Grand Bahama in 1917

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

(Chapter 2) The Sponge Fishers.

The Story of A Two Hundred and Forty-four Mile Voyage on the Ocean in Small Open Boats During the Hurricane Season (pp. 15-37)

"There's none ashore can teach such things to me."
Masefield
"They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;
These see the works of the Lord, and His Wonders in the deep."
- Psalm 107, v. 23,24
When I told the Attorney General that I wanted to go to the sponging grounds with the spongers, he said,
"That's impossible."

And whenever I spoke to others about my desire I was told:
"Impossible! Impossible!"
But I nourish a conviction that it is always possible to do the impossible.

However, I said no more to anyone about it. Many months later, I was sitting one evening on the gallery of an English official's house in Nassau with his wife and two Anglican clergymen. from the outer islands, and the talk fell upon a certain Commissioner who had been sent to act in one island while his English wife (with two babies and no maid) was going in the mail schooner 122 miles to pack up her goods and/ chattels, which were on another island. Everyone was distressed about it, knowing she would be the only white person on the trip and also on the island; and they knew the conditions, too.

"I will go with her," said I, seizing the opportunity.
The clergymen smiled.
"I'm afraid you don't know what you are in for," said one.
"It will be a godsend to her." said the other. And all I said was:
"When does the schooner sail?"
"To-morrow about eleven," was the reply.
"I will be there."
I thought, "If she can go and with two babies, I can go."

By eleven the next morning I had packed up my possessions, and with my garments and pencil and paper in a round wooden hat box and my mattress and pillow tied up with cord, was ready to catch the mail.
I had some trouble finding it, for no one in Nassau cares two straws about Grand Bahama, and even at the Post Office no one knew when the boat would sail — but "Not until after three," they told me, "as the mail has been extended." This is a favorite trick! The mails are always being extended!

I had locked my house and given up the keys to an old man who lives no one seems to know where. With my box, my mattress, rug and pillow I drove down to the dock and looked for the mail-schooner. By the wharf lay a small two-masted vessel, a 28-ton open boat; just 50 feet long and only 18 feet wide; built at Bimini in 1901, and with a hold 6 feet deep./

She was (ironically?) called the "Hazel Dell", and on her deck was strewn everything you can imagine! What looked like a week's washing was hanging from the boom and from the yards; heaps of onions, bananas and cocoanuts were piled up, and a basin full of limes. Many kegs of flour and barrels of hominy weighed the boat down, and dried fish was scattered about, smelling horribly, while a pile of conchs made matters even worse. A negro woman in filthy rags was stirring something in a black pot, from which a smoke extended as from a witch's cauldron. A back kitten sat on a heap of clothes, and coloured men lay huddled up asleep in between the cargo.

After a good deal of trouble my driver managed to get an answer from one, who staggered to his feet and reeled towards me.
"Yes, Marm," he said, "dis here's de mail schooner you'se wantin'".
My heart sank.
Visions of the kind of ship in which I had been accustomed to cross the English Channel rose to my mind — and that is only a matter of twenty miles.
But I was going now to travel six times the distance in hurricane season, on the tropical, shark-infested ocean — in this indescribably disreputable open boat!
Still, was not the Commisssioner's wife, also an English lady, going though with it?

So I gave my belongings into the charge of the man who had told me he had no idea when the vessel would sail.
I told him the mail had been extended and he said:
"Mail extended. You're right. Yes, dat's right."/

"After you get the mail on board how long will it be before you start?" I asked.

He replied:
"Maybe to-night, may be to-morrow. You come back sometime and see de Cap'n, Marm."
So I said firmly: "I will be back at four."
"Yes, Marm. Dat's right. Sure. At four."
"And don't go without me."
"No, Marm. Let's hope not, Marm."
And then he went back to sleep and I got a friend to put up with me for the rest of the day.

At four o'cock I went back.
The captain was asleep.
After some waiting he was rused and reeled to his feet. A shave might have altered him! As it was, he looked like the villian in a very low melodrama. His little eyes were red-rimmed and bleary, his mouth like the back of an axe: he was a very thin and tall half-breed and wore a pair of trousers loosely held up by a belt that really asked for a pair of pistols in it. His shirt was torn in places and his check cap on one side of his uncombed head gave a rakish air to his drunken appearance.

