V. S. Naipaul

THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

Impressions of Five Societies
—British, French and Dutch—
in the West Indies and South America

VINTAGE BOOKS
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FOREWORD TO THE VINTAGE EDITION

The Middle Passage was my first travel book. It was published in 1962, and this is from the original foreword:

> In Septembe. 960 I went back to Trinidad on a three-month scholarship granted by the government of Trinidad and Tobago. While I was in Trinidad the Premier, Dr. Eric Williams, suggested that I write a non-fiction book about the Caribbean. I hesitated. The novelist works towards conclusions of which he is often unaware; and it is better that he should. However, I decided to take the risk.

For the Penguin edition of 1969 I added this note:

> A New Zealand writer, reviewing another book of mine, said that I was writing about the problems of a client culture and a client economy. I wish those precise words had occurred to me when I was writing *The Middle Passage*. They would have made many things more clear. The book might have had more shape; and it might have been less romantic about the healing power, in such a culture, of political or racial assertion.

With the qualification contained in that note, the book, I feel, still stands. Perhaps because it was the first time I had truly "travelled," both the travel and the writing remain vivid to me; and—though the themes are serious—I hope that there are readers who will also catch, and respond to, the element of simple delight.

1981

They were valued only for th wealth which they yielded, and society there has never assumed any particularly noble aspect. There has been splendour and luxurious living, and there have been crimes and horrors, and revolts and massacres. There has been romance, but it has been the romance of pirates an outlaws. The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions. There has been no saint in the West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one out of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a characte and purpose of their own.

James Anthony Froude: *The English in the West Indies* (1887)

1. MIDDLE PASSAGE

In the carriage with me were several gentlemen; officers going out to join their regiments; planters who had been home on business; young sportsmen with rifles and cartridge cases who were hoping to shoot alligators, &c., all bound like myself for the West Indian mail steamer. The elders talked of sugar and of bounties, and of the financial ruin of the islands.

James Anthony Froude: *The English in the West Indies* (1887)

THERE was such a crowd of immigrant-type West Indians on the boat-train platform at Waterloo that I was glad I was travelling first class to the West Indies. It wasn't an expensive first class. Ninety-four pounds, which might have bought cabin class accommodation on one of the ships of the French Line, had got me a cabin to myself on the Spanish immigrant ship *Francisco Bobadilla.*

Most of the people on the platform and many of those in the train were not travelling down to Southampton. But the compartment I got into remained crowded. One man with a Nat King Cole hairstyle was dandling a fat bonneted baby that was gift-wrapped in ribbons and frills, with a rubber nipple stuck like a gag and a final flourish in its drooping, dripping mouth. Two ladies with felt hats and pink stockings sat slumped against the window. They wore gauze-like dresses over satin petticoats of a fiery pink. The powder on their faces had dissolved in patches, and they crumpled tiny embroidered handkerchiefs in large shining hands. They looked constrained and unhappy. There were baskets with food and baby-supplies on the rack and on the floor.

The man with the baby was talking to the man opposite him of the hardships of life in London.

'Is like that Stork on television,' he said. 'Three out of five can't tell the difference from butter. Three out of five don't care for you.'

He spoke in a slow, negligent way. The slumped women stared out of the window and said nothing. The baby, fat-cheeked, big-eyed, dribbled. London rolled away on either side of the railway canyon: the grimy backs of houses, the red tops of buses, the bright new advertisements, the signs on small shops, the men in white overalls on ladders: pictures that already felt like memories: the promised land from which we were already separated: the train just another of the morning noises.

'Eh! I tell you about the foreman?' He spoke easily; the train was not England. 'One day he say, "Blackie, come here a minute." I watch at him, and I say, "Good. I coming." I went up and I hit him *baps!* Clean through a glass window.' He didn't gesticulate. He was dandling the baby on his knee.

In the baby's basket one saw the things of England, a few minutes ago commonplace, now the marks and souvenirs of the traveller: the bottle of Lucozade, the plastic baby bottle (in the West Indies it would have been a small rum bottle), the tin of baby powder.

'*Baps!* Clean through the glass window.'

The ticket collector, tall and elderly, slid the compartment door open. On this train he was a foreigner, but his manner was neutral; he might have been on the Brighton train.

'T'ank God I didn't have the monkey-wrench in my hand. I wouldn't be sitting down in this train holding this baby on my lap today.'

The ticket collector examined and clipped, and slid the door shut.

From the next compartment a very tall and ill-made Negro stepped out into the corridor. The disproportionate length of his thighs was revealed by his thin baggy trousers. His shoulders were broad and so unnaturally square that they seemed hunched and gave him an appearance of fragility. His light grey jacket was as long and loose as a short topcoat; his yellow shirt was dirty and the frayed collar undone; his tie was slack and askew. He went to the window, opened the ventilation gap, pushed his face

through, turned slightly to his left, and spat. His face was grotesque. It seemed to have been smashed in from one cheek. One eye had narrowed; the thick lips had bunched into a circular swollen protuberance; the enormous nose was twisted. When, slowly, he opened his mouth to spit, his face became even more distorted. He spat in slow, intermittent dribbles; and when he worked his face back in, his eye caught mine.

I felt I had attracted his malevolence. And thereafter I couldn't avoid this Negro with the ruined face. I went to the lavatory. Our eyes met, twice. I went looking for a buffet car. I saw him. There was no buffet car. On the way back I saw him. Next to him sat a much smaller Negro, in a grey coat as well, with big blank eyes as lack-lustre as boiled eggs, long arms, and long hands, clumsily clenched, resting on his knees. His trousers were too short and rose tightly inches above his socks, so that he looked like a boy who had outgrown his clothes. His mouth was open. In the same compartment there was another Negro with the physique of a wrestler, and two young white men, one fat, one thin, both bald, in new sports jackets and sharply-creased flannels.

