1965

Saturday, June 5th

Produced the most information and most excitement of any day yet. True to my schedule of discipline, I recorded after an early breakfast at 7:30 until nearly 11.

And then Mr. Muehler, the Park naturalist, joined us. The more I see of the National Park Service and its employees, the more I respect and like them. He took us for a walk around Caneel Plantation, answered innumerable questions, showed us the mango trees, some heavily laden with fruit; the white-blossomed frangi-pangi, the Royal Poinciana with its umbrella of brilliant orange-red, very well called Flamboyant. The cashew tree, with its nuts and hulls just the shape of the cashews that we buy in cans. The hulls are green, and they are poison. Once it's boiled, the nut inside is delicious.

There were old familiar trees, too: the retama and oleander from Texas; the bougainvilla and hibiscus from the Valley; breadfruit brought in by Captain Bligh from Tahiti, the staple of diet for the slaves, starchy, potatoe-like fruit. The mahoganys, first that I ever saw, and the gumbo limbo, so full of life that you can make living fence posts out of it -- that is, just chop up a tree, stick it in the ground to make a fence out of, and presently it will sprout

and you have a long alley of trees. The mignum vitae, with which the whole Virgin Islands had been covered before they were denuded to plant sugar cane. It is so hard it will not sink in water, and it's used in making oceangoing vessels.

Surprisingly, there are innumerable varieties of cactus, which I had only associated with arid country. And century plants that Mr. Muehler says have been measured as high as 40 feet.

There is not a great deal of wild life. Amazingly, there were several mongoose (or would one say mongeese?) in our very own front yard. Long, slim, ratlike creatures brought in from Asia to eat the rats. And on the mountains, wild donkeys. Mr. Muehler said that bats are the only native mammal in the Virgin Islands -- everything else was brought in. Some have a two-foot wing span, and they eat small fish.

The Danes settled here in 1716 and soon brought in slaves from the Gold Coast and began to clear off the timber from the steep mountainsides and plant sugar cane. There was a slave rebellion in 1733, and all the slaves were driven to the end of an island from which there was a steep cliff. They all jumped off to their deaths, and the story is that you can still see their blood

on the rocks below. But the Danes brought in more slaves.

What had happened in the lapse of time between Christopher Columbus's first landfall somewhere in the territory of the now United States, between about 1496 and 1716, I don't know. But the Danes did not really settle here, on this island. They lived in St. Croix or they lived back in Denmark, and they hired Irishmen as their overseers, so Mr. Muehller told us.

He took us to the ruins of the sugar mills, one of the most picturesque sights on the island. They had flourished from shortly after 1716 until the slaves were freed in 1848. And then they had gradually diminished as a money-producing property and closed up, one by one, the last one closing in 1916.

The mill on Caneel Plantation was built of native stone, coral -- much brain coral sawed into blocks, and frequently you could see the contour of all the little convolutions -- and of bricks of many different colors -- white, buff, red, darker. This is one way they can tell a bit about the age of the mill, because the bricks were brought over from Denmark as ballast in the ships, and they know what kind of bricks were being made in Denmark at such-and-such a time. Because the mills were built and added to and changed over a period of 150 or so years.

Saturday, June 5th (continued)

There was a round flat area on top , to which the slaves brought sugar cane down from the mountains on their backs or on donkey-carts, and it was crushed either by the power of a horse going round and round and round in an endless circle and a mechanical gadget in the middle, just as it was in East Texas in my childhood, or in some cases by the power of a windmill. And then the squeezed-out cane, called ~~bagast,~~ bagasse? was used as fuel under the huge pots -- first they were copper, later cast-iron was used. They are still there, three of them. The juice was poured into them, the fire stoked below, and it cooked down until it became brown sugar. The dregs, so to speak, were used to make rum. Somewhere along the process molasses came in. Mr. Muehler said all the trees were cut off the mountains and they were terraced about 1750. And as steep as these mountains are, it is easy to see that nobody in the world except slave labor could or would have performed that inhuman toil.

There were the remains of the mill and the factory, and then on the hillside above them, the house of the overseer, and then, still higher on the hill, the house of the owner, who came very seldom, really, because he lived either in St. Croix or perhaps in Denmark. As for the slaves, they lived a half a mile or so away in huts about 10 by 12

feet in size and about 8 to a hut. They did try to keep families together. They encouraged families.

