

Grand Bahama in 1887

(In November 1887, Mr. Powles, a Circuit Justice in the British colonial judiciary, began a circuit of the islands. He went first to Bimini, then to Grand Bahama, arriving there on the morning of November 18.)

"About 11 p.m. we got once more under weigh, and early next morning were off the island of Grand Bahama, the next place at which I had to hold a court.

As we hove in sight the waves were breaking against the reefs that surround the island in every part, just as they are represented in Bierstadt's picture of "A Nor'wester in the Bahama Islands," which was exhibited in the Indian and Colonial Exhibition of 1886 and the American Exhibition of 1887. If it is going too far to say they were "mountains high," they were certainly "hills high;" for every time they broke they completely hid some houses that stood on high ground just in front of us. Landing in a small boat under such circumstances is not a pleasant operation, especially if you happen to be lame of one leg, and it is a matter of importance to jump on shore at just the right moment. However, we escaped with nothing worse than a wetting.

There was no work for me here, but my companion had to inspect the school, and in the then condition of the wind and waves it was impossible for our vessel to remain long where she was. It was therefore arranged that she should be sent round/ in charge of the pilot, to meet us next day on the other side of the island.

Meantime we were to be the guests of Mr. Joseph E. Adderley, an African gentleman, who is both magistrate and schoolmaster—a combination not uncommon in the smaller settlements. He owns a great deal of land, and keeps a number of cows of a small but pretty breed, This is almost the only island where the people now own cattle in any quantity, but they complain that the price they fetch in Nassau is so low that it does not pay to rear them.

The soil of the island is good, and might, with judicious manuring, be made very productive; and it is so near Florida that a trade might easily be established with the States. In the days of slavery it was fairly flourishing, but now the curse of Nassau and the Nassau merchant is upon it.

It is about ninety miles long, and in some parts of considerable width; yet, with all its advantages, it has but a population of 700 people, who can barely exist.

Nearly all the inhabitants are black, some few only showing traces of white blood. The slave-owners here must have been principally Scotchmen, for the emancipated slaves all took their masters' names, and the names here are nearly all Scotch, such as McPherson, Hepburn, and Grant./

Shipbuilding goes on here to a limited extent, but owing to the prevalence of the truck system the unhappy workman derives but little benefit therefrom. Mr. Adderley brought to my notice a case in which men building a schooner for a Nassau merchant were being paid, at a low rate of wages, in flour instead of cash. We "sampled" the flour, which was invoiced to them at 11. 16s. a barrel, and found it not fit for human food.

I attended the inspection of the school, where ninety-nine young darkies, of all ages, are educated. The pupils were examined in the three R's, and geography, history and music. The latter was evidently the favourite subject, and the children sang well. But it was funny to watch ninety-nine back youngsters singing such songs as "When the stormy winds do blow," and "The Blue Bells of Scotland." The annual visit of the inspector of schools is a gala day in all these settlements. Old and young are dressed in their best, homes are deserted, work left to do itself as best it can, and the school-house and adjoining yard are crowded with an excited throng. Those inside—the audience I mean, not the pupils—stare open-mouthed at the proceedings, showing rows of great pearly teeth; whilst those outside keep up a perpetual chatter all the time.

Mr. Adderley and his family all do their own/ farm work; and, as they have been utilizing seaweed for manure, are tolerably successful. This was one of the very few places in the out-islands where I tasted fresh milk, and the only one in the Bahamas in which I tasted fresh butter, which is unknown even in

Nassau itself. Here, too, I ate sugar-cane for the first time. It was rather like stick at first, but very nice when you get used to it.

A great deal of damage is done here to crops of all kinds by birds called "blackbirds," that look like black parrots, and are in no way related to their English namesakes.

My friend Mr. R. Bowdler Sharpe, of the Natural History Department of the British Museum, tells me the proper name of these birds is the "Savanah Cuckoo."

Mr. Adderley's house is a fair specimen of the dwelling of a well-to-do islander. The outside walls, up to a certain height. Are built of stone and covered with plaster, above which point they are continued by upright pieces of pine wood, commonly canned lumber, connected together by wattled palmetto leaves. As soon as the walls are completed, uprights are erected to support a piazza. Both house and piazza are then covered in with a large sloping roof common to both, thickly thatched with palmetto leaves, which form a most useful and substantial shelter. The interior is then divided by partitions into what are/ called the rooms. With few exceptions, ceilings and glass are unknown in the out-islands. But thought the Adderley house is thus primitive, it is not devoid of some of the elegancies of life, and the scrupulous cleanliness of every portion of the interior is very pleasant to look upon.

After a night comfortably spent on a bed stuffed with what is called bed-grass, our crew came to fetch us, and we started to walk a mile to the head of a large lagoon called Hawksbill Creek, where our schooner's boat was awaiting us. The hawksbill is the sort of turtle out of whose shell "tortoiseshell" ornaments are made. So the name raised hopes of catching something that might fetch a price in the Nassau market. But we were out of luck, for no turtles came our way.

A row of several hours brought us to where the Eastern Queen was lying, about four miles at sea..."

Powles , L. D. The Land of the Pink Pearl or Recollections of Life in the Bahamas. London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1888, pp. 57 - 61