# *Grand Bahama in 1917*

Chapter 7 – The Carved Bedstead – pp 91-99
In a Forgotten Colony by Amelia Defries

".....the Lord preserveth the simple."
PSALM 116. 5.

It would be a desert island but for a few hundred coloured people, who are descended from slaves of the olden times. Sweet and gentle people, most of whom can neither read nor write, but to whom much is known that is hidden from us.
For instance, they accept every word in the Bible (part of which they seem to know by heart) and they accept it as literally true.
They will sail in tiny vessels on the ocean in the Hurricane Season, or dive among the sharks with perfect faith, saying (and believing), "My safety cometh from the Lord." And if you try to reason it out with them they will tell you that you are perfectly safe until your time is up, and "When dat day come you'll die, sure, even if in your bed."
So they have no fear.

On this island, in mid-ocean, time doesn't count, nor the day of the year. Only the morning and the evening, and the month, are counted.
Day begins with sunrise and ends with sunset.
Poverty reigns supreme, but there are no nervous breakdowns and no diseases other than malaria occasionally, though in one village there is some consumption due to intermarriage and sleeping with the doors and windows of the palm-thatched cabins shut, "to keep out de evil spirits," which often take the forms of mosquitoes and sandflies!

The forest of the interior is owned by an American company and no one goes there who can help it, on account of the flies and mosquitoes.
The people live along the reef-edge and the one road runs like a girdle around the island, which is bordered with the ledges built by the coral polyp, in which are pools filled with strange crabs, cast-up sponges (often of the most curious shapes), and shells of wondrous hue.
All around in the sea are the miraculous sea-gardens and the marvel of these waters are to be found around almost all the other islands.

Two spongers took me out in a blue cockleshell boat one day and through their glass-bottomed bucket I saw the life of the sea where the brilliant coloured fish swim among purple and yellow sea-fans, and brown feathers wave above their heads; from a deep grotto in the white sand a huge crawfish emerged, slowly and with great dignity; like a grand dutchess of the Austrian Court—with due form and ceremony and much waving of whiskers she went on call on Madame Crawfish in an opposite grotto—and the rhythm of these two as they swayed down the path together (all the little fish scurried out of the way) was like some mazurka of ancient date! Looking down in another spot I saw the most lovely purple sea-fan I had ever noticed. I exclaimed at the size and brilliance, and as I did so I heard a soft movement behind my back.
Looking around I saw only a coat on the seat where a man had sat a few seconds before!
Presently ... a puffing sound on the other side of the boat, and a muscular young negro was swimming towards me with the free movements of a man/ used from childhood to the water. He was laughing and in his hand was the purple fan I had seen growing on the sea-bottom.

"Dis de one you'se admiring, ma'am?" he asked gently as he climbed, dripping, into the place he had so recently vacated, laying the fan in the boat at my feet. It seems he had slipped overboard and without a splash had dived to the bottom, open-eyed, fully dressed in blue shirt and woolen check trousers.

Before we reached shore he slid over and glided through the amazing water to the bottom again, this time to get a conch for his dinner. His manner of going into the water seemed exactly like that of a fish which we caught and allowed to slip back!
An abler pen than mine has described the fishing in these parts. It is curious to lean over and watch the silly, greedy creatures going so lightly to certain death—when all around them is perfectly good food of the kind they are accustomed to eat.
But I suppose, like ourselves, they say: "Anything for a change"—and rush to any bait.

*  *  *  *  *  *  *  *  *  *  *

Not far from the water, boarding the only road, is an intermittent hedge of sea-grape and an occasional coconut tree rears its delicate, aristocratic head against the everchanging sky, in which the clouds are so distinct in shape that an artist might spend a long time studying cloud-forms and not waster one moment in so doing.
Each family owns its cabin and a good deal of land, but nothing marketable is grown on this island, except onions and some guavas.

The poverty brings the popular saying:
"A shilling in Grand Bahama's worth a pound o' money."
A few banana trees bear their useful fruit in season and when that food gives out, as it did at the beginning of the war, when the sponge market was chaotic, the people "go into de Bush"—for you cannot starve there.

The children in school chant their multiplication tables as if they were beating out the rhythm of a dance, but when they grow older this means little to them. They remember the rhythm but forget how to multiply!

All the mammies and grannies can rear healthy, strong children, all the boys and men can dive and some of the girls and wives are expert divers too, while any male among them can handle a two-masted vessel in mid-ocean in any weather and can read the signs of the elements without barometer.

These people are not ignorant, but only illiterate. In reality, like backwoods people of the Canadian and American forests, they are wise with knowledge which we of the cities have forgotten.

At some time they must have had an Art of their own—for Mr. Steiglitz, of 292 Fifth Avenue, New York, has made us familiar with the carving of the Africans in their native land, and in Brussels I have seen remarkable work done by the natives of the Congo. But civilization seems to have stamped it out here and nothing remains of their natural good taste except the colour sense which makes a girl wear blue stockings with a white dress that has a scarlet sash ... or yellow ones when she puts sapphire bows in her hair.

Around the Residency on Eight Mile Rock there is a constant stream of "visitors." Sometimes it is Aunt Celia, sometimes Siva's mother, or Dolly's children, or Papa Hanna, or people for ac rust of bread and

butter, for a cupful of hominy ("grits") or for permission to gather guavas, herbs, weeds,coconuts ... occasionally someone brings the Commissioner a live fowl, for a present, and gets some old garments in return.

