

## OUR NEW POSSESSIONS IN THE CARIBBEAN SEA

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Considerable interest was aroused recently, especially in Army and Navy circles, when the United States Government purchased from Denmark the little group of islands situated in the Caribbean Sea to the east and southeast of Porto Rico. This transaction, concluded on January 17 of the present year, was the culminating point of a business deal long contemplated and sanctioned by the authorities at Washington, but hindered in its fulfillment by hesitancy on the part of Dutch legislators, who seemed little inclined to dispose of their island possessions, although to all intents and purposes they were of little practical value to their own country—which has no navy—and which was fast becoming a heavy drain on the public resources.

The possessions themselves, finally secured by Uncle Sam for the sum of \$25,000,000, comprise a group once known as the Danish West Indies, but now rechristened American Virgin Isles. They are three in number: St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix (Spanish, *Santa Cruz*). Forty or fifty small unnamed reefs, barely large enough for a single dwelling, were also included in the bargain. Altogether the whole purchase does not exceed one hundred and forty square miles, while the native inhabitants, mostly unlettered negroes, approximate 33,000 souls.

St. Thomas, which covers an area of thirty-nine square miles and has a population of approximately 13,000, is by far the most celebrated of the purchases, for within the picturesque little tropical harbor indenting its south central coast lies the famed and romantic port of Charlotte Amalie. This city, which shelters the greater part of the island's inhabitants, is well within the enclosure of what is perhaps the third best harbor in the West Indies, since it opens into the sea through a narrow neck, flanked on both sides by high, rugged hills exactly suited for strong fortifications. From a commercial standpoint, Charlotte Amalie has at the present day lost much of its former prosperity, and were it not for its bay rum and foreign trade, the inhabitants would scarce be able to eke out even a scant existence. Before the present war, an extensive traffic was carried on with Germany through the Hamburg-American Steamship Line, and the frequent presence there of large passenger and freight boats brought no small amount of money into the coffers of shop-

keepers and curio dealers. For years a lucrative coal business was also maintained between this port and American shipping firms, but this, too, has been practically ruined by the gradual decrease in maritime commerce. The dwellings on the island—small red-tiled buildings—have on the whole a rather pleasing appearance, and with their background of tropical palms, form a really delightful vista to the incoming traveller. Now and then we find a more palatial home erected on the slopes overlooking the harbor, and it was in dwellings such as these that the upper classes, composed mainly of Danish officials, entertained in a style that would do credit to many a larger American or European city.

St. John, the second of the group, which lies a short distance east of St. Thomas, is the smallest of our newly-acquired territories, containing only thirty-two square miles. It is inhabited by some 2000 negroes who are as yet only semi-civilized. There are no large towns, no cities and of course no modern conveniences. In fact, nearly the entire island is covered with dense tropical forests among which the famous bay-tree thrives, thus affording the sister isle, St. Thomas, ample raw material for the preparation of the famous bay-rum which forms its chief export. Rare species of game abound in the little territory and the adjacent inlets are filled with every kind of tropical fish. So far no white men have ventured to establish permanent dwellings on St. John, and it remains to be seen whether or no American rule will render fruitful and productive this virgin soil of the Caribbean.

The third island, St. Croix, lying in the open sea nearly fifty miles south of St. Thomas, is fifteen miles long, and at the broadest end three miles in width. There are two sea-ports—Christiansted, on the north, and Frederiksted, on the west. The latter town, once a famous winter resort for wealthy tourists from the States, has in our own day been outclassed by Florida and the Bermudas, which are easier of access and far more beautiful. Moreover, this particular island, lying as it does in open and unprotected ocean, is an easy prey to the furious and destructive hurricanes of the tropical seas. In fact, so terrible is the force of these raging wind-storms that large vessels have been fairly hurled from the water and landed high and dry amid the rocks and sands of the island. The native population comprises a large number of negroes, rough and coarse of feature,