In my own compartment the baby was being fed. Its nose ran; its mouth leaked; it slurped and squelched and was frequently winded.

' "So you want rent?" ' the baby-feeder was saying. ' "I tell you I ain't paying any more than what I was paying before." He say, "Blackie, I coming up to get my rent or to get you out of that room." I watch at him and I say, "Good. Come up, *bakra*." He come up. I gave him one kick *bam!* He roll down the steps *bup-bup-bup*.

'I pass round there last week. He have up a big sign in green paint. Please No Coloured. In green paint. I tell you, man, is like Stork.'

At Southampton there was a further thinning out of passengers. The man with the Nat King Cole hairstyle was only seeing off his wife and baby; he himself was remaining behind to face aggressive landlords and foremen and Please No Coloured signs.

We were directed to one of the ocean terminal's less luxurious waiting rooms, next to the railway sheds, in the gloomy recesses

of which we could see the immigrants who had arrived that morning on the *Francisco Bobadilla*: a thick, multi-coloured mass herded behind wooden rails, and as silent as though they were behind glass. We stood at the doors and watched. No one stepped out of the travellers' waiting room into the immigrants' shed. There was interest, disapproval, pity and mockery in the gazes, the old hands sizing up the clothes of the new arrivals, clothes like those in which they had themselves landed some time before: thin white flannel trousers, sky-blue tropical suits, jackets with wide shoulders and long skirts, and those broad-brimmed felt hats, unknown in the West Indies yet *de rigueur* for the West Indian immigrant to Britain. Cheap cardboard suitcases were marked with complete addresses, all ending with ENGLAND in large letters. They stood motionless in the gloom; about them bustled dark-coated porters and railway officials; and there was silence.

The Negro with the ruined face stood, tall and totemlike, in the centre of the waiting room. Beside him was the stunted Negro with the short trousers, long arms and big eyes; from time to time he swivelled his head, his eyes never changing expression, his mouth open and collapsed, his large clumsy hands loosely clenched. The fat Englishman gave a cigarette to the man with the ruined face and lit it for him. There was much solicitude in this gesture, and I wondered about their relationship.

As yet we were subdued, as silent as the immigrants outside. But whispered rumours were beginning to circulate. Seven hundred, a thousand, twelve hundred immigrants had come on the *Francisco Bobadilla*. Two trains were taking them to London, from where they would make for those destinations written so proudly in those illiterate hands on their suitcases.

'You wouldn't want to travel with all them West Indians,' the man at the travel agency had said. 'Even the dockers are sick when they come off those ships.'

The *Francisco Bobadilla* was indeed in an appalling condition. The crew had not had time to clean up after the seven hundred immigrants. Paintwork was tarnished, metal rusting. In my first-class cabin, so cramped that I could open my suitcase only on my bunk, there was dust and fluff everywhere. The water carafe was hazy with dirt; the hot water didn't run; the lights didn't work. I rang for the steward; and many minutes later such an old, fatigued man appeared that I regretted disturbing him. I mentioned only the lights and the dust. He argued; I insisted; I mentioned the hot water.

'*Luego, luego,*' he said.

It was a more urgent word than *mañana*. When, some time later, I passed his cubby-hole, I saw him dozing on his chair.

But there was an advantage. On this outward journey there were few passengers, and most of those who lined the deck rails as we moved down the Solent were travelling tourist. When the dinner gong went they disappeared to their canteen below decks. There were only nine first-class passengers, and we sat at three tables in one corner of the large shabby dining room.

As he sat down, an elderly coloured man said, just to open the conversation, 'A lot of these black fellers in Tobago are damn intelligent, you know.'

We were in the West Indies. Black had a precise meaning; I was among people who had a nice eye for shades of black. And the elderly coloured man—a man, that is, of mixed European and African descent, with features and skin-colour closer to the European—was safe. There were no black men or women at the table. The coloured man's wife was, we were told, Spanish. Correia was a Portuguese from British Guiana. And Philip, who came from Trinidad, where he had 'a little business', could have been white or Portuguese or coloured or Jewish.

'A lot of those black fellers in B.G. ain't no fools either,' Correia said.

The intelligence of black fellers in Trinidad and Jamaica and Barbados was assessed; and then they started groping for common acquaintances. It turned out that Correia and Philip had some, in a football team that had toured the West Indies in the 1920s.

Correia was a small, bald man. He wore spectacles, had a sharp hooked nose, and had lost his teeth. But he was once a goalkeeper. He had a booming voice.

'You remember Skippy?' he asked.

'I can't remember when last I see Skippy,' Philip said.

'Well, you not going to see him again. Son of a bitch catch a pleurisy and dead. Frankie and Bertie and Roy Williams. All of them dead like hell.'

The waiter, middle-aged and mournful, couldn't speak English.

'But look at this, nuh,' Correia boomed. 'And I got to spend fo'teen days on this ship. Look here, man, look here. I want some tomatoes. You got that? Tomatoes. Having a lil trouble with the stomach,' he explained to us. 'Tomatoes. You got that? Me. Wantee. Tomatee. Me wantee tomatee. I don't know where they pick up these people who can't talk English.'

The Spanish lady couldn't talk Spanish; Correia himself couldn't speak Portuguese. West Indians are English-speaking, and when confronted with the foreigner display the language arrogance of all English-speaking people.

A young couple from Northern Ireland and an English librarian sat at the next table. The librarian was distressed. She had been under the impression that the *Francisco Bobadilla* was a cruise ship and had booked for the round trip. She had just learned that we were going to the West Indies to pick up another seven hundred immigrants.