Surprisingly, there were more than twice as many people on the islands a hundred years ago.

And then began the adventure of the day. We had made arrangements to go out on a catamaran, a double hull lashed together, very safe, they said, with an enormous sail, with a Captain who had been sailing for 60 years in these waters.

The sky was overcast, but that meant nothing to me except that I wouldn't get quite as good a tan. However, Tony, who had expected to leave about noon in a seaplane, going to see his friend, Mr. Kramer, in St. Croix, got word that the seaplane was fogged in, couldn't fly, bad weather. So that trip was cancelled. We got on the catamaran, Tony, Matiana, Mr. Muehler, Bess and I and the Secret Service and crew, and a very nice young man, handsome, brown, a real lover of these islands, as are all the people I have met here, named Hamer, a Marine biologist and his fiance.

Out we put in the catamaran, with box lunches and ideas of going island-hopping and landing on some sandy beach. I was absorbed in stories of Sir Francis Drake and Henry Morgan and buried treasure --

some was actually found not more than two months ago. And then Bess told me that at the commencement address an old gentleman had come up to her and handed her a letter to deliver to me containing two old coins, which he said he had found in a cachement close by two skeletons. Later when I looked at them they were fascinating.

I saw our Captain putting on his slicker and wondered why, because the sky was no more nor less cloudy than it had been all along. It was only moments before the wind began to lash and the waves began to mount and the ~~wind~~ rain came down in sheets. Mr. Hamer urged me to go below. "Below" was just a tiny little cubicle. I took the one on my side, Matiana the one on the other. The rest of them stayed up on the flat deck. The wind howled, the seas rolled and rolled and roared, Mr. Hamer kept up a running fire of a conversation -- the best stories he could think of to keep me from getting scared, and I knew why he was doing it, and I was just short of panicky, but excited and delighted at the same time.

A Coast Guard cutter somewhere in the distance signalled to ask if we wanted them to come alongside. The Captain said no. I expect it was a bad moment for Jerry. Bess was loving it. The rain and the seas were beating on her. It looked so easy to fall off that slick flat surface.

The last thing anybody wanted to do was eat lunch. Mr. Hamer said, before I could ask him, that it would be better if we did not turn back, because we would go back into the face of the squall -- we'd better go on till it passed, and then tack around and return home. So we did, getting back to the dock an hour or so later, as long an hour as I ever remember. How glad I was to see Hawk's Nest Bay, placid and civilized!

I asked Bess to suggest that Mr. Hamer and Mrs. Gunn and Mr. Muehler join us for our picnic lunch in the living room at Number Seven, where we spread it out, had a Bloody Mary, and then a delicious lunch, feeling very secure and very proud of ourselves -- at least, I did.

One of the most interesting things about this place is the way everybody loves it so. I asked Mr. Hamer to tell us the most exciting things that had happened to him . He said one, a fight between a giant squid and a moray eel. The eel had won. And the funniest --

the time he caught a 400-pound grouper, had a hilarious time getting him on board the boat, and then had an even more hilarious time when he got him back to port, trying to put him in somebody's deep freeze, trying to sell him to a hotel, carting him around just trying to do anything with him.

Finally I said goodbye and went upstairs for a long, good nap, the first one I've had on my vacation. In fact, I've done just about everything except sleep long hours, the only thing I've missed.

The attractive young people who run Caneel Plantation, the Bill Favors, had asked us to come over for drinks, so about sundown we joined them on the terrace of their cottage, dressed only enough to be civilized, for a couple of interesting hours of hearing more about the island, Laurance Rockefeller's operation, the history of Caneel, the National Park, and then home to dinner and bed.

The night before, the most fascinating thing had happened. Sitting on the terrace, I had been looking at the sky, at two stars -- very bright stars -- when suddenly I realized that the one on the left was definitely moving. I thought it must be an illusion. I watched. The seconds passed. I pointed it out to Tony, Matiana, Bess. They agreed it was moving, and it continued on a steady course to the left, southwards across the heavens, and quite fast. We called the

Secret Service to see if they knew whether it was GEMINI. They checked it out and assured us that it was not. But it must have been a satellite. We followed it clear across the horizon -- the first satellite I have ever seen!