

THE CENTURY MAGAZINE.

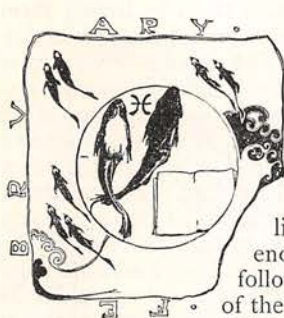
VOL. XXXIII.

FEBRUARY, 1887.

No. 4.

A MIDWINTER RESORT.

WITH ENGRAVINGS OF WINSLOW HOMER'S WATER-COLOR STUDIES IN NASSAU.



IT was the boast of Attila, "the Scourge of God," that wherever his steed planted his hoof, the grass thenceforth ceased to grow. A like blighting influence seems to have followed in the footsteps of the Spaniards who first visited the western world.

The light which guided Columbus to the shore of San Salvador, on the night of October 11, 1492, was to his pious imagination as the flaming Cross of Constantine,— a mystic symbol prophetic of conquests for Holy Church. To the belated native of the Bahamas who bore it, and to all his race, that light was an omen of disaster and death. Faith in an unseen country, peopled by their ancestors, was the chief article of their simple creed. With devilish craft, the Spaniards who followed in the footsteps of Columbus availed themselves of this belief to entice the natives to leave their island homes, and compelled them to labor in the mines and pearl-fisherries of Hispaniola. They promised to convey them to the abode of their ancestors, and after a hellish fashion fulfilled the promise. None were left behind; not one ever returned. Unaccustomed labor soon broke them down in body or mind, and death by suicide or disease followed, the entire race disappearing in fourteen years.

When we review the history of the Bahamas since that evil day, we may easily fancy that

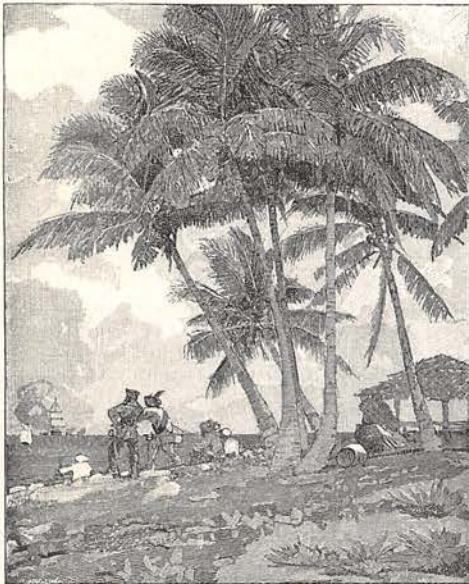
the vengeful shades of these wronged natives still possess their coral islands. No other race has flourished here, and for a time it seemed as though no other was to be permitted to gain even a foothold. The Englishman drove out the Spaniard, and the Spaniard the Englishman in his turn. Chillingworth, the first English governor sent to the colony, was shipped abroad by his unruly subjects, who, "living a licentious life, were impatient of government." His immediate successor, Clark, was roasted on a spit by the Spaniards, but they did him the kindness to kill him first. This application of "civil-service reform" was somewhat overdone,— whether the governor was or not,— and naturally the office was not soon again applied for. The island of New Providence, the seat of government of the Bahamas, was, indeed, wholly deserted for a time. Its population, even now, after a growth of two hundred years, does not exceed twelve thousand. The first governor appointed after the resettlement, Cadwallader Jones, was also deposed and imprisoned by his subjects. The rule of Trott and Webb, who followed each other in one year, was less turbulent, but their successor was seized and put in irons by the islanders. The Spaniards carried off the next aspirant for gubernatorial honors. This so discouraged his successor that he took to the woods on his arrival, and returned, after a tremulous career of a few months, with his valuable commission unopened.

