

Nixon-Roulet Mary F.

Our Little Grecian Cousin



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Содержание

Preface	5
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	12
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	15

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Preface

Of all people in the world the Grecians did most for art, and to the ancient Hellenes we owe much that is beautiful in art and interesting in history. Of modern Greece we know but little, the country of isles and bays, of fruits and flowers, and kindly people. So in this story you will find much of the country, old and new, and of the every-day life of Our Little Grecian Cousin.

CHAPTER I

ZOE

Zoe sat in the doorway tending baby Domna as she lay asleep in her cradle. She was sleeping quietly, as any child should who has the cross on her cradle for good luck. Her skin was as white as milk, and this was because Zoe had taken care of her *Marti*. On the first day of March she had tied a bit of red ribbon about her little cousin's wrist, for a charm. The keen March winds could not hurt the baby after that, nor could she have freckles nor sunburn.

Early on the morning of April first, Zoe had dressed the baby and carried her out of doors. The dew lay over the flowers, the sun was just up, and his rosy beams turned the blossoming lemon trees to beauty. Zoe had sought the nearest garden and there hung the *Marti* on a rose bush, plucking a rose and pinning it to Domna's cap.

"Now, Babycoula,"¹ she had said, clapping her hands, "you shall have luck. Your *Marti* is upon a rose bush kissed with dew before the sun is high. The summer's heat shall not touch you and you shall be cool and well."

It was fortunate for Zoe as well as for the "Joy," which the Greek word for baby means, that Domna was a quiet baby. As most of the little girl's time was taken up with caring for one or another of her aunt's children, when they were cross it left her but little time for thinking and dreaming. Zoe's thoughts were often sad ones, but her dreams were rose-coloured. When the little girl thought, she remembered the home she had once had. It was far in the sunny south where lemon groves lifted golden-fruited arms to the soft winds, and hillsides gleamed with purple and white currants.

Her father had met with ill luck and men had told him of a land beyond the seas, where people had plenty to eat and found gold pieces rolling in the streets. He had sent her mother and herself to live near Zoe's uncle and she had seen no more the bright, gay father whom she loved. Then her mother died, and this, her first great sorrow, made her into a quiet, sober child with a dark, grave face. At ten she was a little old woman, taking such good care of her aunt's babies that that hard-working woman did not begrudge the orphan the little she ate.

Uncle Georgios was a kind man. He loved children, as do all Grecians, who say, "A house without a child is a cold house." He worked too hard to pay much attention to any one of the swarm which crowded his cottage. Aunt Anna had so many children that she never had time to think of any of them except to see that they had food and clothes. Zoe was but another girl for whom a marriage portion must be provided. Every Grecian girl must have a dowry, and it would be a great disgrace if none were ready for her when she was sought in marriage. Fathers and brothers have to earn the necessary money, and the girls themselves make ready their household linens, often beginning when only ten years old.

Zoe had not commenced making her linens because her aunt had not been able to give her thread or even to take time to teach her to spin. So the little maid's hands were idle as she watched the babycoula and that was not good, for a girl's fingers should always be at work, lest she have too much time to think sad thoughts. But, if her thoughts were dark, her dreams were bright, for she saw before her a rosy future in which she lived where the sun shone and everyone was happy.

Baby Domna stirred in her cradle, for flies were crawling over her little nose. Zoe waved them off singing, "Nani, nani, Babycoula, mou-ou-ou!" The baby smiled and patted her hands.

¹ Pet name for a baby as we would say "Babykins."

"You are a good child," said Zoe. "The best of tables was set out for you the third night after you came from Heaven. There was a fine feast for the Three Fates, even a bit of *sumadhe* and a glass of *mastika*.² You must have good fortune.

"Palamakia,³ play it, dear,
Papa's coming to see you here,
He brings with him *loukoumi*⁴ sweet
For Babycoula now to eat.

"It's time you went to sleep again, Baby," said Zoe, her foot on the rocker, but the babycoula gurgled and waved her fat arms to be taken up, so the patient nurse took up the heavy little child and played with her.