When I went down I saw the old steward coming out of my cabin with brush and pan. He smiled and limped away. But the floor was still dusty; the balls of fluff were still under my bunk; the carafe was still dirty; the hot water didn't run. I couldn't complain, though: the lights were now working.

Early next morning I was awakened by Correia. He had the cabin across the corridor from mine. He came into my cabin naked except for a pair of pants. He was without his spectacles; his little face was haggard; his beard had begun to sprout; his thin hair was disarrayed; and he was hugging himself.

'Hi there, man. How you sleep? Lemme see a cigarette, nuh.' He took one of mine and lit it. 'You look as if you sleep well, you know. I had a hell of a night, boy. Didn't want to wake you up earlier. Thought you would be sleeping. But I can't open my suitcase. The one with pyjamas and soap and razor and Eno's and every blasted thing in. You want to try it?'

The canvas suitcase was bulging and taut; it was a wonder that Correia had managed to close it.

'I try those blasted keys all how,' he said, sitting on his bunk, while I tried.

Eventually we opened it, Correia jumping on the suitcase, I turning the key.

'Thanks, thanks, man. I hope I ain't catch a cold, boy. You ain't have a lil Eno's or Andrews with you? Stomach giving me hell, boy. Went three times already this morning. Not one blasted thing. Is this damn *mañana* food. First and last Spanish ship you catch *me* on.'

And all that morning he padded up and down outside the lavatories, smoking, head bowed as if in meditation, tie slackened, spectacles half-way down his nose, hands in pockets. Whenever I went down he gave me a progress report.

'It coming, it coming. I feel it coming.'

By lunchtime, to add to his troubles, he was sea-sick.

I reported this to the table.

'He wake me up at five this morning asking for Eno's,' Philip said.

The coloured man, Mr Mackay, said, 'We have two madmen with us this trip. Black fellers. I was talking to their keepers this morning. White fellers. The British Government paying for them going out and coming back.'

'I see them walking up and down,' Philip said. 'Is a funny thing. But you could always tell people who make it their business to keep other people lock up. They have this walk. You ever notice?'

'You see how these black fellers going to England and stinking up the country,' Mr Mackay said. 'I mean, if a black feller want to get mad, he could stay home and get mad there.'

They spoke of the telephone strike in Trinidad, which had been going on for some time. Mr Mackay said that the strike was a racial one. He spoke of this with feeling. Quite suddenly he was identifying himself with the black fellers. He was an old man; he had never risen to the top; superiors had always been imported from England.

'Is these Potogees who cause the trouble, you know,' he said.

'They have their hands in the stinking salt-fish barrel and they are still the first to talk of nigger this and coolie that.'

'I believe the ship has a list,' Philip said. 'Go up on the sun deck and see.'

'I must say I don't care for the look of those lifeboats. If anything happen we drowning like hell. As soon as we get to the Azores I am going to try to insure Mrs Mackay and myself against accident. I suppose you could do that sort of thing in the Azores?'

'But you don't know the language, Daddy,' Mrs Mackay said.

'Why, what they talk there? A sort of Potogee *patois*?'

'Something like that,' Philip said. 'But I could help you with it.'

'What, you know Potogee?'

'We used to speak it at home,' Philip said.

So Philip was Portuguese.

Mr Mackay fell silent. He stared at his plateful of Spanish food and looked unwell.

Philip said briskly, 'This Trinidad coming like a little America. All these strikes. All these hold-ups. You hear about that man the police catch with eighty-three thousand dollars in notes stuff up in a chest-of-drawers?'

Mr Mackay spoke at length about getting insured at the Azores. And for the rest of the journey he was silent about Portuguese and others and spoke only of black fellers. It was a cramping of his style; but in the West Indies, as in the upper reaches of society, you must be absolutely sure of your company before you speak: you never know who is what or, more important, who is related to what.

It was warm. The tourist-class passengers, who had for a day or two been battened down, it seemed, on the lower decks, emerged singly and in pairs and sunned themselves. The two lunatics came out with their keepers. The young Baptist missionary from the North of England, off to the West Indies on his first posting and travelling tourist out of a sense of duty, read large theological works and made notes. A Negro woman of about eighty, wearing sensationally old clothes, wandered about with cheerful inquisitiveness. She had left St Kitts to look for work in England; the rumour went around that the British Government was paying for her passage back.

Because there were so few passengers the class divisions on the ship were ignored. An Indian butcher from British Guiana trotted round the first-class deck morning and afternoon. A tall handsome Negro, who spoke to no one, walked around the deck as well, for hours at a time, smoking a tiny pipe and holding a paperback called *The Ten Commandments*, the book of the film. This man, according to Mr Mackay, had had some mental trouble in England and was being sent back, at his own request, at the expense of the British Government.

We all rooted among the tourist-class passengers and brought back stories.

Miss Tull, the librarian, came back distressed. She had met a woman who had left England because she couldn't get a room for her baby and herself. 'The landlord just threw them out when the baby came,' Miss Tull said, 'and put up a big sign in green paint. No Coloured Please. Do you mean that in the whole of Britain they couldn't find room for one woman and her baby?'

'They've found room for quite a lot,' Mr Mackay said.

'I can't understand it. You West Indians don't seem to care at all.'

'All this talk about tolerance is all right,' Mr Mackay said. 'But a lot of you English people forget that there is a type of black man—like the Jamaican—who is an animal.'

'But this woman isn't Jamaican,' Miss Tull said, conceding the point.

'A lot of these black fellers provoke the English people,' Mr Mackay said, putting an end to the discussion. Like all good West Indians, he was unwilling to hear anything against England.