It is evident that the empire of the Bahamas was not one to be coveted then, and it is not much more to be desired now. England holds it rather from necessity than from choice; a necessity of that imperial forecast in which we,

her nearest neighbors across the Florida channel, are so deficient, and which England herself seems to be losing as she follows us in her progress towards democracy. New Providence was in our possession during the American Revolution, but Commodore Hopkins, who planted our flag there, thought that the guns and the governor were the only things worth possessing. These he carried away, leaving the island to the control of its British subjects. Our experience with blockade runners and Confederate cruisers during the war shows how much this blunder of the little port of Nassau was swollen at that time by the cargoes of nearly three hundred vessels, sailing in a single year to and from the Confederate ports. These increased the imports and exports to nearly fifty millions of dollars, furnishing the Confederates with the sinews of war and prolonging the fated contest. Those were gay times in the Bahama capital, when the captain of a blockade runner received for his trip \$5000, with the privilege of carrying ten bales of cotton; when money poured in from every quarter, and even the wharf-rats were enrolled in the obnoxious class of "capitalists." We had our revenge in the inevitable depression which succeeded this

scarcely grows at all. The idea of midsummer weather in midwinter warms the blood of the Northern visitor with a glow of cheerful anticipation. For the brief term of his voluntary exile the charm may continue, but, like a sea voyage under sunny skies and with fair winds, the monotony speedily becomes tedious. In the height of the season there are only some one hundred and fifty visitors at Nassau, and the number coming and going in an ordinary year is four or five hundred, eight hundred being the highest total known. Few Americans can long endure existence in a land without scenery except such as the ocean affords; without a mountain, or a stream of running water; without a railroad, bank, or telegraph line; with no Wall street or stock indicator; without so much as a single sheet that can be dignified by the name of newspaper. Thither should be banished by editorial edict those who declaim against the journals they read with such avidity, forgetting how easily they might protect themselves against them by letting them alone, as the people of the Bahamas are accustomed to do. The fine art of interviewing is unknown there, and a delightful unconsciousness of everything that is passing possesses the mind of the local editor. He has a conscience against disturbing the slumbers of the town with news fresh and startling. The failure of the Government Bank, which affected nearly every one in Nassau, was not reported in the Nassau "Guardian" until six weeks after the event. A news-boy crying an extra would be as out of keeping with his surroundings as would one of the stately royal palms among the telegraph poles of Broadway.

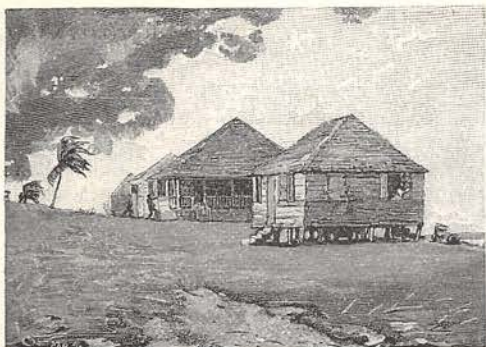
It is for those to whose sore lungs or rheumatic limbs our Northern winters bring endless misery that Nassau has its chief charm; but the proverb concerning shoemakers' wives and blacksmiths' horses holds good here. One of the diseases prevalent among the negroes, who furnish four-fifths of the population of the Bahamas, is consumption, and this station is, I understand, on the black list of the British Horse Guards, as one of the most unhealthy in this regard to which their colored soldiers are sent. But the traveler does not spend one-half his time in the water, as do the negroes, nor sleep in a cabin with windowless openings hermetically sealed at night by close-fitting blinds to keep out the wandering spirits of darkness. Nor are the comforts with which the visitor is surrounded accessible to the Conch, as the native is called. Even the best-regulated thermometer will have its vagaries, and there is no protection against it when it does "bear" the weather. The houses are without fire-places or stoves, and the ingleside of the domestic Briton has not been transplanted



A GROUP OF PALMS.

period of inflation, and left a blight upon the commerce of Nassau from which it has never recovered.

For those not compelled to live there, the Bahamas have their charms. Most of the natives would, I fancy, embrace any eligible opportunity to emigrate, and the population



A HURRICANE.



