



*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.*

## *Troubled Times*

During World War II, Jamaica experienced labor unrest so severe that troops were dispatched to various parts of the country to keep the peace. Bustamante had emerged.

Over six feet tall, he was lanky and hawk-faced, with a bush of gray curls at the back of his head. He called himself Alexander Bustamante, but my great-uncle William's wife, Aunt Florrie, said his real name was Clark. He was her cousin, after all, and she should know. I once heard that Bustamante claimed his new name had come from a Spanish count who had adopted him.

Bustamante was imprisoned — briefly, I think — for causing disturbances during wartime.

I vaguely remember headlines in the Daily Gleaner proclaiming "Black Friday" (or was it Black Saturday? "Black" something, anyway). That was the day Bustamante led a mob to the lunatic asylum on Windward Road, causing such turmoil that the mad people escaped and wreaked havoc.

Someone must have been killed, because years later my father's cousin, "Uncle" Herbert used to make sly faces and mutter cryptic boasts about getting Bustamante acquitted. From his maundering, I gathered he had persuaded Bustamante's lawyer to seek a change of venue to Port Maria, where everyone in the jury would be sympathetic to Bustamante. "The great and the small loved him there," "Uncle" Herbert would reiterate in his raw, rum-scraped voice, his head craning forward on his tom-turkey neck.

I also read or heard a story about Bustamante leading a mob through Kingston and the governor sending troops to stop him. For reasons no one has ever explained to me, Bustamante wore a jacket but no shirt, and when the troops leveled their carbines at his mob, he grabbed the jacket by the lapels and bared his bony chest theatrically. "Shoot me, but spare my people," he said.

(Remember, I wasn't there, and I read or heard the story when I was very young. So I can't swear this is a historically accurate quote.)

Obviously, the troops didn't shoot, because Bustamante lived on to become Jamaica's most revered prime minister, leading the country to independence, and even being knighted by the Queen of England. He married his longtime secretary, who became Lady Bustamante (Lady B to her friends).

His cousin, Norman Washington Manley, was to emerge as Jamaica's premier barrister, a media star whose cases were reported verbatim in the Gleaner, page after raptly followed page. Later, Manley would challenge Bustamante for political leadership of the island. But in those early years, Manley's trade union and People's National Party were yet unborn. Then, there was just the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union and crowds of followers singing:

*We will follow  
Bustamante  
We will follow Bustamante  
Till we die!*

I can barely remember the alarms that went out as Bustamante stormed about the island, agitating the workers. I heard there were riots, and I remember seeing the cook's diminishing back as she strode down the hill at Burlington one morning. "Where is Cookie going?" my father's sister, Aunt Bell, asked.

"She say she on strike, ma'am," the housemaid responded.

"On strike?" my mother gasped. "Whatever for?"

"I don't know, ma'am. She say Bustamante call a general strike."

My mother was astonished. After all, we paid our help five to ten shillings a week (then worth about \$2.50 US). And they lived in. My father's salary, as an agricultural instructor (and later when he was promoted to supervisor), was never more than a few hundred pounds a year, so he probably made \$30 US a week — and his salary supported the entire household operation.

You have to understand that things cost less in those days — a lot less. I think our rent was four or five pounds a month (about \$20), and you could buy a bottle of Two Dagger rum for half a crown (55 cents). Even so, you couldn't buy much on \$2.50 a week, especially if you had children to support, as who didn't?

The cook returned to work within hours, and the incident was quickly forgotten. But I have a memory of my father in a khaki uniform and — I think — puttees, carrying a .303 rifle and climbing into a truck full of other "special constables."

They were away for days, and I never heard what they were doing. But much later, I overheard one of my father's friends telling about the time one of the "special constables" shot a rioter with a .303, "and it tore the poor man's leg completely off."

## **Jamaica Remembered**

George Graham