My own encounter had been with a fat brown-skinned Grenadian of thirty-three. He said he had ten children in Grenada, in various parishes and by various women. He had gone to England to get away from them all, but then had begun to feel that he should go back and face his responsibilities. He thought he might even get married. He hadn't yet decided who to, but it probably would be the mother of his last child. He loved this child; he didn't care greatly for the others. I asked why, then, he

had had so many. Didn't they have contraceptives in Grenada? He said with some indignation that he was a Roman Catholic; and for the rest of the journey never spoke to me.

From our ventures among the tourist class we came back with stories, and sometimes with captives. Correia's captive was an Indian boy called Kripal Singh from British Guiana, who so endeared himself to the company that he was invited to tea.

'So handsome,' Mrs Mackay said over and over. 'So fair.'

'This boy,' Correia said, 'comes from one of the best families in B.G. You never hear of them? Biggest people in the ground provision business. Singh Brothers, man. Singh, Singh, and Singh.'

Kripal Singh looked correctly modest, his manner suggesting that what Correia said was true but that he didn't want to boast. He was tall and slender; his features were fine, his mouth as delicate as a girl's. He smoked with nervous elegance.

'Tell them about your family, Kripal,' Correia said.

Kripal, bowing slightly, offered cigarettes. He was a little drunk. So was Correia.

'They don't *grow* the ground provisions, you know,' Correia said, taking one of Kripal's cigarettes. 'They does only buy and sell. Tell them, Kripal.'

'So fair,' Mrs Mackay said.

For the rest of the voyage Kripal remained attached to the first class, only sleeping with the tourists and eating with them. He could find no suitable drinking companions among them; and he shared a cabin with the British Guianese butcher, whom he detested.

'The man s-say he went to England for holiday,' Kripal said, recalled to the subject by the sight of the butcher running around the deck. 'And he s-spend all s-seven weeks drawing dole.'

Kripal himself had gone to England to study. This studying in England is one of the strange activities of West Indian youth, of well-to-do Indians in particular. It can last until early middle age. Kripal had studied deeply in England and the Continent until his father, alarmed at the expense, had summoned him home to the business and marriage. By travelling tourist Kripal was having his last subsidized fling; his studies were almost over.

One morning, not long after we had left the Azores, I found Correia in a sparkling mood.

'How, how, man? You is a son of a bitch, you know. You never tell me you was a educated man. Let we go and have a drink, nuh.'

Correia had been lucky in me. He became sea-sick: I had Marzine pills. He had headaches: I had Disprin tablets. He developed a corn: I had Dr Scholl's corn-plasters. When he wanted to drink and couldn't find Kripal Singh, he came to me. Drinking with him had its dangers. He drank rapidly and became drunk in a matter of minutes. And he seldom had money on him: he preferred to settle later.

'You know,' he said at the bar, 'I had a damn good wash-out this morning. First try.' This explained his mood. 'You are a damn good writer, boy. Yes, man. I watch you at the post office in the Azores. Writing off those cards so damn fast I couldn't even read what you was writing.'

Philip joined us. He had been reading the *Kama Kalpa* in his cabin. I thought he had been reading the wrong book, but he said, 'This Indian philosophy is a great thing.'

'It *is* a great thing,' Correia said, drunk already. 'What is the first thing you going to do when you get back home, Philip?'

'I think I have to see about insuring the car, first of all.'

'I'm going to have a damn good purge-out with some Epsom Salts, boy.'

Both Correia and Philip had married daughters in England. Correia's daughter had been married not long before; Philip had just attended his daughter's wedding.

'You know what it make a father feel to lose his daughter, Naipaul?' Correia asked. 'You know how he does feel when she cry out at the train, "Don't go, Pa"? You don't know, Naipaul. "*Don't go Pa. Don't leave me.*" His one and only daughter.' He beat his feet on the rung of his stool and burst into tears. 'He don't know, Philip.'

'No, old man. He don't know.'

'Where your daughter living, Philip? Mine living in a kiss-me-arse place called Dudley.'

Philip didn't answer. He left the bar and came back some

moments later with an album stamped on the white leather cover: The Wedding of Our Daughter. Philip was anxious about his daughter and now, looking through the album, recognizing the working-class faces, clothes and backgrounds, I understood why. What had been desirable in the West Indies appeared differently in England.

Everyone seemed to be thinking about his children that day. The Mackays had left their son in England. Mr Mackay had made his last voyage; he would never see his son again.

'He's picking up all sorts of English habits,' Mrs Mackay said with pride. 'Everything for him is a "flipping" this and a "flipping" that. I just can't keep up with his English slang and English accent.'

Mr Mackay smiled, remembering.

It is possible for an escaped English convict to be welcomed by the white community in Trinidad and set up in business. And the West Indian, knowing only the values of money and race, is lost as soon as he steps out of his own society into one with more complex criteria.

The captain, an aristocrat in visage and bearing, invited no passenger to his table. He dined with his senior officers. I didn't know whether this was Spanish naval etiquette or whether it was the etiquette of the immigrant ship. I think it was the latter. From the wireless officer and the purser, the only officers who permitted us to approach them, we learned that just before loading up with the West Indian immigrants we had seen at Southampton, the ship had taken several hundred Moroccan pilgrims to Mecca. Some of these pilgrims had died on the way and had to be thrown overboard; afterwards the ship had to be deloused.

As England receded, people prepared more actively for the West Indies. They formed colour groups, race groups, territory groups, money groups. The West Indies being what they are, no group was fixed; one man could belong to all. A small group of Indians, dropping the competitive talk of London and Paris and Dublin and brilliant children studying in England, Canada and America, discussed the political situation in Trinidad. They spoke of Negro racism, and on the subject of miscegenation repeatedly

wound themselves up to hysteria. The British Guianese Indians, among them a man who spent much of the voyage playing Monopoly and reading the first volume of Radhakrishnan's *Indian Philosophy*, were less impassioned. Believing that racial coexistence, if not co-operation, is of urgent importance to the West Indies, I was disturbed by these Indian views and wanted to explore them further. But I had to drop out of the group because of the unpleasantness with Mr Hassan.

