Strange Scenes on a Strange Island

Malago, the Home of Southern Negro Blood — Inhabitants Almost Isolated from Civilization — Incongruous Scenes on a Spot of Natural Beauty in Casco Bay

Written for the Casco Bay Breeze by Lauris Percy

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"Hi thar, luff!"

We luffed—and I think you, my ladye faire, or you, my gallant knight, would have done the same if so ordered with the stentorian mouth utterance that came to us from some obstructed quarter.

After we had gone to windward sufficiently to please ourselves and we hoped our unknown, unseen pilot as well, we headed for where our gruff commander seemed to be; when imagine our consternation to find the articulated sound coming from the lips of a woman on that queerly-populated, much-talked-about, possession-disputed isle of Malago.

And oh, the incongruity of it! Such a pretty little spot of God's footstool to have such chaos thereon.

A small island, not more than a mile—if that—in length, nestling placidly between Bear Isle and the mainland of Phippsburg, so near either that speaking would be easy, with a shore accessible to smaller crafts, a beautiful sea-view, a foot-path across that is a perfect dream of natural splendor, and yet, Oh! the pity—it is almost ostracised, for its inhabitants, living in huts or shacks, are, as a rule, a lot of people who have married, intermarried, or not married at all, until their genealogy is like unto the man, who, though he had married four times and lost all through death or divorcement yet had the courage for a fifth attachment, and who, on being asked if this wife made him any happier than the others, replied, "sho-o' less said about it the better." So of this people can be said the same in a moral sense.

They eat, when hunger drives them to work; they drink Tea, spelled with a capital, if you please, for if report be true its strength would float a ship at sea; they wear anything given them, if a fit or misfit and like their class the bright colors are so attractive many queer combinations are often seen when they are in gala attire.

Tobacco is their ambrosia and it is said they would almost sell their souls for a cut. Not at all backward are they, of either sex in asking for the same; "say yo cant giv me chew of 'baca, can yer, mister?" was the query from one hut passed and as the interrogator came to the door it was given her, for knowing the love of the pressed weed, a quantity was taken with us, and it won an extra civility, quite unexpected, for liberty of taking pictures was allowed. This one of the two little tots in the group picture cannot do them justice.

As we approached, shyness drove them to cling to their mother who was inside the door all the while their bright eyes were wildly dancing and their little curly heads ducking over and under for a sly peep at their intruders. It was the usual penny toll offered by our escort in a way we are told is all his own—a magnetic personality that always wins a trump hand for him. Anyway it won the two small pickaninnies out into the sunlight for a pose and right cunning were they, too.

The living quarters of this island people are small, oh, so small—one being the cabin of an old cast off schooner.

One room suffices in which to eat, drink and sleep and be merry. In the cabin was a poor sick man laying in one corner on the hard floor, no pillow, no covering, nor anything for his relief or comfort, and hot! imagine a 4x5 structure, shut up, (almost nailed up) a fire in the corner opposite the sick man, while in the third was a small table with an array of tin cans. As the door in the fourth corner was opened sufficiently to allow us to look in, phew! the odor was dense enough to blot out the stars—it seemed like a concoction of brimstone and onions brewing. Pitiful? yes, it truly was. How much better would have been this invalid out in God's sunshine, with mother earth for a pillow and Aeolus to fan him pure health-giving air—verily it would have been his Aeoculapius to have "had God's good care and all His remedies, light, water and air."

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Small need of sending our dollars or missionaries away when a little of the filthy lucre and a helping hand would seemingly do so much good here. Could it not be given and received in a way to better the conditions of all? We like the Abner Daniel sort of a Christian who "believes in breathin' fresh air into yore windpipe, thanking God with a clear eye an' a good muscle an' takin' what He gives you an' axin' Him to pass more of its handy." We confess much of the "more" has been passed on for this Malago people until some claim it useless to try to weep, believing it encourages a lack of energy they possess in a very large degree. Yet much charity is needed, remembering that charity, the "David Harum of the South" calls "a plant, hard to git rooted, and a body ought to have it whar they kin watch it close. It'll die a heap o' times ef you jest look at it, an' it mighty nigh always has bad soil or a drought to contend with." So here, where contentions are great there should be an equivalent of the God-like virtue.

A superstitious race are they of Malago, even the screeching of an owl is an ominous sign to them—"yer hear that now, its sure nuff message—some one going over 'fore mornin'" Then again sure death would be inevitable were a black mitten given any of them unasked.

We have heard it said there is no man so poor but that he can afford to keep one dog, but here it seemed none were too poor to keep three or four if one could so judge by the barkings of the domestic animals. Huts that were barred and bolted were nevertheless not lifeless inside if howls and growls were any proof of a possible existence.

Of cats none were seen; they may have been there but were not visible.