"Little rabbit, go, go, go," she said, making her little fingers creep up the soft little arm, as American children play "creep mousie," with their baby sisters.

"Dear little rabbit, go and take a drink,
Baby's neck is cool and clean and sweet,"

and the little girl's fingers tickled the warm little neck and Domna laughed and gurgled in glee. Zoe danced her up and down on her knee and sang,

"Babycoula, dance to-day,
Alas, the fiddler's gone away,
He's gone to Athens far away,
Find him and bring him back to play."

The pretty play went on, and at last the tiny head drooped on Zoe's shoulder and the babycoula slept again. Then her little nurse gently laid her in the cradle, tucked in the covers and sat slowly waving an olive branch above her to keep away the flies.

Zoe's uncle lived in Thessaly, that part of Northern Greece where splendid grain fields cover the plains, a golden glory of ripened sheaves.

Uncle Georgios worked in the fields in harvest time and the rest of the year he was a shepherd, herding sheep and goats in the highlands. The boys worked with him. There were Marco and Spiridon, well grown boys of eighteen and twenty, working hard for their sisters' marriage portions, which must be earned before they themselves could be married. After Spiridon came Loukas, a sailor, who was always away from home, and then Maria and Anna. Another boy, mischievous Georgios, was next in age to Anna, there were two little girls younger than she, and then Baby Domna, Zoe's especial charge.

It had been a hard summer. The sirocco had blown from Africa and made the days so hot that all field work had to be done at night. Now the threshing-floors were busy and Uncle Georgios was working early and late to get in the grain.

"Zoe!" called Aunt Anna from within the house. "It is time to take your uncle's dinner to him."

"Yes, Aunt," said Zoe, rising from the doorway, and hastening to take the basket Aunt Anna had prepared. There was black bread, fresh garlic and eggs. Then she ran quickly along the path which led to the fields. It was a beautiful day and the air was fresh and sweet.

² Sumadhe is a sweetmeat and mastika a cordial.

³ The Grecian equivalent of "Pattycake, pattycake."

⁴ Loukoumi is a paste made of sweet gums, sugar, rosewater and nuts.

"I am Atalanta running for the apple," laughed Zoe to herself, as she sped up the hill, reaching the threshing-place just at noon. The threshing-floor was very old and made of stone. It was thirty feet across, and over its stone floor cattle were driven up and down, with their hoofs beating the grain out of the straw. Zoe stood and watched the patient creatures going back and forth yoked together in pairs.

"Heu! Zoe!" called Marco, with whom she was a great favourite, "Have you brought us to eat?"

"I have, Cousin," she answered, gazing with admiring eyes at the tall fellow, with his slim figure, aquiline nose, oval face, and pleasant mouth shaded by a slight moustache. Marco was a true Thessalonian, handsome and gay. He had served his time in the army and had come home to help his father bring up the younger children.

"Why don't you put muzzles on the oxen, they look so fierce?" said Zoe, looking at the great creatures as they passed and repassed.

"Oh, they are never muzzled," said Marco. "It was not done by our fathers. It reminds me of what I read in Queen Olga's Bible, 'Do not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the grain.'"

"What is Queen Olga's Bible?" asked Zoe. She was not afraid of Marco. With her other cousins she was as quiet as a mouse, but she chatted with Marco without fear.

"The good queen found that the soldiers had no Holy Scriptures which they could read," said Marco. "Because all the holy books were in the ancient Greek. She had them put into the language we talk and printed for the soldiers. Then she gave one to each man in our regiment and I have mine still."

"How good she was!" cried Zoe. "Did every one love her for her kindness?"

"Not so," said Marco. "Many people were angry at her. They said she was not showing respect to the Scriptures and was trying to bring in new things, as if that was a sin! All new things are not bad, are they, little cousin?"

"I do not know, it is long since I had anything new," said Zoe.

"That is true, poor child," said Marco, kindly as he glanced at her worn dress. "Never mind. When we get Maria married you shall have something new and nice."

"Oh, thank you, I am very well as I am," said Zoe, flushing happily at his kindness, for she was a loving little soul and blossomed like a flower in the sunlight. "I must go home now," she said. "Baby will be awake from her nap and Aunt Anna will need me to tend her."