Mr Hassan had lent me a copy of *Time* magazine. I had lent it to Philip (in exchange for his *Kama Kalpa*), and when on the following day Mr Hassan asked for his magazine, it couldn't be found. Thereafter, four, five, six times a day, Mr Hassan asked for his magazine. He waited for me on deck. He waited for me before and after the film show. He waited for me outside the dining room. He waited for me in the bar. I bought him drink after drink. But he never relented. I promised to buy him a copy in Trinidad. But he wanted his particular copy of *Time*. I told him it was lost. That didn't matter. He wanted his *Time*. After three days of this persecution I burrowed deep into the tourist class and, miraculously, found someone who had a copy of the magazine. It was then, needless to say, that Mr Hassan's own copy turned up. Mr Hassan's main subject of conversation had been his wealth and his persecution, at the hands of government departments, customs officials, shipping companies, his wife's family, his children's teachers. From the depths of my heart I wished his persecutors greater strength and a long life.

And one day there was very nearly a racial incident in the bar. It seems that a group of tourist-class passengers, made restless by the long journey and the approach of their various native lands, and provoked by the comparative emptiness of the first-class bar, had decided to rush it. A group burst in that evening, singing. They came running in and bobbed up and down before the bar. They called loudly for drinks. The barman refused to serve them. The group, their bouncing abruptly stilled, their high spirits gone, stood silently in front of the bar for a few seconds. One man withdrew. The others followed him. They walked in a body down the deck, then back again. They stood in the doorway and muttered. At length one man left the group and, buttoning his

jacket, walked up to the bar and said, 'Gimme a pack of cigarettes, please.' The barman handed over the cigarettes. The man looked at the cigarettes, surprised. For a second he hesitated. Then, with careless swinging steps, he strode out. The group, moral victory theirs, went running off to the tourist bar, singing loudly.

And poor Miss Tull became more and more worried about her return journey. No one could console her. Philip suggested that she should abandon her sunshine cruise at Trinidad and fly back to England.

'I'm not going to lie to you,' Mr Mackay said. 'When I saw that pack of orang-outangs getting off the ship at Southampton, I didn't feel good. It was a damn frightening thing to see. You can't blame some people for not wanting to call themselves West Indians.'

'Angus always tells people he's Brazilian,' Mrs Mackay said. 'He could pass for one too.' Angus was her son, who spoke English slang with an English accent.

* * *

We were near St Kitts. A drink, a sunset as flamboyant as one could have wished, the Caribbees pastel-grey outlines around us, the waters where the navies of Europe acquired their skills in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: it wasn't enough to take our minds off the horror that was nearly upon us. That evening we would take on our first load of emigrants. St Kitts, the mother colony of the British West Indies, 'the first and best earth' (according to an inhabitant of 1667) 'that ever was inhabited by Englishmen amongst the heathen cannibals in America', today an overpopulated island of sixty-eight square miles, producing a little sea-island cotton, having trouble to sell its sugar, and no longer growing the tobacco, the first crop of the settlers, which Thomas Warner took back to England in 1625 to prove the success of his enterprise. The romance of its history —Warner and his Amerindian mistress, their son 'Indian' Warner —is buried. There are reminders only of the brutality of that history: the slaves shanghaied there, their descendants abandoned when prosperity went, and now *their* descendants, their belongings packed, their good-byes said, searching the sea for the black

smoke-stack of the *Francisco Bobadilla*, prepared for another middle passage.

It was night when we anchored, far out at sea. We saw nothing of St Kitts except the scattered lights of its capital. We looked for tenders; several lights deceived us. Nothing moved, except the headlamps of motor-cars.

'Eh!' Mr Mackay said. 'They have motor-cars here too?'

Tourist class, first class, we were one now, lining the rail, watching the lights of the toy capital where people took themselves seriously enough to drive cars from one point to another.

Mr Mackay, joining us later in the bar, reported that one of the lunatics had been taken off. A launch had taken him away with his keeper; the keeper had returned alone. Presently the keeper himself turned up in the bar. In spite of the gravity of his charge, he had come prepared for the tropical climate, and we had observed his degeneration from grey-flannelled, soft-soled official into red-shirted, sandalled cruise passenger.

A commotion, and some shouts, told us that the emigrants had arrived.

Part of the port deck had been roped off; the companionway had been lowered. Bright lights made the deck dazzle, bright lights played on the black water. There they were, rocking in the water, in three large rowing-boats. Men sat on the gunwales and with long oars steadied the boats. Policemen had already come aboard. Tables had been placed just in front of the companionway, and there the purser and his officials sat, consulting long typewritten sheets. Below, the boats rocked. We could see only white shirts, black faces, hats of many colours, parcels, suitcases, baskets. The men with the oars shouted occasionally, their voices dying quickly in the darkness. But from the passengers we heard no sound. Sometimes, for a second or two, a face was upturned, examining the white ship. We saw women and children, dressed as for church. They all looked a little limp; they had been dressed for some time. The lights played on them, as if for their inspection. Beyond there was darkness. We picked out suits, new broad-brimmed felt hats, ties whose knots had slipped, shining faces.

'They could at least have brought them out in launches,' Miss Tull said. 'At least in launches!'

The tourist class looked down, chattering, laughing whenever a rowing-boat struck the side of the ship or when an emigrant tried to get on to the companion-way and was turned back.

Presently they started coming up. The companion-way quickly became packed, a line of people from ship to boat. They looked tired; their clothes were sweated, their faces blank and shining. With policemen on either side, they produced tickets and brand-new passports. Separated from them by ropes, we stood and watched. The blue-dungareed crew leaned over the rails, exclaiming at the beauty of black women and pointing; we had never seen them so animated.