He told me he would sail "Sometime to-day or to-morrow," and went back to sleep.
In despair I fled to the Commissioner's wife, whom I found busy bathing babies. She said: " It is always like that," and told me to meet her at the wharf at six or seven.
Which I did.

We would not be able to get any letters for a month and when I could send any was uncertain. To get help or doctor in case of need might take a month or more. There was not even a clergyman to bury us, where we were going!

"I never expected to be taking a white woman, let alone someone from England, to my home." said the girl at my side cheerfully, after she had settled her little children in the cabin. I was sitting on the the store chest marvelling at the way the cargo had been stowed away and the decks cleared. (Not cleaned, mind), The men were just unrolling my mattress for the night. It was very dark, and very little wind stirred the oil-like eaters of the harbour, across which we were drifting with all sails unfurled. {You don't expect me to use nautical language, do you?}

I got off the chest and we supped.
We eat, I remember, bread and butter (canned butter—margarine, I think), damp cheese and a little potted meat, washed down with tea and condensed milk.
It was my last meal for three days.

Once across the harbour bar we began to encounter "something like weather." Storms spring up in a second in the region. This one was not really "weather" but the next thing to it.
The captain was drinking black coffee to keep himself awake and the black crew were singing hymns and munching green limes.
The effect was picturesque in the extreme and the singing, in concerted harmonies, kept to the rhythm of the sea, and was punctuated by sounds like pistol shots, caused by the wind banging into the mainsail now and then.
I was terrified, but all the crew and passengers seemed very happy—the two white babies slept in the cabin and their mother watched over them./

I was very ill and she was ill at intervals. The gentle kindness of the coloured folk I shall never forget. Indeed, I cannot say enough about the kindness of the common people.
Here we were, two unprotected women, upon the ocean in half a gale, with people who were supposed to be the lowest of the low —but let me here put it upon record that they behaved to us with the utmost chivalry.

True, the vessel was overrun with rats and cockroaches! I lay on the deck for five nights and was covered with a sail when it rained. I was afraid of falling overboard, and a woman, the wife of a sponger, made of her body a railing.
"If you gwine to fall, you can't fall across me." she said in her very soft voice, as she knelt down to pray before going to sleep.
"You donner have to be scared", she told me; "we'se all in de Lord's hands and you can't drownd till your time comes. "The vastness of the sky and the ocean, the seeming helplessness of this small vessel with its human load, the knowledge that countless similar ones were sailing the seas, mere specks, less than needle pricks on the world, makes one feel perhaps a little like individuals must feel in in those great armies in the war—over there.

They spoke of the war now and then during the voyage—some of them had relatives who had volunteered.
"Dey's safe, sure, till deir time comes, an' when dat day come no ting can save dem." So they believe and put all their faith in God ... "For He commandeth and

raiseth up the stormy wind,/ which lifteth the waves. They go to the heaven, they go down into the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble.
They reel to and fro and stagger like drunken men and are at their wits' end.
Then cry unto the Lord in their trouble and He bringeth them out of their distress.
He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still.
Then they are glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them to their desired haven."

In these beautiful old words of the 107th Psalm you have the whole story of our voyage told in a manner which all those people on board could thoroughly appreciate and understand.
For had they not experienced it?—and many times?

Five days and nights I never took my clothes off; and except for a little drop of Horlick's milk occasionally, and some coconut water, had no food for three of those days. After which we left the ocean and came to what they call "white water." That is, the famous transparent Bahamian Sea. We were now off Abaco and stopped to set down passengers, deliver mail, ship and unship cargo at various villages. On the fourth day I went ashore, but my companion did not want to go as it would mean a "humbug" (a native term for a bother) with ll the babies, who had been extraordinarily good, all things considered, so far.

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"The ancient Mysteries and Oracles hinted at it, the venerable sages of India knew it, and men "and women who walked this earth before all history; in the remotest stars it is exactly the "same as here, and in all the / circles of intelligence whether they dwell in fire or in the midst "of what is solid, or in the thinnest vacuum. Many an old woman sitting at her cottage door is "far more profoundly versed in it that I am. Many a fisherman has in it long ago served his "apprenticeship ...
"Learning and superiority are of no use in the face of all this .. But to come near to "understanding THE USE OF MATERIALS is divine and he who has never despised a weaker or more ignorant than himself is nearest to this. {Edward Carpenter. "Towards Democracy."}

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What a waste of time!