"Are you never tired of baby?" asked Marco.

"Oh, I love her," said Zoe brightly, as if that was an answer to his question, and nodding gaily, she took her basket and ran down the hillside, where buttercups and bright red poppies nodded in the sun.

CHAPTER II

MARIA'S WEDDING

Maria was to be married. This was a very great event in the family and all the little Mezzorios were wild with excitement. Maria was the favourite sister, and she was tall and very beautiful. Her hair and eyes were dark and her smile showed through gleaming white teeth. Her marriage chest was ready, her dowry was earned, and a cousin of the family had acted as "go-between" between Uncle Georgios and the father of the young man who wished to marry Maria. His name was Mathos Pappadiamantopoulos, and he had seen Maria as she walked spinning in the fields.

Generally in Greece the parents arrange the marriages and the young people scarcely see each other before the marriage ceremony binds them together. Maria's, however, was quite a love match, for she and Mathos had grown up together and had been waiting only for the dowry to go to housekeeping in a little white cottage near to that of her mother.

Mathos had often been beneath Maria's window and had called his sweetheart all the fond names he could think of. She was in turn "cold water" (always sweet to a Grecian because good water is so scarce in that country), a "lemon tree," and a "little bird." He had sung to her many love songs, among them the Ballad of the Basil.

"If I should die of love, my love, my grave with basil strew,
And let some tears fall there, my life, for one who died for you,
Agape mon-ou-ou!"

Maria's *prekas*⁵ was a fine one. Her father and brothers had determined that.

"She shall not be made ashamed before any man. If I never marry, Maria shall have a good dowry," said Marco.

When the list of what she would give to the furnishing of the little home was made for the groom there was a strange array, a bedstead, a dresser, a chair, sheets and pillowcases, blankets and quilts. There were copper kettles and saucepans of many sizes and shapes, and the lovely homespun linens were beautifully embroidered.

Early in the morning of the wedding day, Mathos' friends helped him carry the *praekika*⁶ from the bride's old home to her new one. Not a single pocket handkerchief but was noted on the list Mathos' best man had made, and it would have been a disgrace to all the family of Mezzorios had there been even a pin missing from all that had been agreed upon when the match was arranged.

Musicians played the guitar and mandolin, as Maria sat straight upright upon a sofa. She was a little white and frightened, but looked very pretty in her white dress embroidered in gold, her yellow embroidered kerchief over her head. Zoe, with the other children, had been flying around the room ready, whenever the *mastiche* paste was passed on a tray, to take a spoon from the pile and gouge out a taste of the sweet stuff.

"Maria looks lonely," she said to Marco. "I'm glad I'm not in her place."

"She'll be all right now," he said as the cry "He comes!" was heard outside. Zoe ran to the door. She had never seen a wedding in Thessaly and was very curious to see what it was like. Little Yanne Ghoromokos was coming up the street carrying a tray on which rested two wreaths of flowers and two large candles tied with white ribbon. Behind him was Mathos, looking very foolish, surrounded by his friends.

⁵ Dowry.

⁶ Wedding things.

"I shall not marry a man who looks like that," said Zoe to Marco, who stood beside her.

"What is wrong with him?" asked Marco, who liked to hear his little cousin talk, her remarks were so quaint and wise.

"He looks very unhappy, as if this were a funeral," she said, "or as if he were afraid of something. When I marry, my husband shall be glad."

"That he should be," said Marco smiling, and showing his white teeth.

Mathos meanwhile made his way into the house and sat down on the sofa by Maria. He did not look at her, for that would have been contrary to etiquette, but over the girl's face there stole a warm and lovely colour which made her more beautiful than ever.

All the men present looked at her and all the women, old and young, kissed the groom, and each woman made him the present of a silk handkerchief. Then it was time for the wedding ceremony and Zoe's eyes were big with wonder.

On the table were placed a prayer book, a plate of candies, as the priest, old Papa Petro took his stand near by. Maria came forward with her father and Mathos and his best man stood beside her. To the child's great wonder and delight, Zoe was to be bridesmaid, for Maria had said to her mother,

"Let Zoe be bridesmaid. It will please her and she is a good little thing." And Aunt Anna had answered,

"What ever you want, my child."

