

CHAPTER VIII

DIVERSION IN COLOUR

I

THE MORNING after my arrival I awoke to find the sun pouring into my room, sunlight so strong that when I arose and stepped on to the flat roof extending from my window, a side walk around the top of the patio, I felt myself enveloped in a warmth such as in England would have been characterised a 'heat wave.' But here, day after day, week after week, this radiant weather persisted, so that I found myself forgetting the season and thinking that in April I should have to return to an English winter.

As I dressed a distant reverberation filled the air, and grew so quickly that almost before I could gain the balcony an immense shape had roared over the house, and momentarily blotted out the sun. It was a giant hydroplane, "The Caribbean West Coast Flyer," leaving for Cuba and Jamaica. Every morning at eight-fifteen this plane, carrying forty passengers, soared over the house, with a promptitude by which I could check my watch, and I never watched its lovely shining mass, with great wings shadowed under the brilliant sun, without experiencing a thrill. Here was the New Age, and as the whirr of four propellers carried the great boat southwards, fading down the azure sky, it linked

North America with South America and brought a new vast continent of mysterious hinterlands to my door.

Breakfast awaited me in the patio, served by a neat coloured maid who presented a scheme of black and white strange to my English eyes. The American, from long custom, feels no curiosity concerning this ill-fated race, the descendants of the wretched slaves transported from their native Africa. They present to the United States to-day a grave problem, and there is a constant vacillation between attempted justice and the horrors of lynch law and mob fury.

For myself, watching these people, I found them gentle, happy, and obliging. They are generally charged with dirtiness, with some truth but no justice, for generations of them have lived in such appalling conditions that it is surprising any sense of cleanliness and human decency survives. The squalor of a slum in an English manufacturing town, which an aroused conscience is now dealing with, is not so depressing as the squalid shacks in which live the southern negro population of the United States. Without sanitation, bordering roads that are only dust tracks, in crowded houses which have never seen paint, and are without the essential domestic fitments, some of these homes reveal nothing better than a gipsy existence without its compensating contact with nature and freedom.

It is charged against the negroes that they have no morals, that the laws of marriage as we interpret them are non-existent, but even if this were the case, the conditions that surround them, the poor inheritance which has been theirs in the eyes of the law since the law freed them, would leave a white race with no stronger moral sense. Emotional, and

therefore prone to religion, they naturally seize on the Christian conception of Heaven which promises them a justice absent on earth, and an equality in spirit when they have escaped the inequality of skin.

As a race they fear and are feared. If a negro runs amok he will probably arouse a fury that insists on death as a penalty, and all the laws of evidence are flagrantly ignored. There are still no effective anti-lynching laws, and every attempt to pass them in the Senate is filibustered. The grand total of lynchings up to date is over five thousand. Only recently a twenty-seven-year-old negro, charged with the murder of a schoolmistress, was taken from the gaol, hoisted to the roof of the schoolhouse, chained to the ridge pole, and and was burned alive with the building in the presence of a mob. He was the five thousandth victim since lynch law began its count in 1882.

The telephone and the motor-car are used to defeat justice, the radio to raise the mob fury. The Press, scenting a lynch in the air, bring up their batteries of photographers and reporters. When the wretched schoolhouse negro had been burned before an audience of four thousand, of which one-quarter were women, souvenir hunters poked about in the smouldering ruins for pieces of bone and other negroid mementoes. Railways have run Lynching Specials, and a train has been known to stop for a hanging going on beside the track.

Informed that a victim was in hand, the élite of a mob left a Mississippi town hotel for a lynching for which they had come from eleven other States and booked all rooms. The Press and the radio had given them 'wind' of the hanging. There is a brisk sale of relics of these victims of burning and hanging; teeth have fetched a dollar apiece, and

fingers, ears, shin bones, and toes have been snapped up. There is also a big demand for realistic postcards.

In England one hundred years ago the mob flocked to hangings in public, and choice upper windows, with accommodation for breakfast parties, commanded good prices. But these entertainments followed fulfilment of the law; the lynching entertainments of to-day are in defiance of the law. Less than one per cent. of the lynchers have been convicted.

