NASSAU'S SPONGE MARKET

HOW BAHAMA SPONGES ARE GATHERED AND SOLD.

SOME ACCOUNT OF THE EARLY TIMES IN NEW-PROVIDENCE—A TOASTED GOVERNOR—BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE'S CONVIVIAL HABITS.

There was a time when Nassau belonged to the United States and the Stars and Stripes floated over Fort Charlotte and Fort Montague. It has been in the hands of the Spaniards, the British, the Americans, and of a gang of pirates. There are accounts of the landing of Columbus on the island of New-Providence in 1492, but their accuracy is disputed. Whether Columbus ever saw the place or not, the early history of Nassau is lively and romantic. Nobody can quite tell whether the Spanish navigator's first landing was on Watling's Island or San Salvador. But it does not make much difference which. Neither island is more than 250 miles from Nassau: and if Columbus had known how near he was to that lively town, no doubt he would have gone on, and wintered there. The Spaniards found the Bahama Islands peopled by a mild and handsome race of savages, differing widely from the neighboring Caribs. They were peaceable, friendly, and easily imposed upon; and King Ferdinand, according to history, took the entire lot of them forcibly over to Spain, and made them work in the mines. It is easy to predict the result of this. They had never been used to work of any kind, and in a few years they were all dead. For something like half a century succeeding the Bahamas were without inhabitants; and it is said to think how many cocoanuts, pineapples, and fat green turtles went to waste in those 50 years. In 1607, more than a century after the discovery by Columbus, an English Captain sailed into the harbor of Nassau and gave the island its name New-Providence, to commemorate his escape from shipwreck. I suppose there had been a hurricane, and this English Captain had "sworn off" all his vices if Providence allowed him to see land again. On the strength of his landing there England claimed the entire Bahamas, and a grant was made of them to three or four Dukes, Earls, and other gentlemen with titles. These gentlemen, to whom the islands were granted, were also the "proprietors" of Carolina, and thus the Bahamas became first cousins by marriage to the United States.

It was while Carolina and the Bahamas belonged to the same owners that Nassau and the other islands fell into the hands of pirates. Here they made their headquarters and waged upon the commerce of the world a warfare second only to that made by the bloodthirsty Algerines. Their vessels were small and well adapted to running into the bays and coves to be found everywhere, and for many years even the English could not drive them out. The boss pirate of them all was Edward Trench, an Englishman, who was known as "Blackbeard." He started out as a privateer, and soon developed into a real pirate, with a small fleet under his command. He made every effort to convince his followers that he was a young devil, and succeeded admirably. It was one of his favorite amusements to shut himself in the cabin with his chief men, make the place suffocating with the fumes of sulphur, turn out the lights, and fire his pistols at random among his friends. This jolly companion was at last captured and killed in one of the inlets off the coast of North Carolina, and the Bahama pirates were scattered. The motto on the Bahama coat-of-arms, "Expulsis Piratis, Restitutia Commercia," is an official memorial of these old piratical days. After they were subdued and were put in the way of making comparatively honest livings by fishing and wrecking, the pirates formed an important part of the inhabitants of Nassau. There was a Governor named Chillingworth, in 1670, whom they did not like, so they put him in a vessel and shipped him off to Jamaica. Seven years later the virtuous and moral Spaniards were so incensed at the piratical deeds of the Bahamians that they made a raid upon Nassau, captured the Governor, whose name was Clark, carried him over to Cuba, and roasted him alive. Unfortunately, the particulars of this barbecue have been lost. Roast Governor ought to be a rare dish, and I wish I could tell precisely how it should be prepared. The Spaniards at the same time burned all the houses they could find on New-Providence; and it was not till 1694 that the inhabitants "built a small town of 160 houses, which they called Nassau." This was the beginning of the prosperous city of Nassau of to-day. About the beginning of the eighteenth century the French and Spaniards made a raid upon Nassau, captured the fort, burned most of the houses, and carried a number of prisoners to Havana. The British Government at last bought out the proprietary lords for $60,000, and "peace reigned supreme for 17 years." (This touching sentence is borrowed.) In 1741 the foundation of Fort Montague, the old fort adjoining Waterloo-place, was laid.

