

## COLOUR-BAR IN THE WEST INDIES

RAYMUND DEVAS, O.P.

**B**UT let the reader be sure to notice at the outset that it is of the southern half of the West Indies that I can speak with experience. There are so many islands in the whole chain, extending as it does for a thousand miles and more; and, whereas all resemble one another in some respects, in other ways they can be, and are, astonishingly different. Naturally, therefore, one should only dogmatise about those of which one has first-hand knowledge. The islands I know are Trinidad, Tobago and Barbados, and (omitting the French islands) the Windward group, which now includes Grenada, St Vincent, St Lucia and Dominica.

One of the charms of the Colony of Grenada is that, full of coloured people as it happens to be, there is no colour-bar. I use the word charm, because it is the reverse of charming when in company with a cultured coloured man to be obliged to halt and reflect *We may not enter here*. It must be admitted, I suppose, that in this matter, at least among the English islands, Grenada is at the moment unique. Not for very long, however, can it remain unique, because in the West Indies the colour-bar does appear to be breaking down: very slowly in some places, but surely. And this is not a question of what one would like, or of what one hopes for, but of the inevitable development of these islands, which are still colonies but which, as all the world knows, are aspiring to federation and even finally dominion status. As an aside, I may remark that highly exclusive hotels have found it impossible to keep their doors closed against delegates from the Governments of other islands who happened to be coloured men.

How is it that this state of things has come about in Grenada, and not as yet elsewhere? Part of the explanation, surely, is to be found in the question of land. Originally of course all estates were in the hands of the whites; but free coloured people soon began to acquire quite a number of acres, depending as Grenada always must do upon the produce of the soil. Fortunately there was plenty of land available, and the ideal of peasant proprietorship quickly developed and has flourished for over a hundred years. These planters of peasant origin, with an essentially Christian outlook—

the majority was Catholic—made good. Not that they were bad before, though the expression can bear that interpretation and actually brings back to my memory the annoyance of an Irish chaplain in World War I, when our divisional commander called us together and congratulated us on having *made good*. Personally, I was conceited enough to think that the phrase was intended by him to mean that we had proved our worth! Anyhow, that is what these West Indians in Grenada did: they proved their worth. Eagerness to advance is most noticeable in these parts, and the peasant proprietors in question were not slow in exhibiting this characteristic: as soon as ever they could manage to do so, they sent their sons abroad to secure higher and even university education. These men returned in due course as lawyers, doctors or engineers, while others inheriting their fathers' property, acquired yet more land, and before long were planters in as big a way as the white people themselves. Not only this, but as promising boys and (later in the development of the colony) *island scholars* to begin with, and now as educated men, they could not indefinitely be excluded from the civil service and administrative offices. In the line of commerce too, they began to be accepted in old firms of English origin, ending up as directors; or perhaps they started out on big business for themselves. The result was inevitable. As a friend of mine, now in high position himself, has put it, gradual migration from class to class became easy, determined not by colour but by education.

What has helped to keep the people down in other islands is that all the land, or nearly all the land, is in the hands of the whites. This group of planters has been so firmly rooted and consolidated that, until fairly recently, white merchants and other people of influence were afraid to open their firms to the coloured, least of all to admit them to high places and positions of trust. My recollection of one island is of a white man standing (or sitting) conspicuously outside every store or warehouse. It is true, I believe, that all this is beginning to crumble, but alas, not without violence and even bloodshed. Englishmen may remember reading of riots in the West Indies, even if described under such an irresponsible headline as *Wind-Up in the Windward Islands*. Significantly, there have been no riots in Grenada to read about.

Another point which may help to explain the state of things in Grenada is that the absence of the colour-bar includes both

Church and State. Such unfortunately has not been the case everywhere. I know of no *church* indeed which coloured people may not freely attend, but I do remember a convent-school, the only one in that particular colony, where coloured pupils were not accepted because parents of the white children objected. The lamentable result of this was that coloured children had to be sent to non-Catholic secondary schools—and this in an area where, as in England, we have been fighting for the right of Catholic parents to send their children to Catholic schools! Happily this state of things cannot last—*solvitur ambulando*. With the increase of the coloured population and the decrease of the white, the shoe will soon be found on the other foot. If white people still persist in their objections, the Sisters will be in a position to tell them that they must send *their* children elsewhere.

In general, however, we are not afflicted in this way; and if in larger colonies a solitary school is reserved for white children, there are others of equally high standard open to coloured people. Such movements as those of the Scouts and Guides, and indeed the very college playing-fields themselves, are acting, and are bound to act, as the thin end of the wedge. In such an environment young people mix freely, even when elsewhere they may not at present meet socially. But on no account is it to be imagined that in Grenada one is bound to entertain people one does not want to: a coloured man's home is his castle, as much as an Englishman's; and you can be just as exclusive in the company you keep as you wish to be. In public, of course, all and sundry are to be met with. There is never an At Home at Government House that is not flooded with coloured people: in fact it could no longer be flooded with any other section of the community. Similarly with regard to clubs: gone are the days when there was distinction as to origin or race. Needless to remark, however, the clubs are not open to anybody, and membership can only be obtained in the proper way, their smooth running being thus ensured. Yet I know of one island, with a mere handful of resident Europeans, where when last I was there they still had an exclusively 'white' club. The excuse offered was that there must be somewhere to bring ships' officers. Members of the St George's Club (Grenada) might well smile at the suggestion that theirs was not a fit place to introduce such officers. The West Indies have grown up, and have a black, coloured and a white gentry of their own.