Leaving the northern end of the island we took the path previously mentioned which wound through shade and sun-light, among blue and huckleberry bushes, over velvety grass and across ridges of stone; in one place is a freak of nature most wonderful. An ascent is made easy by five steps in a ledge which are perhaps two feet long, a foot high and same in width; no one seems to know of them save they have always been there. The end of the path brought us to the ascent is made easy by five feet in bode of a war veteran, whom we found partaking of his eve-time meal. The "Capt." is of the 547 Massachusetts and draws a pension and state aid to provide his daily wants, yet he does dig clams or lobster a little, thus showing an ambition above the majority, who only work as they actually need. The Captain's greeting was kindly and we found him a most loquacious gentleman, especially when started on his war experiences, which he can reel off by the yard and it seems his delight when an audience is granted him. Standing in his doorway, knife in hand, he told how he was out in his dory, was hailed by one in passing telling him men were wanted over in Cundy's; he hove to and came on shore an' fore he knew it was in the Central states; also he recalled his remembrance of Jeff Davis We were entertained as long as we remained and doubtless were we still there the stories would not be lacking, but be sure, my reader, should you ever meet this noted (here-a-bouts) individual you address him as Capt., to obtain the freedom of speech desired.

Many amusing anecdotes are told but to hear them one should see the facial expression necessary to make a complete whole.

Some few years ago a wedding took place there and a good housewife on the mainland told the colored bride she hoped she would not have to work so hard and that she'd not have to dig clams or pull lobster traps as she had done. "Now don' yer worry 'bout me eny more 'cause I ain't merried one o' yer lazy niggers," was the reply, but it was not long when the groom got so "d...efful tired, yer kno, I jes has ter help him out, yer kno."

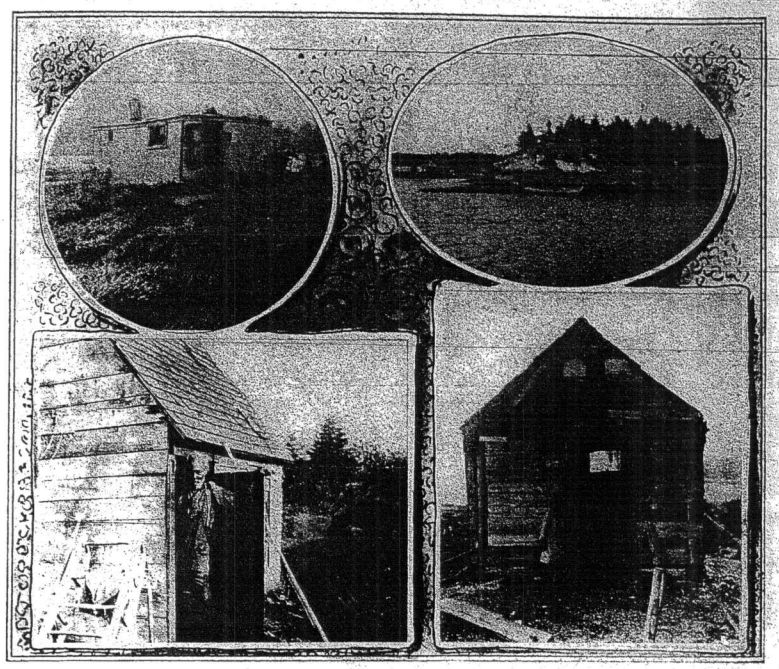
One of the women was washing for a family not far distant and the daughter of the house was asked why she didn't "git merried." On saying she couldn't find any one to have her came the rejoinder, "Sho now, that airs is bad—now yor jes cotch a feller an' I'll fix him so he will have yer." When asked how such a colossal undertaking could be accomplished,—"Why, chile, I'll jes put him in a barr'l, head him up, an' roll him over and over until he'll promise never to leav yer." An original way of husband winning, to say the least, but one we think is still untried.

One of the men is a mason, a fairly good one, too, and who rather prides himself in his capabilities. Not long ago he was employed to repair a ceiling on which work had previously been done by another mason, although this was unknown by the present owner who said, "I suppose you patched that over there, didn't you?" As the white of those eyes rolled round with all the disgust possible, he replied, "that, no, no, ma'm, that's none o' my work. Spose I'd leave that—or that?"

One of the men had at one time a dollar or so more than he actually needed for present supplies and was undecided as to its disposal, for to lay aside any for future wants is a thing unknown. As he was in a grocery store he, of course, was tendered much advice as to its disposal from the usual loafers collected in such a place. Finally it was suggested he put it on interest. Not fully understanding, the matter was explained how he would go to town, take his money to a bank where the cashier would look it over and hand him back a book. This seemed a poser and he was silent some seconds; at last, light dawning, he ejaculated, "ye-ye-yes—g-give um a-all m-my m-m-money an' take m-my p-p-pay in b-b-book."

But enough of the poor colored race, we doubt not many of them have white hearts; and placed here on this isle in Casco Bay for some purpose, though at present an unknown one. Though it is not theirs they seem to hold by peacable possession and it looks like the quoted nine-tenths of the law would hold the remaining one-tenth for no one "molests or maketh afraid." But such a spot of beauty as could here be made for a few summer homes, with the present outlook for Brightwater (the new property of the Boston syndicate on Phippsburg shores) the talked-of future Cliff house on Bear Island, the hoped-for advancement of Cundy's (which will surely come, not long can it remain in its present dormant state) and could this small gem of an isle be depopulated and rebuilt what a change and what an imposing entrance to our beautiful New Meadow River.

In the words of "historic fame" "let it come, I repeat it, sir, let it come!"



1. House made from Ship's Galley.
2. North Point of Island.
3. "Colonel" Johnson's House.
4. Typical Family Dwelling.

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