How they hang about, and talk and laugh, there in the glittering sun, these coloured free-men!
They never hurry.
In little boats like cockle-shells—with one torn sail upon which the violent sun throws green and violet and yellow shadows from the transparent sea—to and fro they come and go, between the land and me. I want to land.
I cannot go in this boat—it is for the Pig.
I cannot go in this—it is overcrowded already.
This one is filled with coconut—no room for me—and this with unripe grapefruit and barrels of flour.

How small I become. Just one of these! And all the while they are laughing, in their rags, in the wide hats they plait out of the dried leaves of Palmetto trees.
But all are not ragged.
Some women have spotless white garment, trimmed with lace and ribbon bows.
"Oh, mother, may I go to school?
Yes, my darling, you may go. You may go with a ribbon bow!"
So goes the refrain of one of their songs.

The rhythm is through all the movement. Away in the forecastle the Boy, with long eyelashes that curl back on themselves—and laughing eyes, sits, bare-legged and shoeless, his shirt in strips and sleeveless, drumming out the time on an old tin can.
One, two, one two, one, two, ONE two,
One, two, one two, one, two, one
One, two, one, two, one, two, one, two.
This last line taken faster than the others and beaten out with the feet, unconsciously, by all those standing about.

I must wear smoked glasses to save my eyes from the terrific dazzle of colours on the moving sea—all the little boats rise up and tumble down upon the restless surface of the water. But the eyes of these people are not afraid of the light, and they cheerfully stand up in their boats and jump in and out, heedless of the barracouta swimming along just beneath them.

Of all the terrors in the tropical seas which frighten me so much they have no fear; but when on dry land they do fear "little gentlefolk" after dark: of which I am not afraid.
They can do what I cannot do. I can do what they cannot.
They are wise where I am ignorant. I know what they do not know. * * * *

The captain in the filthy cabin is slowly sorting out some letters. He cannot read the addresses on them, or the names; without the aid of the Commissioner's wife he would not know whom the letters are for.
Yet, could she have brought us to this haven out of that terrific storm? . . . . . / What is ignorance?

Not long ago one of the spongers went into the office of the local newspaper in Nassau, and when the editor showed him the type-setting machine and the printers at work he asked:
"Boss, do dey print de Bibles and hymn-books same as dis?"
"Of course they do," was the reply.
"Say! boss, den dey isn't printed by de angels?"
If you can believe that a grown man truly thought angels in Heaven printed the Bibles and hymn-books you will have some idea what manner of folk I was among.

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The lowest of the low they were said to be, but except for the indescribably filthy condition of the Government mail boat, I did not find them any lower than people of a similar class (or occupation) in other lands. If we are to judge white sailors by the writings of Masefield and Kipling, indeed these were lambs in comparison; for all on board were gentle to each other and kind; kind and courteous to us; and we two women were as safe among them as among our own kind—perhaps safer.

Any one of the men would softly take and calm the three months old white baby, and would handle him like a mother.
I am conscious that in such a short time one cannot see the depths of any race or class. The camera only records what it sees. I can but do the same. I know that Human Nature is filled with beauty and with Ugliness—go where you will—but vices are/ usually hidden from the casual acquaintance. "I speaks as I finds," as the country people say in England. * * * * * * *

"Now for you, marm!"
It is the captain calling.
He had disentangled himself from the letter difficulty, and clutching those in one hand and the sealed mail-bag in the other he leapt from the deck into the bobbing row-boat, which was partly filled with water, and painted ultramarine

blue with an orange stripe, and was held to the vessel by a man in a yellow shirt and blue trousers standing up with one red and white oar in his other hand. They caught me as I dropped and deposited me with ceremony upon a white seat, and in an incredibly short time, with one oar, the standing man rowed us on to the brilliant coral beach—where the little waves, lapping delicately, kept the secret of the storm to themselves.