The deck became crowded. Passengers recognized an emigrant here and there.

'What, you come back already?'

'I just went up on a lil holiday, man.'

'I think I would go up and try my luck. You see Ferdie or Wallace or any of them up there?'

But most were subdued. One or two tried to duck under the ropes before presenting their papers. The tourist class, with sudden authority, bullied them back. The deck was choked with plastic bags in plaid patterns, brown paper parcels, cardboard boxes tied with string. The crowd grew. We lost sight of the purser and his table. The crowd pressed against the rope. One man with a blue suit, a slipped tie and a hat was jammed against me. He pushed his frightened, red-eyed face close to mine. He said hoarsely, anxiously, 'Mister, this is the ship that going to England?' Sweat was running down his face; his shirt stuck to his chest. 'It all right? It does go straight?'

I broke away from the group behind the rope and walked round to the starboard deck, where it was still and dark and silent, and looked at the lights of the island.

'Well!' someone said loudly.

I turned to see a tourist. We had not spoken during the voyage.

'The holiday is over,' he said. 'The wild cows are coming on board.'

He spoke in earnest. And what was he, this tourist? A petty official perhaps, an elementary school teacher. *The wild cows are*

coming on board. No attitude in the West Indies is new. Two hundred years before, when he would have been a slave, the tourist would have said the same. 'The creole slaves,' says a writer of 1805, 'looked upon the newly imported Africans with scorn, and sustained in their turn that of the mulattoes, whose complexions were browner; while all were kept at a distance from the intercourse of the whites.' On this ship only the Portuguese and the Indians were alien elements. Mr Mackay and his black fellers, the tourist and the wild cows: these relationships had been fixed centuries before.

The emigrants were running all over the ship. They peered in at the window of the bar, stood in the doorway. The ship was suddenly crowded. The first-class bar was the only place of refuge, and to it now came many of the tourists who had come with us from Southampton. No one objected. There were now only two classes: travellers and emigrants.

The barman vented his rage on two small emigrant children who had drifted into the bar, still in their fussy emigrant clothes. He lifted the counter flap, shooed the young emigrants to the door, and, blind to their charm, lifted them firmly and with an expression of distaste out on to the deck.

Sometimes for as much as three months at a time a slave ship would move from anchorage to anchorage on the West African coast, picking up its cargo. The *Francisco Bobadilla* would be only five days. It would go from St Kitts to Grenada to Trinidad to Barbados: one journey answering another: the climax and futility of the West Indian adventure. For nothing was created in the British West Indies, no civilization as in Spanish America, no great revolution as in Haiti or the American colonies. There were only plantations, prosperity, decline, neglect: the size of the islands called for nothing else.

What are the points in the history of an island like Jamaica? 'This isle,' we are told in 1597, in *A True Relation of the Voyage Undertaken by Sir Anthony Shirley*, 'is a marvellous fertil Isle, & is as a garden or store house for divers parts of the maine. We have not found in the Indies a more pleasant and holsome place.' From that, to Trollope in 1859: 'If we could, we would fain

forget Jamaica altogether. But there it is; a spot on the earth not to be lost sight of or forgotten altogether, let us wish it ever so much.' From Trollope in 1859 to the Ras Tafarian of 1959, who rejects Jamaica entirely and wishes to return to Africa, to a heaven called Ethiopia: 'Jamaica was a nice island, but the land has been polluted by centuries of crime.'

When Columbus put his ideas to King John II of Portugal in 1483, King John, telling Columbus nothing, sent a ship out into the Atlantic. Within weeks of the discovery of the New World in 1492, Columbus's companion Pinzón, deserting, took the *Pinta* off on his own to look for gold in an unknown sea. And there, in the treachery of the Portuguese king, in Pinzón's courage, treachery and greed, are all the elements of the European adventure in this part of the New World.

There is a myth, derived from the Southern states of America, of the gracious culture of the slave society. In the West Indian islands slavery and the latifundia created only grossness, men who ate 'like cormorants' and drank 'like porposes'; a society without standards, without noble aspirations, nourished by greed and cruelty; a society of whose illiteracy metropolitan administrators continued to complain right until the middle of the last century; illiteracy which encouraged Governor Vaughan of Jamaica to suggest the placing of a collection of books in the English language 'in the most conspicuous places where such of the gentry as are studious may always resort, since there is nothing more ridiculous than ignorance in a person of quality'; grossness to which traveller after traveller testifies and which made a seventeenth-century observer say of Barbados: 'This Iland is the Dunghill whareone England doth cast forth its rubidg: Rodgs and hors and such like peopel are those which are gennerally Broght heare. A rodge in England will hardly make a cheater heare; a Baud brought over puts one a demuor comportment, a whore if hansume makes a wife for sume rich planter.'*

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? Shall he be as academic as Sir Alan Burns, protesting from time to time at some brutality,

* These quotations, and many others in this book, are taken from Sir Alan Burns's *History of the British West Indies*.

and setting West Indian brutality in the context of European brutality? Shall he, like Salvador de Madariaga, weigh one set of brutalities against another, and conclude that one has not been described in all its foulness and that this is unfair to Spain? Shall he, like the West Indian historians, who can only now begin to face their history, be icily detached and tell the story of the slave trade as if it were just another aspect of mercantilism? The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.

* * *

In the morning I was calmer. The emigrants had got out of their going-away clothes and were sitting in the sun in simpler, less constricting garments, so that the deck looked like a West Indian slum street on a Sunday. One or two of the women had even put on slacks; the cloth was new, not yet washed, and one could detect the suitcase folds.