I once barely succeeded in missing a lynching in a Texan town. A great crowd surged by me, with the indescribably horrible uproar of an angry mob. Instead of following, I got away and learned from the evening paper that a young negro, accused of attacking a white woman, had been tied to a lamp standard, and after a sousing with kerosene had been set afire. I could not help seeing a youth carried shoulder high amid the cheers of the crowd. I was informed this hero had 'nabbed the nigger.'

The majority of Americans are revolted by such happenings, but since democracy ensures the supremacy of the largest number of minds in a variable mental condition, the law is slow to move, and reform meets powerful opposition, since the particular evil will always vigorously organise against the general good.

At a house I visited in Palm Beach my hostess told me of a case which still moved her to grief and horror. For several years she had employed a chairman, one of those negroes who peddle the large basket chairs in which one rides at Palm Beach. This man was married, had a family, and was of irreproachable character. He had always been engaged for the season by my hostess, and had become a familiar of her family. One Sunday morning, confessing to feeling

unwell, he had been sent home and told to return after church, when it was customary for my hostess to take a ride in his chair.

"He failed to turn up," said my hostess, as we sat in the long Italian loggia of her house, "and on making enquiries we learned that he had been shot, and his body was at the mortuary. We went there, and the Sheriff showed him to us—the poor man lay there with his great boots sticking out from under the tarpaulin covering him, his eyes staring, his body quite stiff."

"What had happened—a riot of some kind?" I asked.

"Oh, no, nothing really. Being agitated, poor soul—he'd been unwell and was hurrying back to take me out—he had forgotten his pass, which he had to take him over the bridge from West Palm Beach to here. Being asked for it, although, of course, he was well known, he had probably replied with some irritation. That was enough. He was considered insolent, and shot down."

"But surely a man can't be murdered in broad daylight without some kind of outcry?" I exclaimed.

"There was an outcry," said my hostess. "They held an enquiry. What happened? Nothing. The negro witnesses were blustered and confused by the lawyer, the whites refused to testify. When the Washington authorities stepped in to take action, the shooter went out of the country, and the whole thing blew over. Do you wonder they feel terrorised? We want protecting, there is a negro problem—but! Why, that poor man would not have hurt a mouse. He was the gentlest soul imaginable!"

The European has not the antipathy of the American to the negro. He has at times a negrofile mania, and I have witnessed with nausea the enthusiasm of a white theatre

audience for a negro of undoubted histrionic and vocal ability. He was acclaimed as a genius, and the delirium of the audience at the close of his performance of *Othello* exceeded anything I had ever seen in the theatre. Apart from the racial travesty—Othello was not a negro, and not necessarily a Moor, since *il moro* was applied by the Venetians to very dark Aryans—I found something extremely unpleasant in the spectacle of this giant negro caressing or mauling his delicate white bride, however remarkable his personal achievements may be. I was repeatedly informed that socially he was charming, of irreproachable character, and very intelligent. All this was probably true, but seemed beside the point.

Negroes have their place on the stage, they undoubtedly possess genius, and when this is displayed in an opera like *Porgy and Bess*, Du Bose Heywood's play set to music by Gershwin, the result is as delightful as it is unique. But I can well understand the American's resentment of the *goût nègre* which is almost a cult in Paris.

The treatment of the negro reaches strange extremes in Europe and America. Nothing can justify the monstrous terrorism to which these poor blacks are subjected in the southern States. The treatment is the more extraordinary when one reflects that one of the bloodiest civil wars in history arose indirectly from the question of the liberation of these negroes, and that thousands of white men gave their lives when the march of reform was challenged by the affected States.

A visitor to America, aware of the background, historical and social, cannot but observe the race with the compassion and interest which are provoked by a fresh contact. The American has lived so long with the problem that he

has accommodated himself to a half-fear and a half-solution. The nigger, he says, must be kept in his place. But in the North, where the economic forces are less repressive, and the social maelstrom is fiercer, the negro's place has expanded and overrun the forbidden territory of the white.

