

The Bahamas in 1888

33 The Living age ... / Volume 177, Issue 2292 June 2, 1888

A land in which it seemed always afternoon. Any one who has been there must allow that the description might have been written of the archipelago of coral rocks known as the Bahamas, and few of those who live in the rush and hurry of our great cities but must long for a brief glimpse of such islands of repose, where the burden of the day may be laid aside, and the too pressing realities of life may, for a time, be forgotten. Even progress has its monotonous side, and there is an undeniable charm in countries where railroads and telephones do not exist, and where even tramways and telegraphs have not yet penetrated. Although the Bahamas were the portal by which the devastating rush of European civilization was first admitted to the Western world, it was not for some years after the simple Lucayans knelt in adoration of the white men, who seemed to them as gods descended from above, that they experienced what a scourge the supposed deities would prove to them and their red-skinned brethren. When oppression and brutality had so devastated the Indians of Hispaniola (Haiti) that hardly enough remained to satisfy the conqueror's greed for wealth by working the gold mines, Ovando (the Spanish governor) remembered the simple-hearted" Lucayans, "of good size, good demeanor, and well-formed," and despatched an expedition with instructions to capture the people and transport them to Hispaniola. A few gifts of red caps, hawks' bells, and "other trifles of insignificant worth" made to them by Columbus, had convinced the Lucayans of the divine origin and friendly disposition of the white men. When seventeen years afterwards Ovando's ships appeared, the natives of the Lucayos flocked to greet the new arrivals. The Spaniards represented themselves as having come from the land where the spirits of the departed Lucayans were living in sunshine and gladness, and by promising to restore them to their lost friends and relatives, the unhappy natives were enticed on board the Spanish vessels and transported, to perish in slavery and wretchedness in the mines of Hispaniola. As many as forty thousand of the natives are supposed to have been thus deported; a few who may have escaped captivity must speedily have died out, and for more than a hundred years the three hundred and sixty-seven islands of the archipelago remained uninhabited by man or beast, no four-footed mammal being indigenous to the Bahamas.

After alternately owing allegiance to lords, proprietors, pirates, and Spaniards, the latter finally relinquished their nominal claim to the Bahamas in 1783, and at the termination of the American War of Independence the islands received a considerable addition to the number of their set/

539

blers by the immigration of loyalists from the American States, who brought with them their goods and chattels (their slaves being included amongst the latter), and made themselves new homes around which to raise cotton, bananas, and pineapples. In Abaco and other islands the descendants of these men still remain, and their stalwart figures and fine physique show that the white man does not necessarily degenerate in hot climates. We are so accustomed to associate the negro with the West Indies that we are apt to forget that he is just as much an importation as the white man. Though the older negroes look back with regret to the hotter suns and more luxuriant fields of their own land, after the second

generation the darkies consider themselves real creoles, or natives of the West Indies, and regard with considerable contempt their brethren born on the dark continent, whom they disdainfully designate as "dem Africans." Towards the mixed race or "colored people" the attitude of their full-blooded ebon brethren is a mixture of distrust, contempt, and envy, mulattos occupying the doubtful position assigned to that which is "neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring." There is a negro saying, "Black people are a basket dat hab a handle, and de buckras (white men) are a basket dat hab a handle, but de colored people dey be a basket dat hab no handle," by which they mean that mulattoes belong to no race or nation.

While embracing various forms of Christianity with tropical fervor, the negroes retain a strong faith in the potency and virtues of obeahism. Indeed a secret belief in obeahism is by no means confined to black men, but is shared by the colored people, and the West Indian whites are not always free from a mysterious dread of the powers of the obeah-man, In his capacity of "bush doctor" the dread is not altogether groundless.