Zoe, therefore, in a new frock, with a rose pinned in her black hair, stood proudly beside Maria at the altar. She watched the queer ceremony in silence. First Papa Petro gave the groom a lighted candle and asked him if he would take Maria for his wife; then Maria received a candle and was asked if she would take Mathos for her husband, after which the priest sang the *Kyrie Eleison* and made a long, long prayer.

He blessed the two rings laid on the tray before him, giving one to the bride and one to the groom. The best man quickly took them off the fingers of each, exchanged them, and put the bride's on the groom's finger, giving his to her.

Papa Petro next put a wreath on the head of each and the best man exchanged them, and the ceremony continued, but of it Zoe saw little. She was so overcome by the sight of Mathos' red, perspiring face, surmounted by the wreath of white blossoms, and looking silly but happy, that she had all she could do to keep from laughing.

She was so astonished a moment later that she nearly disgraced herself, for the rest of the ceremony was like nothing she had ever seen before. The priest took the hand of the best man, he took that of the groom, and he held his bride by the hand, and all, priest, best man, groom and bride, danced three times around the altar, while the guests pelted the dancers with candies, and Zoe stood in open-mouthed amazement, until Marco threw a candy into her mouth and nearly choked her. Then the ceremony was over and everybody kissed the bride and her wreath, which brings good luck.

"What do you think of being bridesmaid?" asked Marco.

"It is very nice, but I was afraid I should laugh," answered Zoe. "What do they do now, Marco?"

"Maria must go to her husband's house. She is starting now. Come, let us follow."

They went with the bridal couple down the village street, and at her door lay a pomegranate. Upon this the bride stepped for good fortune with her children. Then Mathos' mother tied the arms of the two together with a handkerchief and they entered their own home. They drank a cup of wine together and turned to receive the congratulations of their friends.

"Marco, it is your turn next. Beware lest a Nereid get you," said Mathos, laughing.

"I am not afraid of a Nereid," said Marco hastily crossing himself.

"Once I saw one upon the hillside when I was watching the sheep," said an old man. "She was so beautiful I crept up to seize her in my arms and behold! she turned into a bear and then a snake. The bear I held but the snake I let go. Then I saw her no more."

"Upon the river bank of Kephissos," said an old woman, "dwell three Nereids. They are sisters. Two are fair but one is ugly and crippled. My mother lived there and she has often told me that she heard the fays talking and laughing in the reeds along the shore. The pretty sisters like children and love to play with mortals. Sometimes they steal away little folk when they have stayed out at night in disobedience to their mothers. They take them to their home in the reeds, but the lame sister is jealous of pretty children and when she is sent to take them home, she pinches them. My mother has with her two eyes seen the black and blue marks of pinches upon the arms of children who did not always stay in the house after dark. And where my mother lived they say always to naughty children, 'Beware! the lame Nereid will get you!'"

"Be careful, Zoe," said Marco. "Be a good child and keep within when it is dark, else you shall see the Nereid."

"God forbid!" said Zoe, quickly crossing herself, "I should die of fright."

CHAPTER III

THE ANTIQUE CUP

Fall had come with its cool, sunny days and Aunt Anna was cooking beans, symbols of the autumn fruits in honour of the old Feast of Apollo. Olive branches were hung over the door of the house to bring luck, as in the olden times olive boughs hung with figs and cakes, with jars of oil and wine were carried by youths to the temples. Upon the hillsides the vineyards hung, purple with fruit and winter wheat was sown in the fields.

Zoe had begun to go to school and the baby could weep for her. She did not at all believe in education since it took away her willing slave and devoted attendant, but in Greece all children are compelled to go to school and learn at least to read and write and do simple sums.

Zoe enjoyed the school very much. She liked the walk in the fresh morning air and she liked to learn, but most of all she liked the stories which her teacher told whenever they were good children, stories of the days when Greece was the greatest nation of the earth, her women were famous for beauty and virtue, her men were warriors and statesmen.

