

The Queer Cayman Islanders

By William Thorp

WHAT splendid looking men!" exclaimed an American tourist, as he watched half a dozen sailors unloading turtles from a small schooner anchored in the harbor of Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies.

Not one of them was less than six feet tall, and two were veritable giants. Well built, tanned by the tropical sun, brawny, handsome, frank of countenance and agile as cats, they looked the popular ideal of the sailor. In contrast with the black loafers on the wharf and the undersized, pasty-faced creole clerk who was tallying their cargo, they seemed like gods among men. "Don't you know who they are?" said a Jamaican friend to the tourist. "They are Cayman Islanders. No wonder you admire them. I suppose that, physically and morally, they are about the finest race of men in the world."

The Caymanians, tucked away and isolated from the rest of the world on tiny islands in the Caribbean sea, between Jamaica and Cuba, have succeeded in establishing that ideal commonwealth of which philosophers and statesmen have dreamed. Crime, immorality and disease are unknown among them; they have just as much civilization as is good for them, and no more; and they hold fast to primitive ideas of duty and religion, and practice the old-fashioned virtues of a bygone age.

The Cayman Islands are three in number—Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. On the first over a thousand people dwell and they have even a couple of small towns, called Georgetown and Bodden Town. On the second there are about a hundred residents, and on the third, a rugged, barren rock jutting sharply out of the placid blue surface of the Caribbean, only a couple of families dwell.

Unlike the other islands of the West Indies, they are inhabited mainly by white people. There are no negroes in the smaller Caymans, and only a small minority of them in Grand Cayman, and these recent arrivals. The original settlers were some of Cromwell's "Ironsides," and the manners and virtues of that stern breed of men survive in their descendants to this day.

When Cromwell had England and Europe under his heel, he sent out an expedition which captured Jamaica from the Spaniards. Some of the men in that expedition were veterans of Naseby and Marston Moor, and they were naturally advanced to the highest positions in the new colony. But when Charles II came to his own again, these men found the times out of joint. They were deprived of their offices, and harshly treated by the royalist authorities. Unwilling to "bow the knee to Baal," they sold their possessions, bought a ship and sailed away to colonize the Caymans and live as they pleased, unhindered by kings or governors. They were another shipload of Pilgrim Fathers.

The Caymans were desert islands, occasionally used by buccaneers for retitting and provisioning their ships. The "Ironsides" soon made short work of those gentry, and had the islands to themselves. They established a patriarchal form of government, tilled the ground, built houses and villages and sailed the neighboring seas in ships of their own construction. They hoisted the British flag, but practically they were an independent people.

Their descendants today are nominally



LANDING TURTLE AT KINGSTON, JAMAICA.

subject to the governor of Jamaica, but they make their own laws and govern themselves through elected overseers and vestrymen—an old parochial form of government which prevailed in England when the original colonists left that country. All the other colonies in the West Indies are autocratically ruled by officials sent out from England, but the Caymanians are as independent as the Canadians or the Australians. They are Englishmen of the sturdiest type, even if they have been isolated on tropical islets for a few hundred years, and they would not stand for any other kind of government.

Just as they have kept the old English methods of government, so they have kept the old English customs and manners.

Even the women dress like the Puritan maids of Oliver Cromwell's time. That is because they never see a foreign woman or a fashion paper. Daughters have dressed like their mothers for generations. They have had no other way, and, even if they had, a new-fangled idea would have been frowned upon as a snare of the Evil One. The spirit of Smite-Them-Hip-and-Thigh Tompkins and his fellows still pervades the little commonwealth, but it has its advantages. On the other West Indian islands, from half to two-thirds of the children are born out of wedlock, and half the population steals the other half's crop. On the Caymans, the morals are of the best, and neither theft nor any

other crime is practiced. There is not a single policeman in the archipelago, and no need for one.

"What would you people do to one of your number if he or she went wrong?" a patriarchal Cayman islander was once asked.

"Verily," he replied, in the slow, grave archaic speech of his people, "the thought hath never been present with me. In my life of more than threescore years, the Lord hath preserved us from that calamity. I know not what we would do. But such an one could not live among us thereafter."

"Do ships often call here and bring you news of the outside world?" he was asked.

"No," he replied. "Once in three or four years a British warship comes hither, bringing the governor of Jamaica on a tour of inspection. In my life I have seen but three others."

"There was a British steamer many years ago which came here for supplies, being out of her course and overdue. Soon afterwards a timber schooner, going to Jamaica, was blown hither by a hurricane. The third was an American steam yacht, a few years ago. The owner was rich and great in his own country, so they told me, but he liked our simple ways, and stayed among us for many months."

But if Caymanians do not get many visitors, they do a lot of visiting themselves.

One of their principal industries is shipbuilding, in which they are experts. Their schooners are the stanchest and swiftest in the Caribbean sea, and there are no hardier or more fearless sailors than they. Shippers in all the ports of the West Indies and the Spanish main are eager to give them charters.

They usually work for themselves, however, catching turtles on the Central American coast. They are the turtle fishers-in-chief to the world. The green turtle soup esteemed by the aldermen of London and by the patrons of the best restaurants in all the cities of the United States is placed upon the table through the energy and daring of these simple, plain-living Caymanians. Themselves the least luxurious of people, they provide the world with one of its greatest luxuries.

Turtle fishing is no easy task. Squalls and hurricanes are frequent in the Caribbean, and many a Cayman sailor has perished with his schooner, or lingered miserably in an open boat under the blazing tropical sky until he died of hunger and thirst. Innumerable coral reefs and sandbars add to the danger of navigation, especially along the Nicaraguan coast, where the turtles are caught as they bask upon the beach.