I fell into conversation with a man who was wearing khaki trousers, blue shirt and unlaced white canvas shoes. He was very big, with thick hands and slow thick speech. He was a baker. In a good week he could make thirty dollars. This I thought to be a very good wage in the West Indies, and I wondered why he had given up his job to go to England.

'Look, eh,' he said. 'I ask God, you hear. I went down on my two knees and ask God. And I always do what God tell me. Don't mind the Jamaicans gone and stink up England. I bound to get through. Morning and evening I does go down on my two knees and consult God.' His eyes became smaller, fixed on the horizon, and he was slowly raising his enormous hands in what could have been a suppliant or a strangulatory gesture.

I tried to change the subject to baking.

He didn't listen. In Biblical language he spoke of his religious experiences and his colloquies with God. Then, breaking off, he asked, 'You know Sloughbucks?'

'Slough, Bucks?'

'Is there I going. You think they have bakeries there? How much

you think they would start me off at? Twelve pounds? Fifteen?'

'I don't know. You could bake good bread?'

'With the help of the Lord.'

He worried me. But many of the emigrants I spoke to had consulted God and He had advised them to throw up their jobs—no one I spoke to was unemployed—and go to Sloughbucks. In Sloughbucks wages were high. And once they made it clear that they were not Jamaicans, they would be treated with regard. Only Jamaicans were beaten up in race riots, and deservedly, for they were uneducated and ungrateful and provoked the English people.*

The young Baptist missionary, with his collar on, worked hard that morning, explaining in what direction England lay, where London was, and unscrambling the apocalyptic name of Sloughbucks. He drew innumerable diagrams of the London Underground, and advised one man against taking a taxi from Southampton to Sloughbucks.

From the St Kitts *Labour Spokesman* ('Sound Speech That Cannot Be Condemned'—Titus 2: 8), September 14, 1960:

Considerable difficulties throughout the reaping of the 1960 *sugar cane crop came to an end last Monday morning when the Basseterre Sugar Factory gave the final signal that the mills at the factory have ceased grinding operations* . . .

Declining interest on the part of some workers became evident at the early stage of crop as (*a*) *there is the possibility of migrating to the U.K. and* (*b*) *the obvious difficulty to recruit young agricultural workers in the Sugar industry. . . . Without being seriously affected by the number which left for England steady production results were maintained down to April when at short notice managers were informed of the intention of workers to leave for the United Kingdom.*

Larger was the outflow in May and some estates were evidently in trouble to reap the total crop.

The second year of the existence of the production Committee, establish [sic] *by the Union and the Association, was somewhat disastrous as some managers disregarded the importance of the work of the Committee, and its full function therefore became fruitless. This however worked out to be detrimental to most of the estates as both managers and workers could not easily bridge some of the gaps in industrial relationships. It is on most of these estates that a substantial amount of cane remain* [sic] *unreaped last Monday. . . .*

Two hundred and twenty-three workers were recruited from Barbados. . . .

OUR QUESTION BOX

IS IT TRUE: *That the complexed Estate manager who was concerned only with his monthly salary is now trying to accuse the Union for the* 600 *tons of unreaped cane?*

Encouraged by the example of the missionary, I went among the emigrants after lunch—they were fed at long tables, in relays: '*Son buena gente*, they are good folk,' a member of the crew said—to find out what had made them leave St Kitts, what they hoped to find in England. I had no official position, no clerical collar, and I attracted the attention of the emigrants' leader, a tall, high-bottomed brown-skinned young man.

'Don't tell him nothing,' he said, running up, some of his flock at his heels. 'Don't tell him nothing. What he want?'

He was an educated man. He travelled first. He spoke very quickly.

'What you want? Why you discouraging the poor people?'

He didn't give me a chance to speak.

'The poor people just come on board the ship and you discouraging them?'

'I wasn't doing nothing, and he come up and start asking me all sort of question. Why I was going to England and things like that.' This was from the God-inspired baker.

* In her articles for the London *Evening Standard*, 'I Sail with the Immigrants', Anne Sharpley gives a Jamaican view:

'"These little dunce breadfruit niggers" (he meant the small islanders). "I *voted* for Federation, but since I come on this ship I seen what barefoot niggers them be. When us said no to Federation I so hurted I couldn't eat for a day.

'"But now them's so insulted me—all from these little islands, St Kitts, Montserrat, Antigua—them's so small that if you started running on them and develop speed you'd land up in the sea.

'"They're going to a dream in London, they don't know what they're going to, but when they ask them in London where them comes from, these yam and breadfruit little niggers, them's got to say Jamaica, 'cos nobody heard of dem islands."' ('The Night the Knives Came out', October 26, 1961.)

'Don't worry with him,' said the leader. 'He is a propagandist.'

This appeared to be a well-known word of abuse among the emigrants.

'What happen, man?'

'We pick up a propagandist.'

'A propagandist?'

'You come from Kenya, nuh?' the leader asked. 'I bet you you come from Kenya.'

'He call me a nigger,' a man said. (I had jotted down his details on the *Labour Spokesman* an emigrant had given me: $3.90 a day during the crop season, $2.82 during the slack season. His destination was Sloughbucks. He had not consulted God.)

'What is this? What is this?'

'A propagandist from Kenya call Boysie a nigger.'

'He call me a nigger,' Boysie said, his voice now touched with genuine hurt.

'Well, this ain't Kenya, you hear,' the leader said. 'I mad to get the boys to give you a ducking. The British Government send you out here as a propagandist, eh? Let him prove that he don't come from Kenya?'

I was rescued by the missionary.

'I know the type of provocator,' the leader said, addressing his flock. 'He don't care about the poor people. He don't care that a hurricane blow way the whole of Anguilla.'

I decided that the attitude of Mr Mackay and Philip and Correia and most of the tourist class was healthier. They had ignored the emigrants altogether, and were in the bar. I joined them.