It was so hot, and I had not washed since I had left Nassau (a month ago it seemed)!
"I want to have a swim," I declared on landing, to the group of starched and beribboned women waiting to welcome us.
"It is not very convenient," they said gently.
"Then I will paddle," I said, suiting the action to the words.
They looked at one another, and two of them walked along beside me.
It was so delicious, after so much dirt and danger and sickness, to be wading in sparkling, clear water that glittered like crushed jewels!
Suddenly there was a cry! For a moment I did not understand./
"Shark! Shark! SHARK!" —I understood.
""Where? Where?" I shouted, stepping out of the sea in haste.
"Dere he go! Dere he go, see! Look! See!"
I looked, and sure enough, not a stone's throw from my bare feet, swam slowly a small shark—the first I had ever seen.
I did not stop to examine him closely!
"I'se told you dis place not convenient." they said quietly, as we made our way to the green land.

I do not know the name of this "Port of call." If you look at the map in the Ward Line Manager's office, you will not see many places marked upon the island of Grand Bahama. "Settlement Point," whither we were bound, looks to be the only one, and we were not at the end of our destination yet. This was one of the tiny settlements which are beneath the notice of map-makers!

A fine-looking woman, very clean, wearing many single-stoned rings on several fingers, and earrings of red coral in her ears, a striped green and blue bandanna on her head, tied very neatly behind, and a pale pink frock duly starched and ironed for the occasion, met me under the archway at the end of her garden, which was a veritable oasis.
She led us into a palm-thatched cottage, in which I would dearly love to live. It might have been built by an artist. The front door opened from the gallery into a large square whitewashed room without any ceiling. It was as cool as a

refrigerator and seemed to me a model from which all tropical houses might be built. Exactly facing the front door was the back door, opening upon the back garden and the adjoining "bush."

No other doors or windows opened out, so that there was a continual current of fresh air which could rise up and aerate through the palm-thatched rafters that enclosed the whole cottage. While, at the same time, no one need sit in a draught, and there was cosiness not found in the ordinary house of Nassau. The white floor was well sanded, and two brown doors in the wall on either side led into adjoining rooms, where on fourposter beds were spread clean patchwork quilts; except in the smaller of the rooms, which was pantry and scullery in one.

In the main room an old, old negress who had seen slavery days, say comfortably in a wide old mahogany settee that any rich man might well envy so fine is its workmanship and proportion. Other members of the family came smilingly from odd corners, with swaying movements of their limbs and bodies, Two finely made mahogany tables were placed against either wall; one held a Bible, hymn-book and Book of Prayer: the other had on it early Victorian vases in which were beads which the old lady was using to make necklaces for the girls to wear.

In a very short time a very beautiful girl brought me food and coconut water and a little boy came in with freshly picked guavas and bananas.
I had taken a tin of pork and beans ashore and half of these had been heated, to which they added some steamed turtle: then they cut me some sugar-cane.
When the captain was ready I paid one shilling, and I bade them goodbye.
I shall never forget the picture they made, and regretted not having a camera. But I had been told/ that films would not stand the heat for the length of time that must elapse before it would be possible to develop and print; so I had to be satisfied with mental snap-shots.

It was suggested that I walk across the rocks to the next port of call, so I did this. The bordering sea-grape trees kept off some of the sun's heat and I was taken to visit another house—nearly as nice as the one I have described. In it was a woman holding an eighteen months old child on her lap. Its head hung back in the queerest fashion!
She spoke sadly about it.
"Dey brought me a strangled fowl before dis baby were born, an' I did pity dat fowl, and dis chile were born wid his head hanging back flopping to and fro, jus' like wot de fowl's did."

"But," said the grandmother, who was squatting on the clean floor, pipe in hand, "dis chile will get cure all right."
"Yes," echoed the mother, "He'll get cure, olright, please Gawd."
"What do you do for him?" I ventured to ask.
"Don't do notting—jus' praise de Lord," she replied simply.
"An' rub him day an' night wid de oil ob de coconut," put in the grandmother.
"We rubs him wid oil, olright," echoed the mother.

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A lot of shouting from the beach and an upright figure in a boat warned me that the mail was about to leave. So I waded through little pools of rainwater and joined the crew; sails were hoisted and we/ drifted away. After the smells and the sea upset me no more. Of Course, it was calm, but the smells remained. I will not go into details! I suppose there had been quite twenty people on board during that voyage, there was only one cabin—very small, and no hygiene. Yet we caught no diseases and were unharmed a few weeks later when I decided to "take a chance" and return to the capital without my friend, as I had business to transact and could not stay any longer.