It was in 1782, when the independence of the United States was established, that Nassau first became known as a health resort. A great many of the inhabitants of Georgia and the Carolinas retained their affection for the mother country and their loyalty to its Government. These good people suddenly found the American climate unhealthy, and were compelled to remove to a more genial atmosphere, which they found in the Bahamas. Many of them took their slaves with them, and established beautiful plantations on the islands, which made ideal homes but never paid. They did not understand either the soil or the climate, and soon ran themselves into bankruptcy. Everywhere the remains of their estates can be seen, fine stone walls surrounding the lands. Descendants of their slaves are still on the islands, about as wealthy now as when they were first freed. For the last hundred years the history of the Bahamas has been uneventful. Life there has been as placid as a Summer sea; there have been no wars nor rumors of war; the cocoanut trees have grown larger and taller; the cemeteries have increased somewhat in size; tides have been rolling on, hurricanes sometimes blowing, trade winds fanning the shores, but there has been no excitement, except in the four years of our American war, when the harbor was full of ironclads, the city was not half big enough to hold the people, and business rushed like a lightning express. But those days have been over for 20 years, and Nassau is again taking a siesta. Happy, thrice happy land, where there are no Presidential elections; where it is never discovered that either of the candidates cheated a blind apple woman when he was a boy! This is a correct history of Nassau and the Bahama Islands. I know it is trustworthy, because I got most of the data for it out of the Nassau almanac and out of Mr. Ives's book on Nassau, entitled "The Isles of Summer." This last-named work I have a fancy for, perhaps on account of the gilt on the binding. One paragraph in it, in the preface, is startlingly lifelike. "While treading the deck of a New-York and Savannah steamer," writes Mr. Ives, "after having been a day or two at sea, and while gazing with a pleasing awe upon an ocean, mysterious, restless, and skybound, he heard like the author of Revelation, a voice saying unto him '*Write!*' and, without pausing to think or inquire whether the injunction came from heaven or elsewhere, he obeyed with alacrity." Singular coincidence! I also hear a voice, Mr. Ives. "While treading the floor of a boarding house back room after having been a day or two too lazy to write, (these being the dog days,) and while gazing with pleasing awe upon a quire of untouched letter paper that should long since have been transformed as it were, into a letter from Nassau, I hear, like the aforesaid author, a voice saying 'Write!'" But it is nothing like the voice in Revelation, Mr. Ives. It is a deep bass voice, a six-foot voice, a voice to make a livid corpse turn pale; no still small voice, but a lively big voice—the voice of the managing editor, in short, inquiring "Is this Friday, and that Nassau copy not in yet?" That's the kind of voice to make you hump yourself and write "with alacrity," my dear Mr. Ives.