and, as many claim, coarser still of morals. This latter fact, if true, may be ascribed partly to the presence among them of careless seamen from every quarter of the globe, and partly to a lack of education—which we sincerely hope may be remedied under the rule of the Stars and Stripes. The two seaports mentioned above—unlovely collections of grimy, squalid houses—do not compare with the more cleanly habitations of Charlotte Amalie, which housed, at least under Danish rule, a fairly large number of refined and cultured Europeans. It may interest our readers to note here that the renowned American statesman, Alexander Hamilton, spent the days of his youth and early manhood as a clerk in two large business houses situated at Frederiksted and Christiansted. Considering the fertile soil and salubrious climate of the island, together with its many natural resources, one would be led to believe that its prosperity must be almost without limits. And, indeed, such might easily be the case were it not for the continuous labor troubles which have disturbed St. Croix since 1733, and which keep its merchants and planters perpetually on the verge of ruin and bankruptcy. In that fatal year the slaves rose in rebellion against their masters, and after burning the plantations murdered the owners, together with numberless women and children. The conflict thus begun has continued with more or less severity ever since, so that even at the present day labor unions with pronounced socialistic tendencies are to be found flourishing among the negro plantation workers. The sugar-cane crop, the cultivation of which forms the principal industry of the island, has always been rather plentiful; the bay-tree likewise thrives remarkably well, and if one may judge from conditions on the neighboring islands, where the soil and climate are similar to those of St. Croix, various tropical fruits and spices might be produced in abundance.

As to religion in the American Virgin group, it may be said that all the islands of the Caribbean Sea belonged until 1850 to the spiritual jurisdiction of the Archbishop of the Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, British West Indies, which office is always held by a member of the English or Irish Dominican provinces, the present incumbent being the Most Reverend Pius Dowling, O. P. In that year (1850) the Holy See erected a bishopric at Roseau, which thus became a suffragan see of the above-mentioned province. Its present incumbent is the Right Reverend Philip

Schelfaut, C. SS. R., who has under his care a well-ordered clergy composed of zealous and holy priests, who attend to the spiritual wants of several thousand souls, most of whom dwell within the limits of our new territory. Parishes and parochial schools are to be found in all parts of the islands and every possible care is being given the native Catholic population.

Finally, we come to the great question of the island's future. What will the United States Government do with them, and how is it to place the group on a sound monetary basis, so that in a few years this expensive investment will make at least partial return for the money expended upon it?

First of all, we have the sugar crop, which if properly planted and cared for should in time become a splendid financial asset; next, there is the cultivation of various fruits, spices and fibre plants, all of which, experts assure us, may be grown with tremendous success on the three islands; finally, the bay-rum production plays no mean part in the present activities of the group, and if this also were well regulated by capable American business men it ought to bring handsome profits into the hands of our manufacturers and retailers.

The question of establishing on the islands a naval base for the Caribbean Sea is another and more difficult matter, for after all it would be hard to determine just where such a station might safely be placed. The harbor of Charlotte Amalie, while well protected by natural fortifications, and practically forming the deep-sea gateway to the Caribbean, is at the same time much too shallow for even a fair-sized fleet, and also has the additional disadvantage of being directly in the pathway of the destructive typhoon. St. Croix is out of the question, for its small anchorage at Frederiksted is really the only available place for harboring large ships. Thus, as a writer in the June issue of *Munsey's Magazine*\* says, the future outcome depends upon the unexplored St. John, which has several harbors reputed to be hurricane proof, but whose real value, from defensive and strategic points of view, can only be determined by experts on these matters.

However this may be, if we are to cope with the other great maritime powers a way-station and coaling-post in the "American Mediterranean" is an absolute necessity, and this all the

\* *Our New Possessions*, *Munsey's Magazine*, June, 1917. James Luby.

more since with the opening of the Panama Canal hundreds of our trading and passenger steamers are continually passing through the famous waterway.

In conclusion, one might remark that even if no commercial or military benefit is to be derived from the Virgin Isles, at least the part of America which plays, will certainly find on these beautiful and romantic little spots in the Caribbean ample opportunity for rest and recreation, and a welcome winter retreat from the snow and ice of our own more severe climate.

—Humbert M. Palmer, O. P.