GROWING HEMP.

here, where it would be, indeed, out of place. The simple expedient of determining a man's military rank by the number of chimneys on his house, said to be in use in some of our Southern localities, would fail here, as the houses have no chimneys. The cooking is done in a kitchen detached from the main building, or in a fireplace built out-of-doors. Even the hotel has no conveniences for warming its rooms, and an invalid who last winter sought extra warmth was obliged to supply the lack of a chimney-flue by conveying her stove-pipe through a window-pane. Another visitor, a man of genius, and fertile in expedient, went to bed in his overcoat. But then he was an artist, and artists we class with the sensitive plants. The chief protection required is against the heat, and many of the houses are sheltered from the direct rays of the sun by an outer shell of lattice-work extending from balcony to balcony.

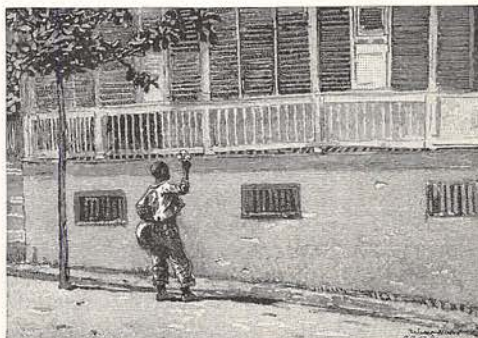
In justice to the Bahamas it should be said that we have the unanimous testimony of the inhabitants that such weather is exceptional, and the oldest residents agree in the declaration that they never saw its like before. We have the equally comforting assurance of the captain of the steamer, which carried us through as nasty weather as we wish to see, that it was something unknown to his winters' experience

in those seas. The very worst of Nassau winter weather is, however, like the balm of Gilead to the invalid, compared with the best our New York or New England climate affords at the same season. This is the place in which to seek complete repose for brain and nerves. A delicious sense of rest and refreshment descends upon all who do not carry with them the insane desire for locomotion which possesses our restless people, and are content with the rides and sails to which the delightful weather constantly invites them. It is the land of which Columbus wrote to his generous patron, Queen Isabella, in the first enthusiasm of his discovery: "This country excels all others as far as the day surpasses the night in splendor. The natives love their neighbors as themselves; their conversation is the sweetest imaginable; their faces always smiling; and so gentle and affectionate are they, that I swear to your highness there is not a better people in the world."

Alas that such a charming people should have been expatriated, and that in the process of evolution so little progress has thus far been made in reproducing their like! The negroes have something of their spirit, and as their blood is gradually giving a warmer and warmer coloring to that of the whites, a race such as Columbus admired may again people these



ON ABACO ISLAND.

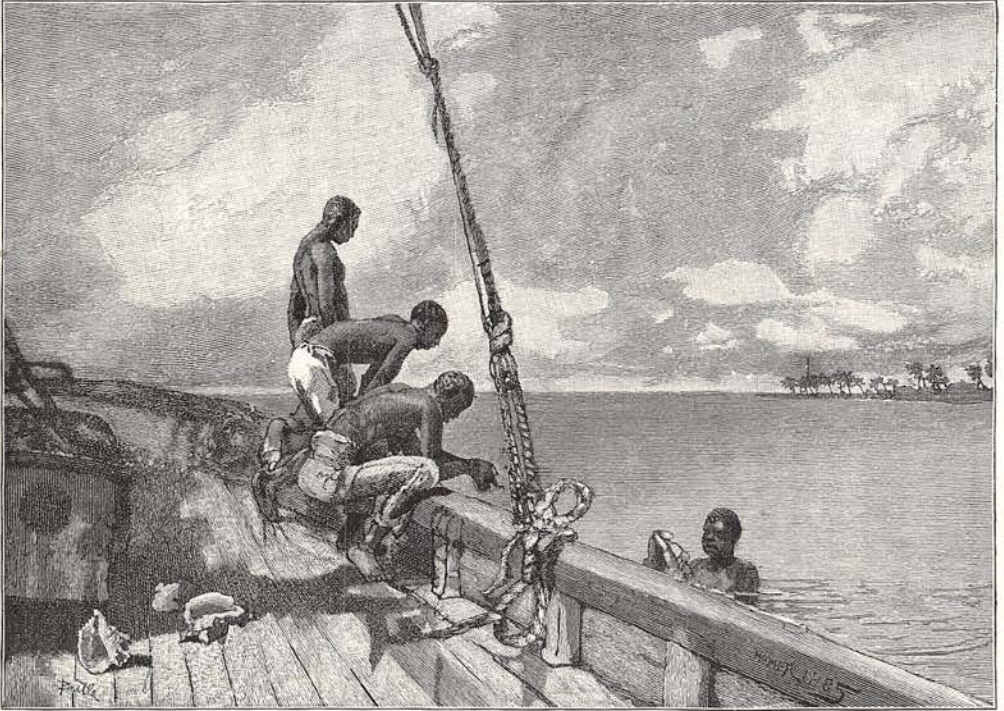


A FLOWER-SELLER.