II

On the night of my arrival at Coconut Grove I went out after dinner, to stroll in the leafy darkness, alert to every manifestation of the tropical night. Emerging upon a highway, I followed it for a distance when a sound of music came on the warm air. I could not be mistaken in the nature of this music: it was a medley of organ-pipes and whistles, with an undercurrent of human activity and machinery in motion. It must be a fair.

Excited by the prospect of an American folk scene, and, as I hoped, of a gathering of Florida 'crackers,' as the native-born Floridians are termed, I hurried on in the direction of the glare I could now see in the upper sky. The native is about one per cent. of the inhabitants of Florida. I was curious to see him. Did he give evidence in his physiognomy of the racial melting-pot of this peninsula? Should I find the Spaniards from the reign of Spain, the Frenchmen, the English, and even the Greeks of the Turnbull régime?

I laugh now when I recall my disillusionment. I gained the fair, in full blast, and I found the native Floridians—but they were negroes. It was a colourful fair in all senses, situated in the negro district of Coconut Grove.

I could not see a single white face about me, but I shouldered my way into the heart of this fair, and met nothing but smiling courtesy on every hand. But what enchanted

me was not the fair, the gay roundabouts, the swings, the great wheel, the whirligigs and tumbrils that produced shrieks of merriment from those who thronged them, it was the human kaleidoscope, the orderly crowds of youths and maidens, of piccaninnies supported on the shoulders of their fathers, and bright-eyed babies, less black than their fondling mothers.

The night being warm, they were in summer finery. How gay and dandiical they were! The young men, mostly with black curly hair well greased down, wore white shirts with half-sleeves, and gaudy lemon, scarlet, or blue pull-overs, their black faces, throats, and arms offset by these vivid colours. Most of them were long-legged and slim and attired in well-creased trousers of white or cream, tight-fitting over their hips. They were all well shod, though the shoes were often fanciful in colour and shape. And I noticed, as before, the negro hand with long pointed fingers, of a fineness that an aristocrat would envy.

The young women had a sleek exotic air that, despite the gaiety of their dress, carried one to the very verge of the jungle. They moved, heads and throats superbly poised, proud-bosomed under the amorous glances of the youths. Blouses of all colours, of thinnest texture, merely veiled the plastic figure beneath, and it seemed as if at the beat of a drum civilisation's veneer would be dissolved and the black virgins would move to the unforgotten rhythm of their race. Their eyes were enormous, jet black and flashing, the pupils enlarged by the excitement of the scene. Their hair was neatly coiffeured and tightly drawn up from the smooth dark nape. Some of them wore no stockings, and their black skin shone through the laddering of white kid shoes. They

moved, without exception, with a supple grace, slender-hipped and virginal, with smiles that revealed white, even teeth.

Colours so vivid that on any other person they would have been garish contributed, on these indolently laughing youths and maidens, to the ensemble of the negro fair. They were in tone with the crude ornamentation of the roundabouts and side-shows, with the highly decorated baroque organ braying into the torpid night the inescapable *Moon over Miami*. This tune, and the nude torsos of four negro caryatids supporting the organ pipes, had a singular relevance to the scene. And there, high above the rout in this suburb of Miami, was the serenaded moon, as round and white as the eyes that flashed about me, but lacking their fire.

I could not help noticing amid this dense crowd the laughter and raillery, accompanied by the delicious coquetry of these black Venuses. It was never ribald, nor gauche, as too often is the case with our own rustic fairs, where the horseplay is seldom far removed from the crude overtures of sex. These negroes had an elegance, a *politesse*, that almost became a burlesque, so that I did not seem far removed from those sadly comic versions of negro High Society, a favourite theme of writers portraying negro life. It required but a step for us to be transported to the court of the Black Emperor of Haiti, to move amid the fantastically apparelled, and betitled black nobility of that era of negro sovereignty, to hear the starred Duke of Uganda greet the bejewelled Duchess of Limpopo.