The condition of the island is a disgrace to the British flag; and this is no fault of the Commissioner, who did what he could on very little money, built a bridge and made a very good road leading to the mangrove swamp from where one can sail for many miles to "The Mud" where sponges grow.
The Grand Bahama people are noted for their honesty and are as clean as in extreme poverty they can be. They know nothing of agriculture. They grow next to nothing and depend for food on the expensive stuff the spongers bring in from Nassau which food is imported from the States and has had a high duty paid on it before it starts its 150 mile trip.

Grand Bahama is a very large island (as Bahama Islands go) but it is not prosperous, to say the least!
Yet, I heard a visiting examiner in the schools asking the school-children: "Who was Shakespeare?" And "who was Julius Caesar?" They knew not.
"What do you mean by Germination?" They knew not.
If they were taught that you plant seeds you have to care for them until they grow it would/ be more valuable to them than Shakespeare or Caesar or a word like Germination! It is not that the Government does not give them education, it seems merely as if it gives them too much education of the wrong sort. It is bad enough in this sense in the Board Schools at home, and it is far, far

more out of place on a desert island, where they really think if their seeds are washed away in a rainstorm that it is the Lord's will; and if there is no rain during the dry season, it would going against God to water their plants with the water from their wells!
They say nothing will grow, but one finds out that sweet potatoes, red peas, coconuts, guavas, bananas, onions, oranges, limes, grapefruit and other tropical fruits and vegetables will grow with very little care wherever there is soil.

It was a queer sensation to leave one solitary English lady and her two babies alone on that barren isle—where no mail would come for another two weeks at the earliest—bereft of all that is supposed to be necessary to civilized people. But she was used to it, and her servants were cheerful and kind, ready to do anything for her.
The captain of the Income sent word, on the morning of the day we were to leave, that I should be ready at 6 a.m. That hour found me, without breakfast, sitting upon my rolled-up mattress in the road near the cutting in the rock where the vessel's boat comes in.
They asked me if I would go on board, or if I would sooner they put the cow on first. I said, Place aux vaches, and waited with a little crowd of other people. So the men went off to fetch the horned lady, who jumped a wall and ran into the bush. For four solid hours tehy chased her! After I had been sitting in the blazing sun for two hours I asked them whether they would wait for me to while I went to ahve breakfast. They said they would do that if I was quick, so I gulped down hominy and bacon and arrived just as, with much shouting, they were driving the cow towards me at full speed!
Suddenly she veered round and escaped them again.
And once more I had to sit and wait in the burning glare and heat, for the moment they caught that cow they would depart.
They could wait for her, but not for me!
At last they got her lassoed, and in a wonderful way they leapt into their boat and dragged her in the water behind them. How she was put on deck I did not see, but when I got on board she was meekly standing tied by her horns to the foremast,

The vessel was as clean as a new pin; it had just been painted inside and out and one could but admire the taste with which this had been done. White and blue were the chief colours; grey for the deck, and blue and white picked out with scarlet and yellow for the cabin; all shades mixed to just teh right tones: why could not the Mail be like this?

The billowing sails were new and white and all the people were cleanly dressed and gay. Their cargo was sponges, coconuts, limes and so on, and they expected to make Nassau in twenty-four hours as we had a fair wind and plenty of it.
If I had not been afraid I could have enjoyed that journey.

A it was I lay on my back upon my mattress, my hat over my face to keep off the glare, and held/ tightly to a rope for fear of being thrown over-board when the vessel lurched!
The cow, I noticed, shared my feelings.
I heard one of the peopel say to another: "The white folks tinks we don't love life too."
"We love life or light!" said another, "we ain't taking no risks".
Then one of the group came over and reassured me.
"Dere ain't notting to fear, please Gawd!."

We took the whole of that day stopping at little places along the coast. At one we took on a boatload of unripe grapefruit. At another we took on a black cow and a black pig, which were tied to the mast with the first cow. At last it seemed as if the small vessel could hold no more. But again we stopped, while some of the men and women went ashore to join a ring-dance that was in full swing along the water's edge.
The refrain reached us and everyone on board, except the two cows and the pig, beat time to it with clapping hands, with beating a barrel, a tin basin, or with the feet and the whole swaying body.
"Whosoever shall pick up de stick
Mama lick, baby lick,
Rougey, Rougey."
This was for the rhythm, of course, more than for the sense of the words.
The boats going to and fro amid laughter and greetings passed away at least an hour and a half. Meanwhile the barometer was falling.