islands. It is hard, though, to discover thus far any proof of De Moussy's theory that the mixed races are destined to return in a great measure to the superior races, possessing the added advantages of acclimatization. Slavery was abolished in 1834, and with it seems to have disappeared the prejudice of color. Even a generous admixture of it does not exclude one from white society or prevent a social intercourse

ported from England form a class by themselves, and the attempt to establish among them the etiquette of a vice-regal court excites in the minds of the profane a sentiment akin to that with which Gulliver must have viewed the ceremony at the court of Lilliput.

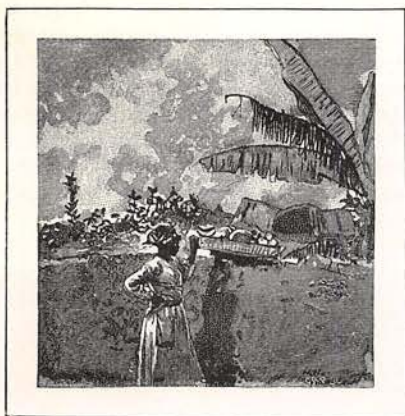
Those who are attracted to the Bahamas should not forget that islands have a way of lying out in the sea most suggestive of dis-



CONCH DIVERS. (SKETCH OWNED BY RUSSELL STURGIS, ESQ.)

from which may follow results most disturbing to one educated in the ideas which prevail at home. A story is told of a young American girl who married a Bahamian, with a shade of color too delicate to be noticed, and was taken home to the hospitalities of a family of relatives, descending through the various degrees of consanguinity to the dusky hue of Solomon's bride upon whom the sun had looked. Prosperity and the development of the faculty of accumulation will bring social success to the negro in our own country in time as it has here. The ten million dollars' worth of property reported to be in the possession of the negroes of Charleston has all the force for them of a new proclamation of emancipation. The wealthiest family in the Bahamas is of semi-negro origin, and the collector of the port is a full-blooded negro, who is justly respected for his character, education, and ability. The officials im-

comfort to owners of weak stomachs. Nassau lies some two hundred miles eastward from the Florida coast, and the Bahamas at the nearest point are seventy miles away; yet it seems to be beyond the energy of its inhabitants to maintain any permanent means of direct communication with the mainland. It remains to be determined whether the latest attempt to establish a line of steamers to a Florida port will supersede the present means of intercourse by steamers coming nine hundred miles south from New York, and stopping at Nassau once, or at the most twice, a month, between New York and Cuba. Aside from the prolonged misery which too frequently attends a voyage of four or five days in winter weather, the discomforts of landing are, at times, such as to daunt any but the most hardy. The industrious coral engineers, to whom the island of New Providence is indebted for its exist-



A PEDDLER.
(SKETCH OWNED BY MRS. MARTIN BRIMMER.)

ence, made no provision for a harbor, beyond throwing up the outlying reef called Hog Island, which only partly protects Nassau from the force of the sea. There is scarcely room between the two islands for an ordinary coasting steamer to manoeuvre, or sufficient depth of water in the channel to float a vessel of any size. The steamers that call here lie outside and drop their passengers over the bulwarks on to the retired New York tugboat that does duty as a transfer vessel. Like the other valetudinarians laid up in ordinary here, it has come South to lengthen out its days.

