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FROM MY DIARY IN BRITISH GUIANA

“The momentum of past events, the spontaneous impulses of the mass of a nation . . . all have more to do with the progress of human affairs than the deliberate views of even the most determined and far-sighted of our individual leaders.” — JOHN MORLEY, “Cromwell.”

January 25, 1890. In the Court Room at Georgetown, Demerara.

ON a high platform sat the judge, William Anthony Musgrave Sherriff, by name, in gorgeous crimson robe but without wig. Immediately to his left was the witness-stand, and immediately in front of his desk, but below it, sat the Clerk of the Court, a handsome and intelligent-looking mulatto, who had passed his legal examination at the British Guiana bar, and is at present writing a book upon the law and practice in this colony. This interesting clerk, M. E. Q. V. Abraham, speaks highly of the Dutch law in vogue here, as being vastly simpler and more rational than what is practised in London.

Close to the clerk's desk, on the right, is the table where the Crown officers sit in their gowns of black, but minus wigs. Behind these, on the right of the room, are tables for reporters. On the left of the Judge are the twelve jurors, as with us, and immedi-

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ately in front, behind a central table at which counsel sit, is the prisoner's dock, behind which again are seats for about fifty spectators.

The first case was against two blacks, who stood in the dock charged with having assaulted a merchant on the street and knocked a walking-stick out of his hand, with the obvious intention of doing him bodily harm. The case was clear against one of them, a man who had been already four times convicted of felony. The Judge gave him the fullest opportunity of offering evidence in his behalf, of questioning witnesses, and of addressing the Court and Jury. This prisoner was condemned to seven years' hard labor and three years' subsequent police supervision, and left the room cursing the Judge and growling general malediction. The other prisoner made a harangue to judge, jury, and spectators, his eyes bursting with tears, his voice choked with emotion, his arms and hands waving with a grace that indicated the triumph of nature over art. He reviewed his past life, referred to his respectable family and seven children, his professional duty as market scavenger, which, he insisted, raised him above suspicion. But the most grievous weight upon his spirit appeared to be, not that he was in court on a charge of larceny or even murder, but that he should be suspected of affiliating with such a "low" black as the other prisoner. "My dear good father"—"My dear good massa judge," were expressions that he used in appealing to "His Honor," while the jury were referred to as a group of "My dear good brothers." His speech flowed as freely as could have been desired by the most ambitious of stump speakers, and his ar-

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guments, even if they lacked coherency, appeared to fuse together with enough force to carry conviction to many of his fellow blacks. The jury did not leave their seat in order to pronounce this one "not guilty" and convict the other—though my feelings were mixed when the judge told me later that this same man whom I had seen acquitted had already served three terms in jail on similar charges.

The trial left nothing to be desired on the score of dignity, decency, and fairness. The jury listened attentively and the servants of the court did their work quietly and efficiently. The room was scrupulously clean, the attendants well dressed and tidy.

The absence of counsel for the defence would appear from our standpoint to be unfair to the prisoner, but as the trial is conducted here, it seemed to me rather the reverse. The judge does not merely sit as a dummy to give a verdict after opposing lawyers have wearied the court with wrangling. He is here to see fair play. Knowing that the prisoner looks to the judge for fairness, and not to a lawyer, the bench assists in bringing out any testimony that may redound to his credit. The Crown prosecutor, in his turn, does not seek so much the winning of his case as the establishment of the truth. The spirit in which the trial was conducted by judge and prosecuting attorney appeared to be that of fairness above all, remembering that ninety-nine guilty men had better escape rather than one innocent man suffer.

January 26.—Last night at dinner, the hostess (English in birth and breeding) told me that her health was

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much the better for living here. This same high praise for the Guiana climate I had also from the wife of the Comptroller of Customs, Mrs. Darnley Davis, who told me she had lived here five years, had never known the need of medicine, and only once in the life of her three-year-old daughter had a doctor been called in.

The dinner might have been in New York or London for aught that might be called "tropical" about it. The black men-servants, to be sure, were in white duck—a very sensible arrangement—but their education was distinctly metropolitan. After dinner, on passing into the drawing-room, we found the floor cleared for a dance and about fifty guests assembled, including the three white English officers of the garrison and two mulatto ladies—which latter received apparently as much attention as the majority of charming English and white creole girls at the dance. The two ladies of color were fashionably dressed, and quite at their ease. I was told that colored people went into society here, and that one of the mulattos at this party was engaged to a white merchant of the place. Her presence at the ball was not resented, as it would have been in other parts of the West Indies, to say nothing of the United States.

Henry Bolingbroke, writing in 1807 of Georgetown (then called *Starbroek*), says: "Few weeks pass without a ball or a concert, the attending of which is, however, very expensive. A ball and supper cost to each of the gentlemen subscribers \$8, a concert and ball \$12. *His ticket also introduces two ladies of color.*"

"When an European arrives in the West Indies and gets settled . . . he finds it necessary to pro-

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vide himself with a housekeeper or mistress. The choice he has an opportunity of making is various, a black, a tawny, a mulatto, or a mestee; one of which can be purchased for £100 or £150 sterling, fully competent to fulfil all the duties of her station . . .”

This arrangement is not unknown to-day, but it will disappear when white wives shall have made their influence felt.

The son of a British bishop, particularly when in company with his father, may be deemed competent authority when quoted in regard to the pleasures of the dance. Henry Nelson Coleridge (in 1825) wrote: “A ball to our creole girl is more than a ball; it is an awakener from insensibility, a summoner to society, an inspirer of motion and thought. Accordingly there is more artlessness, more passion than is usual with us in England. The soft dark eyes of a creole girl seem to speak such devotion and earnestness of spirit that you cannot choose but make your partner your sweetheart of an hour; there is an attachment between you which is delightful, and you cannot resign it without regret.”

“She is pale, it is true, but there is a beauty in this very paleness, and her full yet delicate shape is at once the shrine and censer of love, whence breathe—

“ ‘The melting thought,
The Kiss Ambrosial, and the yielding smile.’ ”
Etc., etc., etc.

Anthony Trollope has referred to Demerara as “The Elysium of the Tropics—the West Indian happy

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valley of Rasselas—the one true and actual Utopia of the Caribbean Seas—the Transatlantic Eden.”

This master of fiction continues:

“The men of Demerara are never angry and the women never cross, and life flows on in a perpetual stream of love, smiles, champagne, and small talk. Everybody has enough of everything. The only persons who do not thrive are the doctors——”

In the midst of such gorgeous verbiage from slow-blooded Britons, is it for me to raise questions?