She learned of Lycurgus, the great lawgiver, of Pericles, the statesman, of Alexander, the great general, and of the heroes of Thermopylae. All these tales she retold to her cousins and many were the hours she kept them listening spellbound.

"It was not far from here, the Pass of Thermopylae," she said. "Some day I shall ask Marco to take us there. The story tells of how Leonidas was king of Sparta and the cruel Persians came to conquer Greece. Xerxes was the Persian king and he had a big army, oh, ever so many times larger than the Grecian. Well, the only way to keep out the Persians was to keep them from coming through the Pass of Thermopylae, so Leonidas took three hundred men and went to hold the Pass. For two days they held it, and kept the Persians from coming in, and they could have held out longer but for treachery. A miserable man, for money, told the Persians a secret path across the mountains, so they crept up behind the Grecians and attacked them. When Leonidas found they were surrounded, he made up his mind that he and his men must die, but that they should die as brave men. They fought the Persians so fiercely that the Pass ran with blood and several times the Persians fell back; others took their places, but these too turned back, and the Persian king said,

"What manner of men are these who, but a handful can keep back my whole army?" and one of his men replied,

"Sire, your men fight at your will; these Grecians, fight for their country and their wives!"

"But at last the end came. Leonidas fell, covered with wounds, and without him his men could withstand no longer. One by one they fell, each with his sword in hand, his face to the foe, and when the last one fell, the Persians, with a great shout, rushed through the Pass over the dead bodies of the heroes."

"That's a fine story," said Georgios. "But I sha'n't wait for Marco. I shall go to see the Pass for myself."

"No, no!" said Zoe. "You must not. Aunt Anna would be angry. It is quite too far and it is in the mountains; you might meet a brigand."

But Georgios said only, "Pooh! I can take care of myself," and looked sulky. It was rather hard for Zoe to look after him. He was a mischievous boy, only a year younger than she was, and he thought himself quite as old. He did not like it at all when his mother told him to mind what Zoe said and often he did things just to provoke her. This particular Saturday he was in bad temper because he had wished to go to the mountains with Marco and his brother would not take him.

"Another time I will take you," said Marco. "But to-day I am in haste. Stay with the girls and be a good little boy."

"Stay with the girls!" muttered Georgios. "It is always stay with the girls. Some day I will show them I am big enough to take care of myself."

So he felt cross and did not enjoy Zoe's stories as much as usual.

"Not long ago," said Zoe, for the other children were listening with rapt interest, "some shepherds were tending their flocks on the hills and one of them dug a hole in the ground to make a fire that they might cook their food. As he placed the stones to make his oven, he saw something sticking out of the ground and leaned down to see what it was. It looked like a queer kettle of some kind and he dug it out and examined it. He cleaned the dirt from it and it turned out to be an old helmet, rusted and tarnished, but still good. He took it and showed it to the teacher in the village and he said it was very, very old and might have belonged to one of Leonidas' men. So the master sent it to Athens and there they said that it was very valuable, and that the writing upon it showed that it had been at Thermopylæ. They put it in the great museum at Athens, and paid the shepherd a great many *drachmas*⁷ for it, so many that he could have for himself a house and need not herd sheep for another man, but have his own flocks."

"Wish I could find one," said Georgios. "I heard my father say we needed money very badly. There are so many of us! I wish I was big!" and the boy's face grew dark. Zoe's clouded too.

"I am but another mouth to feed," she thought; but Aunt Anna's voice, calling them to come to the midday meal, put her thoughts to flight.

It was not until after the little siesta they all took after luncheon that she thought of what Georgios had said.

"How I wish I could find something of value," she thought to herself. "I am not of much use except that I try to help with the children. Oh, I wonder what Georgios is doing now!" she thought suddenly. She could not hear him and when Georgios was quiet he was generally naughty.

"Where is Georgios?" she asked the children, but they did not know. Only little Anna had seen him and she said that he had run quickly down the road a little while before.

"You must stay with the baby *coula* here on the door step," Zoe said to the little girls, calling to her aunt within the house, "Aunt Anna, I am going to find Georgios, he is not here."