Towards midnight I left the fair, still in full spate, and took the moonlit road, shadowed with palms, banyans, and live oaks, towards my dwelling. In the warm night the

voices of crickets and frogs raised their incessant chorus. Night moths and insects winged through the air. The fireflies jewelled the darkness, and reminded me, ludicrously, of the flitting fairies of pantomime. The live oaks, with their drooping festoons of grey moss, gave a macabre air to the nocturnal scene, as though the spirit of Gustave Doré had again called up his visions of Dante's Inferno. My Florida friends express a liking for these trees. To me they are ghoulish with their funereal gloom, their ogreish proportions. Their immense grey-green branches support airplants that smother the tree with a moss like dirty beards. They are depressing by day, they are almost terrifying by night. How readily Dante, had he known of them, would have used them in the landscape of Hell.

On the morrow I made no mention of my nocturnal adventure. I felt that my kind host might feel surprised, and regard me as yet another of those odd Europeans with negrophile sentiments. The Southern Americans, familiar with negro life, have no curiosity, and strictly maintain the segregation of the races.

In the course of the next few days I came into repeated contact with negroes serving in various domestic capacities, either as servants, gardeners, chauffeurs, and general handy men. They are quiet, respectable people, always smiling and ready to oblige. Most of the coloured domestic servants go home to sleep. There is a regulation, in the Coconut Grove residential area, as elsewhere, that negroes must not be in the streets after nine o'clock. Moreover, they may not ride in taxis. The time limit results in the evening meal being sufficiently early to enable coloured servants to reach their homes by the prescribed hour.

The maid who served my breakfast in the patio each

morning had always a bright greeting, and covertly watched my needs. She was slim, most neatly dressed, and was probably a beauty among her own people.

Talking to the gardener one day, I had a shock. We were discussing plants and the varieties differing from those I knew in England.

"Yes, suh, I'm a British subject!" he said.

At first I thought I had not heard him correctly and that he was alluding to an English plant. I asked him to repeat what he had said, his soft accent troubling me a little.

"Yes, suh, I am a British subject. Ah was born in Nassau an' that makes me British. When ah was jest a li'tle boy, the Bishop he wanted to tek me to England, but my parents were skeered of that—an' I came here later."

I confess I felt a shock on finding that this negro gardener was my fellow-countryman. It was the first time I had come face to face with a black subject of the British crown. I learned later that the Bahama- and Jamaica-born negroes regard themselves as the aristocrats of the negro world, possessing a longer tradition of freedom and all the patriotism of the proudly English.

My host told me a delightful story of a negro caretaker he had employed, the predecessor of Moses who, with his devoted little wife, under a housekeeper, ran our establishment. My host returned for the season from the North to find the caretaker, Clarence, a trustworthy boy, nowhere on the premises. Everything was in excellent order in the house at Leafy Way, but all the hurricane shutters were up and it was evident that Clarence had not been there for some time. My host made an excursion to his home, where Clarence lived with his mother, among a large family ranging from three grown-up sons down to a tiny piccaninny whose black

curls were done up in paper, in approved negro fashion. Clarence's mother, a large woman, was seated in the porch, peeling potatoes. She expressed surprise when she learned that her son was not at Leafy Way.

"Why, sure, suh, he be right there very soon," she said.

"Have you seen him to-day anywhere?" asked my host.

"He's got the keys and we must get in."

"Why, no, I haven't seen Clarence just now, suh."

"But when did you see him last?"

The fat old mother rolled her eyes. "Why, to be sure, suh, I haven't seen my son Clarence recently. But he'll be back right soon, I'm sure."

"But how soon—and where is he, anyhow? Do you know?"

"Why, no, suh. Ah can't jest say—but I know he'll be right back. You don't worry about Clarence, suh," replied the fat negress, now surrounded by five children, all moon-eyed before the visitor.

"Now come," said my host, growing impatient. "I must know what has become of Clarence. We wrote telling him to open up the house, and there's not a sign of him; the whole place is locked up. He's got the keys."