But transfer to the hotel by this means is comfort compared with the experience to which many visitors are subjected. With contrary winds and seas, approach to Nassau is impossible, and the steamer must make a harbor under the lee of the land, miles away. In some winds it is even compelled to go entirely around the island to South Bay, and dump its passengers on the beach, to get over the distance of fourteen miles to the hotel in carriages as best they can. There is a spice of adventure, but not such as invalids seek, in finding your way across a tangle of wilderness, through a country you never saw before. Fortunately for them there are no wild animals there larger than a hare, and the only representative of the ophidians is the chicken-snake, which is perfectly harmless, in spite of the fact that it is reported sometimes to grow to fifteen feet in length. The tarantulas or ground-spiders are the only venomous creatures on the island, unless we include the mosquitoes, which are said, with patriotic discrimination, to confine their visitations to foreigners. But these pests are citizens of the world, and extended their attentions even to the crew of the *Jeannette*, icebound in an Arctic sea.

Once safely landed at the Royal Victoria, everything will be found most comfortable, and

the balmy breezes from the sea will woo the invalid from thought of his pain. As he is there only for the winter, he is not disturbed by the reflection that the city of Nassau is the hottest place in the colony. The fact that it is built upon the slope of a ridge of land which shuts it out from the prevailing southerly breezes concerns only its unhappy summer residents. The "out islands," as all but New Providence are called, have attractive sites for health resorts, but furnish no accommodations for visitors. What the hotel at Nassau would do if it were dependent, as the residents are, upon local supplies, it would be hard to say. All of its meats are brought in huge refrigerators from New York, where everything seems to be obtained, excepting fruit and fish, of which there is abundance in delicious variety. It is impossible to give a complete dinner without calling upon the resources of the hotel. A few vegetables are grown in the hotel grounds in soil brought, like that in which the Capuchins of Rome are planted, from a distance. There is scarcely any soil upon the island, except in the pockets of the coral rocks; scarcely any foundation for it, indeed. The trees in this climate seem able to live upon the air, and you see them growing to large size on top of walls. Over the sides their roots spread themselves, until they reach the crevices in the rock below and take anchorage there. Cut down a jungle, and you find beneath nothing but a mass of conglomerated rock, formed of finely comminuted coral, shells, and various marine deposits of recent origin, with red earth composed of vegetable mold and the detritus of the limestone rock, scattered irregularly in patches of a few inches in depth. The roads through the town are made by smoothing off the top of the coral rock, and they are nearly as dazzling in the sun as a white-washed wall.

The walls that border them are built of the



A NASSAU GATEWAY.
(SKETCH OWNED BY E. W. HOOPER.)

same rock, with, in many cases, gates of entrance curiously projecting above the low wall itself. There are no fences, stone walls being required for protection against the winds, which at times sweep over these islands with the fury of the hurricane. The rock seems hard enough when weather-beaten, until you see a laborer at work upon it with hatchet and saw, shaping it to his uses. The ocean works

on the surface that the roots of plants and trees penetrate in all directions, seeking the fresh water stored up in its crevices, and resting upon the sea-water which is found below it. Andros Island is the only one of the group that has any pure water, except what is stored in tanks after a rain. The water of the shallow wells in Nassau is brackish, and rises and falls with the tide.



SHARK-FISHING — NASSAU BAR.

it into fantastic forms, of which we have an illustration in the famous Hole-in-the-wall on Abaco Island. This is an opening in the calcareous rock, through which the setting sun, blazing in its tropical majesty, at times produces a picture leaving an impression never to be effaced. The deposits of which the rock is formed have in places solidified into compact beds of limestone, from which fine building-stone is quarried. These beds show evidences of stratification, and abound in fossils of recent and living species. The infiltration of water through the mass of calcareous sand, produced by the attrition of the waves on the coral reef, has given to it an interior crystalline structure, like that of ancient limestone. Soft beneath, on the surface exposed to the air the coral rock is as hard as flint, and will, like flint, emit sparks when struck with a steel. Most of the coral rock is so porous

A tragedy is connected with the principal hotel, the Royal Victoria, which associates it with our own recent history. It is brought to mind by a notice found in the Nassau "Guardian" of fourteen years ago, to this effect:

NOTICE.

All persons having demands against the estate of the late Lewis F. Cleveland, deceased, are requested to render statements thereof, duly attested, on or before the first day of May next, to John S. Darling, Esquire.

And all persons who are indebted to said estate are requested to make immediate payment to the said J. S. Darling.

