

CHAPTER XXXV

A VACATION IN VIRGIN ISLANDS

Vacation time, 1929, had arrived - Grandfather felt that life had been made too rapid with the airplane survey, and it was agreed that Grandfather should slow down a bit by taking Grandmother and Grace on a slow boat to tour the Virgin Islands. The weather was delightful, the tropical seas were calm and blue, the trade wind blew constantly from the Northeast, bringing the refreshing breezes which make the tropics in midsummer more comfortable than hot spells in the United States.

The best room for a summer cruise in the tropics is forward port side corner room with a window to the bow and another window on the port side. Going down the wind will blow in the port window and coming back, will blow in the window facing the bow. We had this room - there was but one such on the boat - and we were comfortable.

The Virgin Islands are the eastern range of the West India Islands. The principal islands in the order of our visit are St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. Kitts, Antigua, Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Lucia, Barbados and Trinidad. The trip is rendered more interesting by the fact that the islands while all tropical and all inhabited principally by negroes, nevertheless differ materially in physical characteristics and in the varied modifications of racial type which has come about through differences in island ownership.

President Hoover, in a visit to the American Islands in the group, about a year later, said that the United States in buying St. Thomas and St. Croix had bought a glorified poorhouse and that there was no prospect that the islands would ever become economically or politically self-supporting. This confirmed the impression we had of these islands, but it seemed to us

likely that as refuelling stations for the Navy and especially for planes, they may be worth the expense of purchase and of upkeep.

A funny incident occurred in crossing St. Croix. We insisted on riding across in a private car, and the owner of the bus line finally chauffeured us across in his own car. About half way across we found one of his busses stalled by the wayside. The negro driver was asleep over the wheel, the negro conductor was stretched out on his back sound asleep and all the passengers (all colored) were asleep.

The owner, quite disturbed to see his bus by road side and the people apparently asphyxiated, demanded in a loud voice to know what the matter was. The driver at the wheel began to stir, the conductor roused himself from the grass and the passengers one by one opened their eyes. The matter? They had run out of gas! All were taking a nap until a white man should come along to tell them what to do about it!

The owner told them how - in fact, tended to it himself, taking the conductor on the running board of our car to a farmhouse for a pail and thence to a sugar centrale about a mile away for gas. By the time we got back all the passengers were awake and having a good time, and with a gallon of gas to carry them to the next gas station, all were soon merrily on their way.

St. Croix is reminiscent of Alexander Hamilton, for here as a youth he clerked in a village store, which still does business at the old stand and here his mother is buried.

One of the most interesting islands to visit is Martinique. Here are mountains and a volcano, and great glens filled with ferns, and coconut groves and sugar plantations on the hillsides. Here negro women build the roads, carrying unbelievable loads of rock on their heads. Here the women

also are the stevedores coaling the vessels by carrying huge baskets of coal into the hold on their heads.

In passing it may be said parenthetically that some of these negro laboring women have erect and graceful carriages that may well be the envy of many American girls.

We happened on the return voyage to stop here on a church holiday when all the negro population were out in their finery to attend church, and a colorful sight they presented in their gowns of many brilliant colors. When laboring, these negroes resented having their pictures taken. Now, however, in their finery, what could please them better?

Barbados is quite different - rather flat, more dry than the other islands, right in the path of the trade wind. Barbados has for two centuries been considered as something of a health resort. George Washington's brother went here when attacked by tuberculosis. The ruling population is English. There are nice homes, pleasant club buildings and, all in all, Barbados looks to be the most pleasant of all the islands in which to live or to visit.

The scourge of the islands are the fall tornadoes which devastate the coconut groves, wreck houses and carry death and disaster through a broad swathe. The islands showed many evidences of bad storms of the two preceding years.

To the south of the Virgin Islands, then the terminus of our trip, lies Trinidad, a large island under English rule. Trinidad has a less salubrious climate than Barbados, having its full share of tropical rainfall, but like Barbados has pleasant hotels and clubs. Social life here is said to be quite interesting to British and Americans.

A unique industry of the island is Pitch Lake, from which comes practically all the asphaltum used in the United States for roofs and roads.

The lake comprises about 100 acres - and a dismal looking 100 acres it is - looking much like mud flats when the tide is out.

The pitch is hard enough to walk on safely. It is dug up with picks, thrown into carts, hauled to a large plant where heat is applied and the pitch then flows freely into barrels which are carried by a huge overhead system out to boats and dropped into the hold. Where the pitch is dug out, a hole is left which fills with water from the next shower, one of which comes every few hours. To avoid breeding places for numberless mosquitoes, the pitch is dug out so as to form drainage ditches. In a few weeks these ditches are filled up from below with other pitch.

Only one other pitch lake is known and that is just across the Straight on the north coast of Venezuela which can readily be seen from Trinidad.

Pitch from the lake in Trinidad was used by Sir Walter Raleigh to calk his boats and has been used by shipbuilders and all others needing such a product for centuries.

Apparently the supply of pitch is endless - probably it is not - but there is every likelihood that it will last as long as you are interested in roofs and roads.

An American company has the sole concession to take pitch from the lake and in one year is said to have paid the government a royalty of \$350,000, which shows that a pitch lake, although not much to look at, is a valuable 100 acres to own.

Just as we started on this trip to Trinidad, the Graf Zeppelin started on its first cruise around the world. As we came into New York harbor on our return voyage, the Graf Zeppelin flew over our boat. In the three weeks we had been to Trinidad and back, the Graf Zeppelin had encircled the globe - a new form of transportation had made an impressive demonstration.