We have, then, a city of about 14,000 inhabitants lying snugly on a hill beside the sea that has not changed materially in a century nor turned a hair in 20 years. What keeps it alive? It is quiet and peaceful, and when it invites Northerners to come down and enjoy themselves in Winter it is not to emulate the social excitement of a metropolis, but rather to find that rest and quiet for which city people continually long and which they seldom discover. It is a place, I will tell you confidentially, where nothing can ever worry you. Anything you want and expect will do just as well to-morrow as to-day, just as well next week as to-morrow. There is rest in the air, repose in every breeze, tranquillity on the wings of the trade wind that springs up every afternoon. I remember that after writing a letter there one day it took me four days to raise energy to mail it, though the Post Office was only a block away. Certainly it could not have been on account of the trouble of walking there, because I used to walk three or four miles every morning before breakfast. It was because one day was just as good as another for it. There was no hurry, for no mail went out for a week. The climate is not hot enough to be enervating, but everything is quiet and restful, and the incentive is toward repose rather than exertion. Happy relief, to find such a country after living in New-York. It is only in comparison with one of the Northern cities that I speak of Nassau as being quiet. For a West India place it is a lively city. It has a great many business houses, a fine market, good public institutions, churches without number. Go out early in the morning and take a half hour's walk through the streets, and you will meet more people than you would at the same hour in many parts of New-York. But they are deliberate people, going along as if they had not a care in the world, and worried not about when they would reach their destination, if, indeed, they would troubles themselves to have any destination. Being the capital city of the Bahamas, the only city and only considerable town for a population of about 35,000, Nassau has a good deal of "back country" to draw upon. The products of all the other islands come to Nassau for sale or shipment. If there are pineapples to be sent to New-York, or cocoanuts, or vegetables, or oranges, or sponges, they first reach Nassau, unless they are taken direct to their destination in small sailing vessels; for New-Providence is the only one of the Bahama Islands that has regular steam communication with the outside world. Speaking of oranges, I was surprised the other day, in looking over the New-York Custom House reports, (as I frequently do on warm days, for light reading,) to see that in 1882 there were shipped from Nassau 1,924 barrels and two entire cargoes of oranges, making a total of 1,095,050 oranges. There were also shipped from there, in the same year, two cargoes and 897 barrels of pineapples, comprising 229,748 pineapples. This will give some idea of how fruits grow in these rocks. But there is no single industry of so much financial importance to Nassau, I think, as the sponge fisheries. Nassau is the great point of export for sponges in the Western Hemisphere. A large number of men and vessels are engaged in the business, and all the sponges of the Bahamas are taken to Nassau and go through the "sponge market" before being exported. "Sponging" is a regular business in Nassau, of such large proportions that a Sponge Exchange has been established, governed by rules on the plan of the Stock Exchange; and to do a sponge business successfully in Nassau a firm must be represented in the Exchange. Sponge is an important thing in Nassau. It is plenty, of course, and cheap. You see sponges lying in the streets and kicking about the wharves that in New-York we would have to pay 50 cents or a dollar for. Wherever sponge can be used in place of cotton or woolen cloths it is used. Kitchen maids use sponges for "dishcloths," and frequently the seat in a boat is nothing but an immense sponge as big as half a barrel. Windows are invariably washed with them, glasses polished with them, and they are used for almost every conceivable purpose. Around the hotel in the Winter are always two or three "boys" with long strings of them, trying to sell them to the Americans. Hardly any visitor leaves Nassau without taking a box of them along. Next time you go into a drug store and pay a dollar for a little bit of a bath sponge console yourself with knowing that you could buy one just like it in Nassau for 5 cents. I bought a string of about 15 sponges, that stretched out far higher than my head, for "one-and-six," or 37½ cents. They make very fine presents to give to your friends when you get home, they are so cheap, and a sponge is more valuable when you know it has just been brought by somebody you know from the sponge fisheries. Some of the servants about the hotel understand the knack of pressing sponges, and for a trifling consideration will take a bushel of sponge and pack it in a cigar box. This does the sponges more good than harm, so they say, and makes them firm and solid.

The sponging fleet is composed of small schooners ranging from 10 to 40 tons, or even smaller. Each schooner carries from four to six men, and makes periodical trips out to the sponge beds. Around Abaco, Andros Island, and Exuma are some of the principal fisheries; there are hardly any of value in the immediate vicinity of Nassau. The men do not dive for them, as sponge fishers in the Mediterranean do, but use long-handled things like oyster tongs to fish them out of the water. They do not "go it blind" and probe in the mud, like oystermen; in this clear water they can see every inch of the bottom, make up their minds what sponges to take, and seize hold of each one carefully, detach it from the rock to which it clings, and lift it into the boat. They are not the nice, delicate, light-colored things we see in shop windows. When first taken from the water they look and feel more like a piece of raw liver than anything else I can compare them with. They are slippery, slimy, ugly, and smell bad. Their color is generally a sort of brown, very much like the color of gulf weed, only a little darker. Most people are taught, in the days of their freshness and innocence, that the sponge is an animal, and when they visit Nassau they expect perhaps to see sponges swimming about the harbor, if indeed they do not surprise some of the more athletic ones climbing trees or making little excursions over the hills. But they are disappointed when they learn that the animal part disappears entirely long before the sponge reaches a market; and that the part we use for mopping up fluids is only his house, the many-roomed residence in which he sheltered himself while at sea—a regular marine tenement house, built with great skill and architectural precision, in which many of the little beasts lived and died. After the sponges reach the deck of the vessel they are cleaned and dried and go through a curing process. They then become the sponges of commerce, and are divided into eight varieties in the Bahamas. Some, called "lambswool," or "sheepswool," are as fine and soft as silk and very strong. Others, although large and perhaps tough, are coarse and comparatively worthless. There are, too, bouquet sponges, silk sponges, wire sponges, and finger and glove sponges. The process for curing them, I believe, is to keep them on deck for two or three days, which "kills" them. Then they are put in a crawl and kept there from eight to ten days, and are afterward cleaned and bleached in the sun on the beach. When they reach Nassau the roots are cut off, and the sponges are trimmed and dressed for exportation. Nearly every darky in Nassau understands how to do this trimming part. The symmetry of the sponge must be preserved as much as possible, and if there are any places where coral sand has adhered to the sponge, those places must be cut out, for no amount of skill or care will get rid of sand in a sponge, and the sand is sure to scratch anything it touches. The trimming is generally done very expertly, so that a novice would hardly see that a sponge had been cut.