"Very well," said her aunt, and Zoe set off down the road. "Georgios!" she called. There was no answer, but she thought she saw the tracks of his feet in the dust of the road.

"Perhaps he has gone to the river," she said to herself, "to try to fish," and hastily she ran to the bank but there was no little boy in a red tasselled cap in sight. She hurried back to the road.

"I am afraid he has tried to go and see the Pass," she thought. "It would be just like him, for he said he would not wait for Marco. Oh, dear! I must find him. Aunt Anna will think it my fault if he is lost or anything happens to him." She hurried onward, calling and looking everywhere but found not a trace of the naughty little boy. It seemed as if he had disappeared from the face of the earth, and she murmured to herself,

"Oh, if he has gone to the river and a Nereid has stolen him! Perhaps he has run to the mountain and a brigand has found him! I must bring him home. Good St. Georgios, who killed the terrible dragon, help me to find your name-child! Oh, dear, of course the saints hear us, but it would be ever so much nicer if they would answer!" she thought. Then she had little time to think more, for her whole mind was bent upon finding the naughty boy whom, with all his naughtiness, she dearly loved. She hurried up the hill, peering under every bush, behind every tree, beginning to think that perhaps something had happened to the child. She went on and on until the shadows of twilight began to gather and she grew more and more frightened. Beneath her on the mountain-side flowed a little stream and she peered into its silver depths wondering if perhaps Georgios could have fallen into it. Then in her eagerness she leaned too far, lost her balance and fell. Down, down

⁷ A Grecian coin worth about twenty cents.

she tumbled, rolling over and over on the soft grass until she reached the bottom of the hill. She lay still for a few moments then sat up and looked about her.

She was in a spot in which she had never been before, a pretty little glen, where the silvery stream ran over white pebbles with a soft, murmuring sound. Ferns grew tall and green, delicate wild flowers bloomed among them, the air was fragrant with the pines which grew overhead, and the whole spot was like a fairy dell. She tried to rise, but frowned with pain, for she had hurt her foot. So she sat thinking, "I will rest a minute and then go on and find Georgios."

As she sat thinking she noticed a queer place hollowed out by the water. Something lay there half covered with earth and she stooped to see what it was.

"Perhaps I shall find something like the shepherd did," she thought, but with sharp disappointment she found that the object which had caught her eye was but a queer little cup black with red figures around the rim, and with two handles, one at each side. It had the figure of a woman at one side and Zoe thought it rather pretty.

"It is not of any use," she said to herself, "It is but someone's old cup. But I shall take it home for the baby to play with. She will think it is nice." So she tucked it into her pocket and got up to go. Her ankle hurt but not so badly that she could not walk. She wet her kerchief and tied it around the swollen joint and climbed up the hill which she had rolled down so unexpectedly. At the top she stopped and called as loudly as she could, "Georgios, Georgios!"

An answering shout of "Zoe!" came from below and her heart gave a glad leap. She turned her steps downward and Marco met her ere she was half way down.

"Child, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Is Georgios found? I came to seek him!" she cried.

"He was not lost, that bad boy!" said Marco. "When I reached home I found my mother disturbed in her mind because you had disappeared and the little girls said you had gone to the mountain to find Georgios. Him I found by the river fishing and he said that you had called but that he had not answered. He will answer the next time," and Marco's voice told Zoe that he had made it unpleasant for Georgios. "Then I came on to seek you. Poor child! you must have had a hard climb."

"Oh, I did not mind," said Zoe. "Only I fell and hurt my ankle. I am glad Georgios was not lost. He might have answered me, though," and her lip quivered.

"He was a bad boy," said Marco, "and did it just to tease you. Let me see your ankle. It is badly bruised, but not sprained, I think. Come, I will help you home," and he put his arm around her.

It took Zoe some time to get home for walking on the lame ankle tired her and often Marco stopped her to rest.

"What is it you have in your hand?" he asked her, as they sat down to rest beneath a giant fir.

"Oh, it is nothing," she said. "Just a queer little cup I found and thought Baby Domna might like to play with."

"Let me see it," said Marco, and he examined it carefully. "Where did you find it?" he asked at length and Zoe answered,

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