

Grand Bahama in 1917

(Chapter 6) "AUNT CELIA" - *The Medicine Woman of Eight Mile Rock* (pp. 81-87)

When the Astors, who were yachting in the Bahamian waters not long ago, felt obligated to land at Eight Mile Rock (122 miles from Nassau) on account of a sea-sick guest, they found themselves on what seemed to them no better than a desert island. Rumour has it, indeed, that the only cow on this island lives upon broken bottles which are imported from Nassau—and originally came from the United States!

Finding no doctor on the land the millionaire's party soon departed, for no one had suggested that they might send for the Medicine Woman.

Six months later it append that the Commissioner's wife and I, with her two babies, were the only white people on this island—the Commissioner being away on leave just then—and when I caught a chill which developed into inflammation Aunt Celia was sent for.

I recognized her at once, for I had last seen her coming from delivering a baby into the world and she was dressed then as now in remarkably grubby rags fastened with a safety pin. On her head a soiled yellow bandanna handkerchief, silhouetted against the orange and sapphire of the sunset, and the attitude of her angular hands, the way she moved and her general "atmosphere" recalled the Howeis painting of Bahamian negroes.

I recoiled at first—for the unclean, long nails of the "wise woman" looked anything but hygienic. Nevertheless, she "worked on" me (as she put it) and cured me in a remarkably short time. During the treatment we had many a talk and I found out how the original doctors effected their cures. Aunt Celia has very little work, for most of these "ignorant" people on this desert island know how to cure themselves on the rare occasions when they fall ill. But in serious cases she is consulted.

All her medicines grow in the "Bush" and are fresh picked and fresh boiled for every patient.

Rubbing with lard or melted tallow candles is one of here chief cures and to some of her medicines she adds a "large, big rusty old nail."

Cow's gall is a remedy for certain complaints, when you can get it.

This and mustard, however, are rarities.

Sometimes a description of a treatment will begin: "If you have any mustard"—just as we might say "If you have any champagne."

[Another rarity in these parts is a needle. One of their songs begins

"If I had a needle I'd mend my baby's clothes."

Apart from this she can find all she needs in the bush.

A stary plant called shepherd's needle, "biled," will heal wounds.

"Pepper grass" will draw away inflammation, fennel "biled" will purify the blood, mangrove roots stewed with a rusty nail will work wonders, every weed that grows has a medicinal value know to Aunt Celia.

"Nobody never dies of my treatments," she avers.

"Dey dies ob old age, or drownin', or sharks, or pison: consumption too when dey will shut derselves in and tighten up de windows—but dey doesn't die from what I does to dem. Not dey!"

The remarkable soundness of here knowledge is such that after some experience of it one wonders very much at the superiority of doctors in any but actual surgical cases! Everything else she seems to know!

If you have a bad toothache which will not subside when rubbed or bathed, then she takes a rusty nail and makes it hot and puts it in the hole; the tooth is split by this, and next morning you can pull out the pieces.

If you have serious signs of coming decay in your teeth, you take some hot cobbler's wax and rub your teeth with that every day and "kill cut the worrum what eats de teet away."

All tumours and growths (inside and out) she can make to pass away by rubbing them herself with tallow candle or lard and healing afterwards by one of her concoctions in which the fresh barks of certain trees, as well as the roots and fibres of others, form important details.

The use of quinine, I am told, was known to wise women long before doctors discovered it and the same is true of laudanum; almost every other drug in the pharmacopoeia has been in use since the world began, in its simplest form, among such wise women as Aunt Celia, in one part or another of the primitive world.

Seaweeds are valuable medicinally, also certain fish and their shells. For instance, if you drop a heavy weight on your foot and send for "granny,"/ she will break open the beautiful shell which so often holds the Pink Pearl (for which the Bahamas are famed—and for which men dive); taking out the "Conch" she will lay that on the wound. If it is a contusion when will "cup it" and then bind it up with shepherd's-needle lotion and lay pepper grass on the top.

Most of her cures are affected in two days.

In many cases she has a variety of to draw from; she will do so and so—"an' watch, an' if it don't act" she will take stronger measures.

Some weeds need drying before they are "biled," because the medicine they contain would be too drastic if taken fresh.

The earth itself is used for certain troubles: a very good poultice can be made, for instance, of earth and red peppers.

Coconut oil is used for skin troubles and to make the hair grow: massage or what she calls "working on" with melted candle or with beeswax will "draw out" almost every pain."

A good deal of magic, called Obeah, is practiced surreptitiously in many parts of these islands, but Aunt Celia assured me that she didn't believe in "no such ting."

"I believe in God and my own strength,": she said solemnly, gazing up at the dazzling silver moon one evening when she was entertaining me, squatting on the floor of the gallery where I spent most of my time.

The coconut trees moved their branches softly and so daintily in the slight breeze that they reminded me of ballet dancers. The stars were so big that they shed a reflection in the smooth sea.

Defries, Amelia Dorothy. In A Forgotten Colony. Nassau: The Guardian Office, 1917. (sections from three chapters)