The West Indies abound with shrubs and plants of medicinal properties, not a few of them being highly poisonous; in the use of these the obeah-men are proficient. In most of the islands the

manchineel (*Hippomane mancinella*) grows in more or less abundance. The tree is so poisonous that it is not considered safe to take refuge from sun or storm beneath its branches, and when it is desirable to destroy the tree, it is usual to make a circle of fire around the trunk and burn it down, so as to avoid the risk of cutting it. Not unfrequently leaves and branches of manchineel have been vindictively dropped /540/into tanks or wells of those against whom certain persons may have a grudge. Any one who drinks water thus contaminated xviii, it is said, gradually waste away, and if the use of the water is continued, death is the result. So poisonous is the manchineel that during very dry weather it is not safe to eat the land crabs, which, at other seasons, are reckoned delicacies. However, during a drought land crabs cannot resist a salad of the shining evergreen leaves, rather like those of the camellia in appearance. The flesh of crabs that have fed on this tree becomes impregnated with the poison. In proof of the danger of the diet we were told the following story. Not very long ago two men went on a shooting expedition to one of the Bahama group, known as Acklin's Island. One day three land crabs were caught which were cooked and eaten for supper, each man taking a crab and sharing the other between them. During the night one of the men was taken alarmingly ill, his body swelled tremendously, and before morning he was dead. His companion experienced no ill effects; it therefore seems probable that one of the three crabs must have been poisonous, but on a remote tropical island, some two or three hundred miles from a doctor, a post-mortem examination would be impossible, so no positive certainty could be arrived at. As the poisons used by the obeah-men are all vegetable and can be gathered everywhere in the bush, and as the negroes are extremely averse to speaking on the subject, it is difficult to obtain positive evidence about the matter; but there seems a very general belief in the West Indies amongst those whose opinion is worthy of respect that the process of "putting obeah" upon a man is not always a purely spiritual weapon. The reliance on the powers of the bush doctor is almost universal amongst

the black people, who greatly prefer him to the authorized practitioner. In some cases the remedies prescribed are simple, if not efficacious. A dose of sea-water is considered beneficial for a broken arm, and to hold salt in both hands is reckoned a certain remedy for various of the ills to which flesh is liable, and is also held to be of use in warding off ghostly enemies in the shape of evil spirits. Singularly enough, I have known the same shield against the powers of darkness used by peasants in the west of Ireland. It is common when the bush doctor is consulted for him to pronounce that the patient is suffering from an ailment caused by the presence of a beetle or a spider in one of the limbs. The doctor proceeds to extract the intruder, by sucking the afflicted limb, producing the creature from his mouth at the end of the operation, in proof of its efficacy. Spools of cotton, buttons, nails, and so forth are sometimes alleged to be the cause of the illness, and are extracted in a similar fashion. In his character as wizard, the obeah-man is in request to guard the crops of pineapples or oranges from the hands of the spoiler, the ships from storm and shipwreck, and the crew from death and disaster. Not a schooner leaves the port but has a bit of obeah attached for good luck to the mast, while beneath their shirts a string of charmed twine preserves the men from danger by land or water. Vacant houses are also protected from intruders during the owner's absence by the obeah-man. To effect this police duty, a bar is rolled up containing a few rusty old nails and some pieces of rushes, and laid on the threshold of the cabin; on seeing this mysterious ball, no negro dares to enter the house unlawfully. A rudely carved head, fastened on a tree, is a secure guardian for cocoanut or orange grove, while a horn with a cork on it stuck full of pins and a bottle of water underneath is a favorite protection against thieves or spirits. It would be a bold evil spirit who would enter the field so guarded; he knows right well that the pins would prick him and force him to enter the bottle of water; no negro would dream of intruding within an enclosure where such a bottle was displayed. When the obeah-man's charges are high, or faith is weak, occasionally the owner of a farm throws himself on the good feeling of depredators. I have seen a placard fixed to a post in a field of maize on which was painted the polite request, "If you steal the corn, do please leave the blades." Though the obeah-man is usually resorted to by owners who may have been robbed of their goods, any one in authority may be appealed to on an emergency when no clue can be had to the delinquent. The following paper was one day sent to the governor's secretary: — Mr. Secretary, — Will you please have the person arrested who stole my clothes? This is the prayer of your humble servant, John Smith.