The Nicaraguans are another peril. They strongly object to the Caymanians catching turtles on their territory, and try to mete out to them the punishment awarded to seal poachers in Siberian waters. The Nicaraguan and British governments are always nagging at one another on the subject, and at the present moment they are engaged in a more than usually bitter controversy over it.

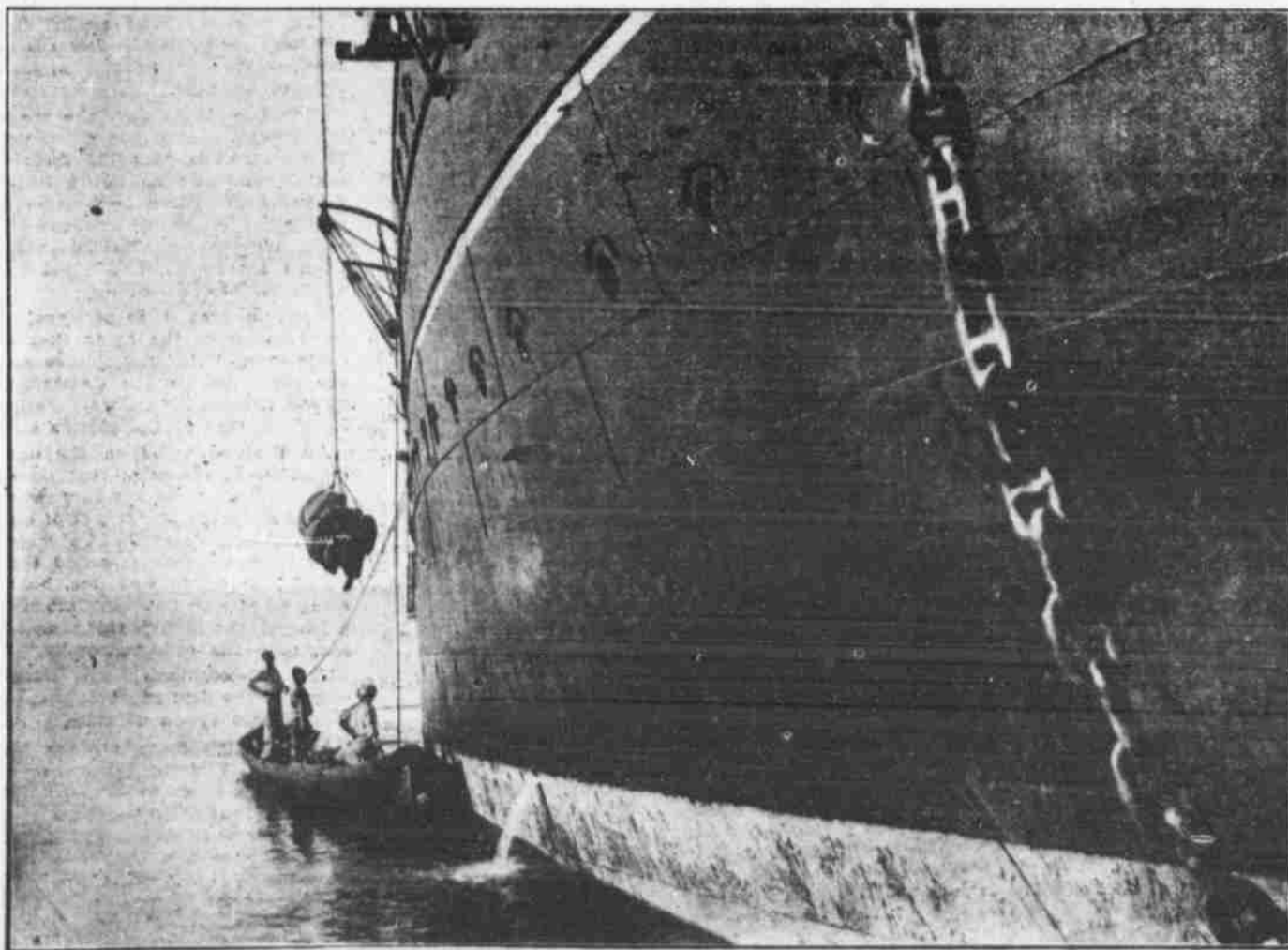
But the Caymanians can generally take good care of themselves. Seldom a month passes without their having a fight on the beach with Nicaraguan officials and soldiers. Nine times out of ten the Caymanians win the battle and carry off their turtles in triumph to their schooner, leaving half a dozen Nicaraguans stunned and senseless on the sand.

The Nicaraguan government does not want to have any Caymanians killed in these affairs, lest the British government should take serious offense; and the soldiers do not, therefore, use their rifles. They try to arrest the Caymanians, whose oars and boat stretchers are more than a match for clubbed guns.

Lately the Nicaraguans have given up their attempts to suppress the fishery, and now they are trying to collect a tax on each turtle caught. But the Caymanians send the tax collectors limping home with bruised shins and broken heads.

After the turtles have been fought for and won, they are taken to Jamaica by the schooners and sold to merchants there, who ship them in ocean liners to New York, Boston, Philadelphia and London.

With the money obtained by the sale of the turtles, the Caymanians buy flour, rice, cloth, pork and other supplies for their families and neighbors at home. Until a few years ago they never used money, but transacted all their business by barter. The growth of their turtle fishery compelled them at last to adopt a currency. Cayman postage stamps have only been used for a year or two, and they are much prized by collectors. The mails—a new institution—are carried at irregular intervals by the turtle schooners.



SHIPPING TURTLE ON AN OCEAN LINER.