All on board were like one happy family, calling each other "Brudder," "Sister", and when later on/ I had mal de mer they were as gentle to me as to a child and called me "sister" too! But with no undue familiarity.
With their food they shared and shared alike—and offered it to me also and I of course offered mine to them. There was no flirting on either trip—no loose behaviour at all. A young man was very attentive to one charming girl, who kept her dignity in a quiet way, and that was all.
The men took turns with the babies and waited on their women gallantly.

Many of the women were ill when we got into the ocean, but all of them were modest and well-mannered.
I never heard one word of swearing coming or going. {I am told that I travelled on an exceptionally "nice" boat..}

They watched every cloud and every breeze and the surface of the water too. Just before we left the last port and set sail for the open sea, I heard the captain mutter that he was "scared along ob de barometer." And for a while we were in doubt whether he would cast anchor and wait, or make a dash for it.
The mate and two others and the chief put their heads together and discussed the question. A great deal of their talk was nautical, but at length I heard a man saying: "If so be's you'se lived good an' near to Gawd, can't come no harm, an' if a man don't live near to Gawd he'll go to the bottom anyway, when de time comes." At which the captain, solemnly agreeing, hitched up his trousers, tightened his belt, settled his cap on more securely and ordered them to dowahtever sailors do for getting under way!/

I have sailed in many craft and in amny seas and I never saw finer seamanship that these seemed to ahve. They would appear careless to the casual onlooker, possibly, but to one who had experience in sailing it was clear that they handled their craft with the ease that comes when work has become second nature.
As we sped away to the merciless ocean the sun was setting in a balze of violent orange, pale emerald and lemon-yellow.
The women rocking sleeping babies were crooning softly to them and the men were singing low to themselves.
As the stars begant to come out I realized what such a trip might mean, in one's own vessel, with the right companion! Even as it was, and in spite of what happened later on in the night, to me there comes somewhat of that peace which passeth understanding, for the rhythm of the sea and the wind syncopated with the moving of the sun, with the movements of the people (to say nothing of my fellow passengers the cows and the pig).

As night fell the impending storm gathered force.
Not one wink did I sleep—nor did the crew close their eyes. Every change of the wind was noted anxiously, and every little while the man at the wheel exchanged whispers with the chief. They steered aprtly by the stars and aprtly by a compass in a box set between the steersman's feet and lihhted by a dingy alntern. Both lantern and compass, it seemed to me, might go overbaord at every lurch.

Now and again a wave swept the deck, and we were all pretty wet before morning!

Anxious moments these were: I remember once a man lurched over, clinging to the boom, and said to another who sat near the wheel:
"Dere's an art in sailing a boat, orlright."
The women just kept still and "praised de Lawd," and the cows kept very silent.
At one time we lost our course, but the men found it again, and towards dawn when a boy ran up to the mast-head and yelled he could see a lighthouse a shiver of relief ran through us all.
At daybreak the people all sat up and shook themselves. The men brought water to the women who cleaned their teeth with their forefinger, over the vessel's side.
Then everyone, with a knife, a coconut and a lime proceeded to breakfast.

After this, in the very teeth of the storm, they all sang in chorus to the beating on the tin basin and waited patiently for whatever might come.
A man passing me, laughed:
"No cause to fear, sister," and offered me some fruit from the cargo.

Well, to cut a long story short, we passed two more lighthouses—the last was on the Berry Islands—and began to feel secure.
"We'se all safe, please Gawd," a woman said to me.
"Praise Gawd!"
"Safe in His keeping," echoed the others, contentedly munching their food.
The boy reached over and fed the cows and the pig with tall grass. The babies got their breakfast in the way that Nature intended. The men washed out the infants' belongings and cleared up the debris of the night./

Suddenly, a rope broke.
"What's dat?"
"Good Lawd save us!" exclaimed the captain, and three men risked falling overboard to catch the frayed end of the slashing thing. They literally clung to the edge of the vessel with their toes, and with one hand on the unbroken rigging, leant out over the turbulent water till they had succeeded in catching the broken one.
"All fast," they sang out when it was tied up again,
The wind came in gusts that shook the sails with sounds like cannon-shots.
But "Notting to fear," the men said, and I began to have faith in their skill. When at midday we reached the Nassau lighthouse I realized the good the whole trip

had done me; and I realized too, when I read the cables later in the day that we had weathered "the tail end" of a hurricane.