And when it enters one head to do any of these things it will be followed by dozens of others—for these people think in herds ... so one week may see a stream of people offering chickens or eggs, after which you may go for a month and not see a chicken or an egg ... and so on.

In the midst of the throng one grizzled, half-white, old man in rags does not attract much attention. Such an old man was Josiah Anthem and his repeated visits in which he mumbled something about a "basket" or a "batstead" which was like "Nuttin ever made on dis island." didn't seem very interesting. One evening, however, after heavy rain, when I had to take my shoes and stockings off to wade down the road to the little white church, where the blaze of orange and lemon sunset was thrilling behind the palmetto trees, and the little white waves washed over the reef where the crabs scurried into the coral crevices, Anthem stopped me politely and spoke again of his "bashted". (He evidently do not know the real word at all!)
So I went with him to see it. He led me to a swamp, in the deeper parts of which naked young/ negroes were swimming and diving, behind the sea-grape bushes. But a man dressed in white sat smoking under a shelter of palm thatch! He had been to Florida.
Anthem went before me, gallantly taking down the wall as he went to lay its grey rocks in the path for me to step over.
"Dis my place," he said, and "Dis my pig," as we came upon a black creature of that ilk. A buxom girl in pink strayed among the bushes—
"Dis my daughter," he proclaimed and, as we came to a rocky pathway strewn with white sand, "Dis my house," he said with pardonable pride. It was carved all over, and the reddish-brown paint, blended with the white and the olive-green on the doors and shutters, might have been chosen by any artist.
It was "right."
"Dis my wife, Miss Anthem."
An old negress with a yellow and blue bandana round her head, gold earrings in her ears and a palm hat on top of all, held out a bony hand and welcomed me with courtesy.

Inside, the tiny house was carved and the old lady's bedstead was painted periwinkle blue, with a design of red and white at the head and foot: a patchwork quilt (very clean) completed the room. In the living-room each wall had a carved square set on points, in which two hearts were engraved and various family marks arranged underneath.
A crowd of little darky children of both sexes and all ages were about the place—grandchildren; and the daughter murmured;

"Not ebreybody can't paint nor carve same's my fader," while the old lady nodding her head kept on repeating:
"No ma'am not ebreybody can't do it."
Then the old man brought out the chief labour of his hands, piece by piece.
"But how can I sell it when nobody never comes to see?"
That certainly was a problem. No two pieces of the carving were alike ... he had not repeated his design anywhere. Every one of the partitions was of the "right" proportion and in the "right" place, and as he stood admiring it, Anthem said quietly: I could do better'n dat." Already he was thinking out his next work of art!

Slowly it was impressed upon his mind that if he put the carved bedstead upon a sponging vessel and sent it across to Nassau in the fashionable season he might sell it and even get an order for another.
"If God gives life I will do dat," he announced slowly.
"If God gives life," echoed the old lady.
And they sent their children to speed the departing guest and lead her, in the brilliant moonlight, across the pools of rain-water.

*  *  *  *  *  *  *  *  *  *  *

"Shall the dust praise Thee?"— PSALM 30.9.

One shining day a month or two later, a man met me in Bay Street; he held out a piece of paper on which was written "Miss Defries, Nassau," and he said:/

"Dis you, ma'am?"
For a moment I could not think what it meant, and they I remembered—Anthem, who had been ten days and ten nights at sea, in such a gale that two anchors could not hold them, with thirty-five souls on board, and the vessel not much over thirty feet long.
God had given life!
And the carver had found me.
We were doomed to disappointment, for when we landed the bed, to my surprise, everybody I showed it to seemed to expect it to be like the deep carving of olden days, and my interest in it they could not comprehend.
They had not seen the desolation of Grand Bahama, nor the squalor of the homes, and so to them it did not seem wonderful,as it did to me, that one man alone in all that place, should try to create beauty, unconsciously fulfilling a song of Whittier's, which ends—
"In Labour as in Prayer fulfilling the same Law."

In olden days the whole community belied in this, and everybody made and patronised fine workmanship; but never had it occurred to me that anyone would expect this isolated survival—spiritually impoverished and without precedent or support—without even tools to produce workmanship like that of old, when workers made beauty—as the beaver fells the tree or the spider spins the web—by second nature.
"Savages," I was told, "can carve better than this man does"—which was true, of course. But the pathos of this man and his carved bedstead can/ perhaps, only be clear to those who have read Masefiled's "Dauber" and understand the tragedy in that.
Savages, you see, are a community of craftsmen, following leisurely, as a part of their daily life, the inherited tradition of countless centuries, which white men ruthlessly break.
Anthem was like a rent and tattered sail after a storm.
Yet his children might recover what still must remain in their blood—and if there was a revival of craftsmanship on these islands (as in England) much good (moral and commercial) might result, But the people must not be expected to produce things of an English or American character: they must follow their own bent after having been initiated by someone who has studied craftsmanship and ethnology.

Anthem's bed is still for sale, in Nassau, though he has returned to his home.
It will last good for thirty years, whereas cheap machine-made imported furniture soon goes to sawdust in the tropics.

Yet, curiously enough, people think the latter has "intrinsic" value.
Whereas, really, all value is relative.
I value Anthem's bed, not only because it will last, but also because he is the only man out of the whole population to attempt to make for himself something better that he or his community had ever seen before.
His pride in it was wonderful! And he said it was meant for the mother and father and all the children to sleep in: "A family bed," he said!/

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