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Bahamian Flower Show

By H. E. BATES

I HAVE so long been nurtured on flower shows where marrows need to achieve the size of sucking pigs before they are considered as possible prize-takers that I had not the faintest notion of what a tropical flower show would have to offer. Would there be classes for bread-fruit and bananas? It seemed possible. And one for those extraordinarily pretty star-apples? For the best avocado, the best papaya, the best sour-sop, the best passion-fruit?—open to all. And what of flowers? I knew I should miss those soldierly sweet-peas with leaves as coarse as cucumbers', those gorgeous cushion-wide dahlias that countrymen so love and those jam-jars of drooping buttercup and moon-daisy and cow-parsley and poppy that children bring.

In the Bahamas gardens belong to the rich; cottages support perhaps an untidy hibiscus, a stray banana, a hedge of oleander, a trail or two of bougainvillea and vine and the inevitable coconut palm. The soil too is thin, hungrily calcareous, and has been much exposed to erosion ever since the indiscriminate husbandry by Loyalists reaping an over-quick cotton harvest at the end of the eighteenth century. Holes have to be blasted from solid rock before trees can be planted. The sun is extremely hot and sea winds sweep in at hurricane force. Gardening therefore is not easy. Coloured gardeners tend also to go off on rum binges at critical horticultural moments, returning to parched and wilting gardens with the shameless news that lumbago has yet again struck them down.

All this is expensive and in consequence the flower show lacked some of the endearing cottage simplicities we know. Its beauty was luxuriant, exotic, sometimes almost too rarified. A central backbone of standard bougainvilleas in melting half colours was as dazzling as a line of tree torches, pink-yellow, gold - purple, salmon - magenta, vermilion-brick. In the tender rain-filtered air of an English summer you might have been tempted to speak of these as vulgarities, but when you live in streets where lithe and lovely

negresses constantly flaunt blouses of singing cerise with orange skirts and parma-violet shoes and emerald and scarlet ribbons in their hair your eye for colour is not jolted by the mere flamboyance of a flower.

There were, in any case, less dazzling things. A great arch of bohinia, pure white, resembling a *magnolia stellata*, was as cool as a tree of ice-cream against the deep long custard bells of solandra. The solandra is a very cultured beauty. I liked too a modest and handsome plant, sword-like in leaf, not unlike a refined fox-glove in flower, called a ginger-lily. There were many Easter lilies, pure white too, and gladioli, mostly yellow, a shade or two paler than that enchanting yellow arum, which here sat exactly like a chalice on a great

altar-bed of caladiums. These are grown, like coleus, purely for the marking and veining of the long heart-shaped leaves; but their colourings are more delicate than coleus; they play beautifully on a subdued octave of dusty green and litmus pink and mauve and french-grey and pale plum and slate-blue and green-white and maroon.

But it was not these charming things, nor the many arrangements of sub-tropical fruit and garland and leaf that are sometimes known in England as being "frightfully Connie Spry" that I liked most. I think Mrs. Spry too might well have been excited by the permissible entry into this Bahamian flower show of some very beautiful sea-gardens. Almost every scrap of Bahamian tradition is of the sea. The great conch-shell, looking so much like a delicate rose-pink

pegasus, is much more a symbol of these islands than the coconut palm. Of several varieties there are two, the queen conch and the king conch, which are not unlike whitish-brown gourds split open to reveal a heart stained coffee-colour by fallen seeds. There is also an exceptionally fine shell called the triton, surely the original cornucopia, a true horn, sometimes pink-coral spotted, with a strange smooth imprint of negroid fingers in pinky-brown across the edge of its bowl.

These things, together with sugary sprays of white coral, some exquisite gauzy fans of mauve seaweed, several orange star-fish and an occasional sea-horse, had been made into gardens that seemed to me even more truly Bahamian than the flowers. Coral here is often of exceptional quaintness and gets itself thrown up on to dazzling white seashores in shapes uncommonly like those of Mr. Thurber's illusory rabbits and hounds. It grows too like flowers with statice-like stiffness, with the crusty delicacy of *immortelles*. These dry sea-gardens therefore had remarkable airiness and grace, a lovely sea-change from the flaunted monstrosity of a plant called heliconia, originally I think from Honduras, a vast orange plantain, more weapon than plant which seemed to have strayed in from some Caribbean tribal war.

There was also an exhibit of orchids, mostly small, clinging to forest shadows like flights of pink parasitic butterflies; but as I turned out there were no classes for bread-fruit; nor for coconuts for papaiyas and avocado pears. But someone had miraculously brought a bowl of blue plums and another an unripe amber spray of peaches. And as if to mock my thoughts of home there was a solitary dahlia, orange-striped dotted upon with the reverence due in England to a tropical lily, and also a few roses and pinks, some snapdragons and a violet cloud of larkspur. I felt it needed only a vegetable marrow to complete the picture and happily I found it, fast as a little pig sucking at a stalk of young bananas, themselves as appropriately tender as green fingers.



Drawings by John Minton