GROVER CLEVELAND,
W. W. STEPHENSON,
Executors.

January 20, 1873.

One of these executors has since been called to administer upon a larger estate. The occasion of his visit to Nassau in 1873 was the sudden and melancholy death of his brother, the lessee

of the hotel. He was lost on the steamer *Missouri*, burnt off Abaco Island on the morning of October 22, 1872. Another brother of President Cleveland, Mr. R. C. Cleveland, and a brother-in-law, were also among the victims of this disaster. Lewis Cleveland was a man of strong personality, and stories told of him would indicate that some of the characteristics of his distinguished brother are family traits. An inexorable rule of his hotel management forbade the payment of fees. One waiter who accepted a Christmas gift was promptly dismissed. The lady whose gratitude for special services had thus found expression finally secured the reversal of the sentence, on condition that the gift should be returned. "I will not," said Mr. Cleveland, "have those in my house who are unable or unwilling to fee the servants put to any disadvantage." It is told of Mr. Cleveland that, as he was on his way to the steamer at New York, he said: "I do not know how it is, but I have an impression that I cannot get rid of, that this will be my last voyage." So it proved, not only to him, but to sixty-eight others of the eighty-five persons who sailed in the *Missouri* as passengers and crew.

The loss of the *Missouri* is but one in a long train of disasters on record to the disadvantage of this fateful coast. What gives the Bahamas such value as they have for England is their situation opposite the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico. They lie directly in the track of the great commerce that goes in and out of the gulf, tempting to their fate innumerable vessels, some the victims of misfortune, others, how many no one can say, the victims of dishonest owners or dishonest skippers. The dwellers on the Bahamas are "toilers of the sea," and among the sea's most lucrative products for them are the wrecks strewn along the coast. The extent of the industry dependent upon disasters not included in the underwriters' description as "the act of God" can be judged by the statistics of wreckage during a given period of fifteen months, 1858-9. Within this time eighty vessels, having a value of two million six hundred thousand dollars, contributed their salvage to the wealth of the Conchs. These made good use of the opportunity afforded them, and it is notorious that the system of salvage established here is little better than organized robbery. Judge Marvin, of the United States District Court, Florida, shows that the salvage on vessels unlucky enough to be wrecked on the Bahama side of the Florida channel was eighty-seven per cent. of their value, while on the American side it was but fourteen per cent. This disproportion becomes more noticeable when we recall the fact that the Florida wreckers are

descendants of the Conchs; so the difference is one of laws and their administration, and not of people. The early inhabitants of the Bahamas were freebooters, preying on commerce under the lead of Black Beard and other pirates, and the breed does not seem yet extinct, in spite of the legend borne on the colonial escutcheon, "Expulsis Piratis, restituta Commercium." As the commerce of the United States is that which chiefly suffers, we have some right to protest. Here, again, we find ourselves paying tribute where we should be in a position to exact it. These islands were part of the colonial possessions known as the Carolinas, which came to us after the Revolution, and should have been included with them in the transfer of the title obtained from the Earl of Shaftesbury and his associates. The doubtful theory which holds that the Bahamas are built upon a deposit from our Mississippi would, if accepted, serve to give us a further title. Whatever their origin, they unquestionably belong to our system, as the colonists were once rudely reminded by the Home Government, in denying their request for an independent coinage. Geologically, the underlying stratum, upon which, as it gradually sank beneath the ocean, the coral insect built these islands, was once a part of our continent. Their work was begun thirty or forty thousand years ago, according to Agassiz, or one hundred thousand years after the corner-stone of the present Florida peninsula was laid by them. The Bahamas are the most northerly of the series of island groups beginning near the Florida coast and following the general trend of the North American continent for two thousand miles across the entrance of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea to near the mouth of the Orinoco in South America.