The Nassau sponge market is a large, open building, long and narrow, without any side walls. When the sponge vessel reaches the city her cargo is all sorted out into the various qualities, and the sponges are put in piles along the sides of the market, the piles sometimes three or four feet high. Each pile, either from its position in the market or from a label attached to it, is known to belong to some definite owner. Two or three or perhaps a dozen vessels come in during the day, and their cargoes are deposited in the market. When the place is opened, at 9 o'clock every morning, all the sponge dealers in Nassau, or their representatives, are assembled. Each member of the Exchange is provided with little slips of paper bearing the numbers of the different lots of sponges. A member goes up to one of the little heaps, looks it over, makes a mental estimate of the quantity and quality of the sponges in it, decides just how much he will be willing to give for it, and puts the figures down on the paper corresponding with that lot, with his initials at the bottom. Then he goes on to the next lot and does the same thing there. If there are any sponges he does not want he does not bid on them. When he has visited all the piles of sponges and made estimates of their value, and all the other dealers have done the same, the papers containing the estimates or bids of the various members are handed to the clerk of the market, and he looks them over. It takes him only a few minutes to ascertain who is the highest bidder on each lot, and he reads off the purchasers and prices and the day's business is done. The highest bidder on each lot, of course, is the purchaser, and it is remarkable to see how close the bids often are. I went down one morning at the kind invitation of a member of the Exchange and saw the whole process. I was shown a number of the bids after the sales were made, and in several instances there was a difference of only a farthing in the offers for piles of sponge worth from £5 to £10. By long practice the Nassau sponge dealers have come to know at a glance what a lot of sponge is worth. A novice going into the market, of course, would not have the remotest idea of the value of a lot; and even years of practice would hardly enable a man to compete with the dealers who have been brought up to the business, and who know sponges as a Wall-street man knows stocks—frequently better. Everything in the sponge market is quiet and orderly. It stands on one of the wharves, with the end of the building reaching up to the water, and on the morning of my visit, when it was raining, (that was the only rainy day I saw in Nassau,) there was a brisk wind blowing that made it delightfully cool, and was enough to cause a Northern visitor to envy the sponge dealers of Nassau.

The chief city of the Bahamas is, in one respect at least, in a peculiar position. Being under the British Government, with a Governor appointed by the Queen, with a Parliament and English institutions throughout, and with its money always legally reckoned in pounds, shillings, and pence, its only regular and frequent steam communication is with New-York. All her business, or nearly all, is done with New-York. When her people want to make a journey they come to New-York. Even if they are going to Europe, they come to New-York first. Thus the people, while always thoroughly loyal to the Queen and her Government, are becoming every year more American in their ideas and habits. American currency has made its way to Nassau and has mixed itself up with the pounds and shillings, till you never know, when a price is reckoned by the shilling, whether an English shilling or a "York" shilling is meant. A greenback is just as good as a Bank of England note, and there is no discount on either. The condition of things is almost as anomalous here as in some of the Channel Islands, which, while under the authority of the British Government, do all their business with Paris and use the French language. In the heart of the city, where some of the streets are narrow, the appearance of things is decidedly foreign. Some of the building there look like Quebec houses, others like Spanish houses, and others have an English air. Over it all the white stone and the white streets and the tropical trees and plants throw an air decidedly West Indian.

To the gentleman who has written me that he read of the cocoanut growing nicely as a house plant in Brooklyn, and that he desires to start one, and wants to know whether the nut should be planted with the eye up or down, I must confess that of my own observation I do not know. I always took it for granted that of course the eye and stem should be planted upward, unless the planter desired to have his tree grow through to China, for the benefit of Mongolian unbelievers. But I am surprised to find, in a trustworthy work on cocoanuts, the following directions: "They should be planted as follows: Place the ripe nuts about four inches under the soil, and about 20 feet apart. Care should be taken to plant the nut with the end that is attached to the stem downward, as the milk inside of the nut will then cover the eye and germinate the young sprout that produces the tree." But if you follow these directions, my dear Sir, and subsequently find yourself the proud owner of a cocoanut tree growing upside down, please don't blame W. D.

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