"I'm sure sorry, suh. That's not like Clarence. Ah can't think why he has done such a thing," she lamented.

But my host knew there was something behind this display of ignorance.

"Now listen. You know very well where Clarence is—he lives here, so you know whether he's about or not. Now tell me the truth. Has he run off?"

The woman threw up her hands.

"Oh, suh, you know my Clarence. He's a honest boy and jest wouldn't do such a thing."

"Then what has happened? I must know, and I must have the keys. Has he been locked up?"

The expression on the woman's face showed that the guess was right. She sank into the rocking chair and wiped her eyes with her apron.

"Why, suh, you know my Clarence. You know he be a sairtain honest boy. Yes, suh, honest an truthful he be. But jest now he be in sore trouble. He's had a little difference of opinion, an' the law behaves most high-handed, and doesn't listen one word to my Clarence. They jest took him, but he be back soon, I know!" affirmed the old mother, weeping.

"Then he's locked up. What's he done?" asked my host, the truth emerging at last.

"Why, he jest no more than borrowed an automobile for some business he had, and they said Clarence took it, which is mighty untrue, as you know, suh."

"And where is he now?"

"In the City Gaol, the poor boy."

Since Clarence had the keys, there was nothing to do but to visit the City Gaol and obtain permission to see him. There he was, the keys safely deposited with his other belongings. He had hoped to be released before his employer's return. "That automobile be much exaggerated, suh," he said.

III

The Miami City Gaol was so unique that I visited it myself. The City Hall in which it is situated is one of the most conspicuous objects in Miami. It is a stone-built skyscraper, crowned by a pyramid, and rises from a large municipal building, which also includes the County Court House. It is

twenty-six storeys high, but the top seven storeys are not municipal offices—they are the city gaol, and the cells there accommodate nearly two hundred prisoners.

I felt a certain amount of envy for prisoners who had such a glorious view. Below lay the city, the lagoon, the three bridges, the hotel and villa-thronged island strip which is Miami Beach, the wide Biscayne Bay, a blue sweep of water dotted with yachts, the long tree-girt boulevards leading to the outlying suburbs, the open space of the Pan-American aerodrome, the villas and yacht basins of Millionaires Row, and afar, fading into the haze of the horizon, the flat green plain where lay the mangrove swamps, and the jungle of the Everglades, a No-man's-land sacred to birds and Indians.

Such was the nature of this panorama of land and sea. But the prisoners saw little of it, for their cells mostly looked inwards, or the view was obstructed by the heavy balustrade of an external promenade. This lofty tower was not crowned by a gaol for their benefit, but solely for their security; though, on occasions, this is in doubt, for when the September hurricane raged, the tower swayed so violently—four feet, a warder assured me—that the terrified prisoners were all transported to earth.

This tower prison, which had seemed at first an eccentric experiment with unhappy men, had very definite merits. When the gaol was situated on the outskirts of the city, the prison van bringing them to the Court House was subjected to the attacks of organised gangs seeking the rescue of their accomplices. Now, when the prisoners were called for trial they were put into the elevator and at the end of their descent found themselves in court. Sentenced, they were put back into the elevator and taken skywards again, if the sentence was short. Long sentences were worked

out in other prisons, and sometimes in chain gangs on the roads.

A prison on the top of a tower is, therefore, not so fantastic as it at first seems. There is, indeed, a long historical precedent. There was a 'lock-up' in the top of the high gate-tower by which one enters delightful old Rothenburg, in which the custodian of the tower, an old woman who sells postcards and beer, lives to this day. "Yes—it's fresh and lovely and quiet up here, but it's a long way down for water, *nicht wahr?*" she observed to me.

In the Middle Ages Venice was ever ingenious in the matter of prisons; it roasted you under a lead roof, or rotted you in a damp dungeon, or hung you high in a basket out of the top of the Campanile, and the gay Venetians drinking in the Piazza below made bets on how long prisoners sentenced to 'exposure to death' would last.