As to wrecking, two curious stories are told which illustrate local ideas. One is of the native who tendered the prospective profits of future salvages to a New York banker as security for a loan; another of the colonial governor who was about to return to England. In his farewell speech he offered to use his good offices to procure from the Home Government any favor the colonists might desire. The unambiguous reply was as startling as the demand for the head of John the Baptist in a charger: "Tell them to tear down the lighthouses; they are ruining the prosperity of this colony." The one thing to be admired in these wreckers is the undoubted skill which long habit has given them. They will dive down through two hatches to fasten their grappling-irons on to packages floating in the lower hold, in the filthy mixture compounded of bilge-water and the various ingredients of an assorted cargo.

The Conch is, in fact, an amphibious animal. The proximity of water having a temperature, even in winter, of seventy degrees Fahrenheit, tempts the children, almost from the cradle, to seek upon the sea the freedom the land does not afford. This circumstance may also serve to explain the fact that the Baptists, judged by official statistics of average attendance, outnumber here all the other denominations combined. The sharks are not inviting, but there is a tradition that they do not take kindly to black flesh. Indeed, it is hard to find a proof that they meddle with human flesh of any color, in spite of such voracious stories as that with which the Duke of Edinburgh was entertained when here. According to this account, a boat carrying five men was upset off the coast, and nothing more seen of its occupants until a shark was captured within whose proper receptacle were stowed away five human skeletons, neatly arranged in a row. Clinging to the breast-bone of the man-eater was the silver watch carried by the former occupant of one of these skeletons,—still going. Without vouching for this story in all of its details, I can testify that I saw an unpleasantly suggestive-looking fin gleaming above the water near the spot where I had taken my boy of ten in the day before. One of the favorite pastimes of this land which affords so little game of any size is the hunting of sharks.

One of Mr. Homer's spirited sketches represents a party of fishermen watching one of their number as he appears above the water with a conch shell. The flesh of this mollusk furnishes a staple article of diet, as well as the bait with which the fish are enticed. Its shell is used for the manufacture of ornaments, and hidden in its recesses are occasionally found the pink pearls, the best of which command a high price. The "king conch" is the royal head of the mollusk tribe, represented in these waters by four thousand different species. Shells in every variety can be obtained from the shops along the shore devoted to the

sale of marine curiosities, and having a most ultramarine smell. One of the glories of Nassau is the opportunity it offers for the study of the wonders of the ocean depths. In a boat having panes of glass set in the bottom, you glide over the coral reefs, studying their wonders through the opalescent water, which the eye penetrates to a depth of eighty or more feet. Unconscious of your presence, the denizens of the under world pursue the routine of their daily lives, and without the formality of an introduction you seem to be admitted to their homes. Description fails in the attempt to convey the impression received from such a glimpse of the ocean world. You understand, as never before, how it is that all primitive peoples dwelling by the sea have filled it with the semi-human beings of their own imaginative creation. Indeed, you are more than half inclined to doubt whether they were not nearer the truth, and sigh for "the creed outworn" which gave a charm to the ocean of which science would despoil us.

In the area of the Bahamian colony may be properly included the whole of the coral banks of the Great and the Little Bahamas,—42,560 square miles in all. Of this, 3,560 square miles project above the surface of the sea in over a thousand islands and cays, a total area of land about three-quarters that contained in the State of Connecticut. The submerged banks rise out of the ocean depths to within a few feet of the surface, and from them are gathered the sponges, the fish, the shells and pearls, and the turtles, which are either consumed or sold in exchange for foreign necessities and luxuries, to supplement the meager diet of fish and vegetables which is all the islands afford. The most interesting as well as the most valuable portion of the Bahamas lies beneath the sea. There is enough in the sea gardens alone to explain why it is that her Britannic Majesty's colony of the Bahamas is seen so generally through the halo of imaginative description alone.

William C. Church.

IN MASQUERADE.

NOW every twig's a gleaming lance
With jeweled haft of dazzling frost,
And withered tops of weeds, once tossed,
Are frozen in a spectral trance.

The moon is blown a silver boat
Across the soundless upper seas;
A beetling castle stand the trees,
The valley is a bridgeless moat.

Beyond the meadow winding down
The dusky hollow to the sea,
Beyond the unstirred poplar-tree,
I seek two lights within the town.

They glitter like a serpent's eyes,
And waiting in their luring glow,
The serpent-soul I seek, I know,
Sits there in woman's sweetest guise.

L. Frank Tooker.