



Jamaica Remembered

By George Graham

Jamaica Remembered

*In the afternoon in Jamaica
When the sun stood still
And the sea lay down like a lamb,
When the leaves barely trembled
In the promise of a breeze,
And even the bees hummed in a lower, slower note,
I used to lie under a poinciana tree,
Veiled and dappled by shadow,
Dreaming of big cities and success.
Now, I sit in my office (in my Yves St. Laurent suit),
And look out the window at the skyscrapers...
Dreaming of Jamaica.*

Ganja Tea and Rat Soup

When I was very young, my family lived in Burlington Great House, near Port Antonio. That was before my father realized that his salary as an agricultural instructor couldn't support an opulent Colonial lifestyle.

During those years, my parents belonged to the country club, had tea with Governor Denham and his wife when they visited Port Antonio, and in general enjoyed the privileges of Jamaica's pampered elite. We were mentioned quite often in the Gleaner's "Pink Sheet," and my mother's scrapbook shows I was quoted more than once in "Cute Sayings of Children."

"You sat in Lady Denham's lap," my mother told me in later years, when we were living in obscurity, far from the glitter and glamour of the country club set. By that time, my father had been transferred — first to Manchester, and then to St. Elizabeth, at the exact opposite end of the island.

During our Burlington days, we had a butler named Aiken. He was a Maroon, a descendant of the slaves freed by the fleeing Spanish when the English invaded Jamaica nearly three centuries earlier.

The Maroons sought refuge in the Cockpit Country — a particularly inaccessible mountain chain riddled with sink holes and choked with vines that are known to this day as "Maroon wiss." Camouflaging themselves with the vines and setting ambushes from among the branches of the thick-foliaged trees, they defied every effort the British made to conquer them. Eventually, the British government made a truce that gave the Maroons a measure of independence: They were subject to British law only in such serious cases as murder, and they were ruled by their own Colonel.

As far as I know, Aiken is the only Maroon I have ever met. He was full of strange tales and superstitions, and I found him fascinating.

But one of his quirks got him in trouble with my father.

My younger brother, Harry, my newborn sister, Betty, and I had come down with whooping cough.

"Ganja tea," the cook advised my mother. "Give them some ganja tea."

My mother was horrified. Ganja was illegal, and every once in a while, the Gleaner would have a news item about some man who had gone berserk after smoking ganja and had chopped up someone.

Aiken said nothing, but after my mother had lectured the cook about the evils of ganja and left the kitchen, he whispered: "I know a better cure than ganja tea — rat soup!" That evening, he called us children into the kitchen and presented us with steamy cups of broth.

We had just begun to sip the soup when my father appeared in the doorway.

"What are you giving my children?" he thundered.

"Rat soup, Busha. Is the very best thing for whooping cough."

"You are giving MY children rat soup? Where's my gun?"

And he wheeled on his heels, heading toward the bedroom.

By the time he reappeared with the double-barreled 12 gauge, Aiken had vanished like his ancient forbears, and we never saw him again.

Jamaica Remembered

George Graham