On the other hand, although there is no longer any colour-bar in Grenada, it must not be thought that people have no further interest in the matter. Here as elsewhere some men are quite ready to take offence and are very touchy on the subject. Persons who have tried their religious vocation, for example, and have been advised to leave and return to the world, are sometimes prone to attribute their rejection to their colour. They are slow to understand that it is a question not of colour but of character, and that in many communities of unmixed white religious, not fifty per cent of the aspirants get through and go on. The others return to the world, but may do well in the world, perhaps marry and have children who, under the providence of God, go on *successfully* for the priesthood or religious life, made possible only by their own 'rejection'. Only some coloured people have such a complex as this, whereas *all* are indignant at any sort of insult offered to their confreres in other parts of the world. The Seretse Khama affair stirred everybody in Grenada as well as in the West Indies as a whole. Stories of discrimination against West Indians in England will at once be given headlines in the local newspapers; and mention of any segregation or distinction south of the Mason-Dixon line makes coloured people boil.

Inevitably therefore men will be met with who positively dislike white people. After all, you still meet Englishmen who simply 'cannot stand' the Irish, and vice versa! It may be that they were at school in England and never recovered from being nicknamed 'Darkie'. It may be that they were in one or other of the services during the war and did not secure the promotion they anticipated, and attributed this to colour. Offset against all this, happily, are the many men one meets who have no complaints to make about their sojourn among white people, and others who (especially in America) did have to endure slights and even insults, have had the sense to see that this was only sectional, and have by no means allowed it to spoil their general outlook on life and on white people in particular. It is notorious of course for people who have been downtrodden in the past to be supersensitive and to see insults where none is intended; but this too, in the case of the coloured people, is bound like the bar itself gradually to pass away.

Two final points may be of interest to the reader. The first, which strikes alike the casual visitor and the old observer, is the

great difference in feature as well as in colour amongst West Indians. Even omitting Trinidad for the moment, which for its size is perhaps the most cosmopolitan place in the world, nearly every variety is to be met with, from the negro type with skin of ebony (by no means such a common type as of old) to the man whom you might well mistake for an Englishman or a Scot. Again you will see men with fairly negro features who nevertheless are brown or even quite light in colour. Others are quite dark or even black but have the regular features of a European. One certain thing: there is no lack of good looks; and I remember an American expressing his opinion in some book on Haiti, that one day the ideal of beauty might pass from the white to the coloured. It is not however this detail of good looks upon which I would lay stress, while the caustic reader is perhaps muttering that there is no accounting for tastes, but upon the unity that runs through all these different types. The variety may be, to my certain knowledge it is, sometimes the cause or at least the occasion of jealousy, party feuds, and so forth. Words and names are bandied about as terms of reproach, such as 'redskins' or the 'black people'; but this sort of thing seldom goes very far, and soon dies down. It has reminded me, for all the world, of the fierce scorn one Scottish regiment had for another on the football field or elsewhere; but, when there was question of any base southron battalion coming along, all the doughty Scots were united as one man. So with all these different types and shades in the West Indies. They may sometimes have their disputes, but when it comes to a question of colour they at once close their ranks. It matters not if, to you or me, they seem to be far more white than black, it matters not whether either of their parents was white, and the other even nearly white, they themselves are not white, they are coloured—that is their outlook.

The second and last point is this. Rid as we are of the colour-bar in Grenada, and rid as we are bound to be of it in other West Indian islands in the century to come, something remains and will remain. Am I wrong in thinking that the whole question of colour prejudice is based on the old English system of class? The black people of Africa and elsewhere, then the negroes of the West Indies and subsequently the coloured folk, were originally in the social scale the lowest of the low, the most deeply despised. Illiterate country yokels were the lowest in England itself, and

then one had to pass through many stages, many different grades of the 'lower orders', whom the upper classes did not 'meet', till one came at last somewhere near the gentry. Even then, in society, someone might describe a third party to a friend as not quite 'top drawer'. In the West Indies of olden times, if people found that they just 'did not belong', they knew it was due to their colour. Nowadays, such ostracism, if it still exists, is beginning to be due, not to their colour but to their lack of culture, social status or wealth. In Grenada, society consists of heads of Government departments, directors of chain-stores, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and owners of large estates, many of them black or coloured men. On the other hand the various grades of the 'lower orders' still exist, and, in numbers and noise, of course still prevail. Like the rowdy crowds one remembers of old at sea-side resorts in England (two world wars possibly have somewhat crippled their style or subdued their vulgarity), there is a boisterous element among West Indians. The *difference* is that some of these coloured rowdies are close relatives of men who now belong to society, but remain for the time being at least among the proverbial 'poor relations'.

As a postscript, if an opinion is asked about mixed marriages, the answer is simple. Men are free, and it reveals a sad state in a country's mentality when it can think of legislating to prohibit coloured and white people intermarrying. On the other hand, just as it is not very usual for Englishmen to marry Greeks or even Italians, though it does happen sometimes, so coloured people may marry persons of another race, but generally speaking the happiest results are realised when they make their choice among their own people.