Down near Florida "someone's getting it," Nassau folk were saying, and Grand Bahama, if you look at the map, is very near to Florida!
I said goodbye to my travelling companions, pig and all, and as I walked through the market a woman ran after me and told me I was getting broad. I recognized her as the woman I used to buy vegetables from last winter, and laughed as I told her it was due to hominy and peas! I had never felt so well, and certainly had put on weight, and I recommend every overworked or overstrained visitor to try it; it is the best rest cure known, in spite of the discomfort and the risk in it is probably part of the cure.
My whole point of view had altered—I viewed life from a new angle and was ready to start "fresh" with/ everybody. Everything that had worried me four weeks ago was completely wiped away ...[end of GB section].

(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 Haweis 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 starry 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.

A big schooner from the sponging fields loomed in front of us and, casting anchor, furled her sails; the concerted chanting of the ship's crew wafted across to us and when the last hymn had been sung we heard them playing the concertina and beating out a rhythm on the back of some tin box or bath tub! Life on a desert island has its variety!

And if it has its discomforts and dangers it certainly has many advantages which millionaires in their yachts and Society women in their hotels do not ever experience.

On Eight Mile Rock, with its monthly mail, one hardly realises it is not a three days' journey to New York—by yacht!
But the ends of the earth are always quite near, and savages are not only on remote islands. If manners maketh the man, one would judge these people as far more civilized than many in the big cities.
The urchin who came to call Aunt Celia to the birth of his mother's tenth child raised his ragged cap to me with the courtesy and gentleness of a prince, and the Royal Physician himself could not have given me a finer bow than the wise woman gave as she rose from the ground and went away to her "case," promising me she'd come again to-morrow.
"If God gives life."

Every appointment is made with this prefix:—
"If God gives life."
Last summer a mild sort of typhoid was brought into this distant island by some "stranger" and many children died of it—simply, Aunt Celia said, because their parents were lazy and careless./
She herself had two, out of her eight, delirious and "talking in unknown tongues," but she saved them "by hard work."
She "packed" them with pepper grass and she "filled" them with oil and other purges; she made them sweat and removed their clothing each time: she covered them continually in dry, clean rags and threw away the damp ones; she bathed them unceasingly in hot water and rubbed them with hot lard. She put plasters of red pepper and earth at the napes of their necks and on their temples; she covered her finger in a piece of flannel and wiped out their throats and she fetched certain cool branches from the bush and made them fresh beds which "drew away the heat;" she fed them only on "biled" milk and when at last the fever broke and they slept, she cleaned out the rooms and washed the floors, and, for the first time in many days, she took off her own clothes and rested. Afterwards, she gave them conch, stewed, with a few eggs and a medicine with rusty irons in it; and they were speedily cured, but remained deaf, so she melted candle and lard and beeswax, and poured it into their ears, which she afterward syringed with soap suds.
And so saved them.

"Nobody never die wid my treatment, please Gawd,": she repeats periodically; and really one grows to have a great deal of faith in her—and she is not nearly so rough as one would think.
When you have a headache and she begins with her fingers (you have suggested that she first cut her nails) upon your scalp, the quality of her touch is quite remarkable. She soon soothes you and "draws all the blood together"—then immerses the/ legs up to the knees in a hot bath and puts a towel rung in boiling water across the abdomen, and lo! your headache is gone and your nerves are steady!
She makes gargles for sore throats and syringes the nose with soothing lotions—and whatever is wrong she invariably "cleans you all down throughout."
If she were cleaned up herself and set up in Bond Street or Fifth Avenue as "the New Herbalist," she would reap a fortune; but fifty cents will pay for any treatment and, as she is now, she will thank God for it.

(Chapter 7) THE CARVED BEDSTEAD (pp. 91-99)

".....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.

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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 a crust 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.

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II

"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 ad all the children to sleep in: "A family bed," he said!