'That Baptist boy keeping busy like hell,' Correia said. 'He must be really like the work.'

'He say he would like to go up England with them,' Philip said.

'Better he than me,' Mr Mackay said. 'Tomorrow afternoon please God I getting off this ship, and that is that.'

It was from the emigrants' leader that I first heard of the hurricane, Donna, which had struck Anguilla and caused many deaths. The *Labour Spokesman* carried further details: the cables received and sent, and an account of the rescue operations. The cables in-

terested me; for their style, first of all: an early longwindedness, urgency expressing itself only towards the end, in the omission of a few prepositions; and because they showed the delight West Indian politicians take in their new titles. St Kitts is sixty-eight square miles, Montserrat thirty-two.

> *From Chief Minister, Montserrat. To Chief Minister, St Kitts. Sent on 9th September 1960. Please accept and convey to the distressed people of Anguilla the sympathy of the Government and people of Montserrat damage sustained hurricane Donna. Chief Minister.*

> *From Chief Minister, St Kitts. To Chief Minister, Montserrat. Sent on 10th September 1960. Thanks very much your sympathy expressed in telegram of 9th. Chief Minister.*

And so it went on, an exchange of salutations. Mr Manley of Jamaica was more positive:

> *From Manley, Premier of Jamaica. To Southwell, Chief Minister, St Kitts. Sent on 8th September 1960. My profound sympathy for the disaster you have suffered. Please let us know what help you need. Manley.*

The Chief Minister of St Kitts was determined to show Mr Manley more honour than Mr Manley had shown him:

> *From Chief Minister, St Kitts. To Hon. Manley, Premier, Jamaica. Sent on 8th September 1960. Thanks kind sympathy. Food, clothing, cash useful. Southwell.*

Another cable repaired omissions.

> *From Chief Minister, St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla. To Hon. Manley, Premier, Jamaica. Sent on 9th September 1960. Further my cable. Grateful include tarpaulins if possible. Chief Minister.*

The story was rounded off by an article on the relief work. The writer was Mr John Brown who, according to an announcement in the same paper, was lecturing, even while the boatloads of emigrants were rocking in the shadow of the *Francisco Bobadilla*,

on 'Dialect, Drama and West Indian Culture' and was inaugurating a Literary Club.

What was less inspiring [Mr Brown wrote] *was that there was little semblance of an overall plan of organization. There were organizers of various sorts at work—too many of them if anything, and too few carrying out the work. . . . It seems self-evident that a central hurricane relief planning unit is needed for the colony . . . and it is essential that the exact nature of its relationship with the voluntary agencies—Red Cross, Jaycees, etc—should be very clearly defined to prevent confusion of responsibility and action.*

I had some idea who the 'etc' were. But the Jaycees were new to me. It was hard, on this immigrant ship, to associate the West Indies with well-dressed young businessmen, well-dressed and helpful young wives, and well-publicized acts of public service.

The emigrants' leader had his tea in the first-class dining room. He had excellent manners and skipped no part of the tea ritual. His followers peered approvingly through the windows at him. He concentrated on his tea. Sitting apart from us, and without the occasion to talk, he looked a little constrained. But I felt he would go far and that one day he too would be sending off cables. As soon as he had finished his tea and had daintily pressed a paper napkin to his lips, he rejoined his followers and started jabbering again, walking round and round the deck. We had occasional glimpses of his high bottom bobbing up and down outside windows. Then the class barriers on the deck came down and his walks were cut short. He stayed with his followers in their reserve.

Someone didn't approve of the barriers, however. He was the pipe-smoking Negro who had kept to himself throughout the voyage and read *The Ten Commandments*. It was his habit to walk around the deck for hours. Now he broke the barriers outside the dining room, outside the bar. The barman put the barrier up; the pipe-smoker broke it again. A squabble started. The pipe-smoker continued to walk, shouting over his shoulder. He was met at the dining-room barrier by the chief steward. He raised his voice; the chief steward replied. Angrily the pipe-smoker

wrenched the barrier up, snapping the thin cord, and crashed it down. He walked past the steward; he was screaming now, incoherent with anger. Groups of emigrants, their faces growing as blank as when they had come up from the rowing-boats, began to gather. Officers were summoned. The pipe-smoker walked measuredly round the deck, breaking barriers, his calm stride unrelated to his hysterical words, which carried across the ship. When he came round to the dining-room barrier again, he had a crowd of frightened emigrants behind him. The emigrants' leader ran up eagerly, as he had run up to me; his followers opened a way for him; but he only halted and his jabbering ceased. The pipe-smoker walked alone. With an access of added fury he broke the barrier. On one side of the barrier the deck was black with emigrants. On the other side officers and stewards stood in a cool white circle. The pipe-smoker, in black, approached them at an unfaltering pace.

'He's gone mad,' Mr Mackay said.

The emigrants were beginning to buzz.

'Don't handle him roughly,' the purser shouted. 'Captain's orders. Don't handle him roughly.'

The pipe-smoker walked steadily on.

'I'm gonna get you!' the chief steward said. He didn't speak menacingly. He was only speaking an American expression.

'Terrible, terrible,' Mr Mackay said at dinner. 'To see that fine beast trapped.' His heart was bad; he had been disturbed by the incident and could only nibble at a lettuce leaf. His words were a matter of habit; they were separate from the distress in his voice. 'I talked to him once or twice, you know. He wasn't a bad feller. Such a beautiful Negro. Terrible, terrible.' His mouth was twisted with pain. 'He must have had a damn hard time in England. Now they're taking him back to his mother.'

'They give him an injection and put him in the sick bay,' Philip said. 'I must say I wasn't expecting that at all. Insulting these Spanish officers in front of everybody.'

'Saving on the bad food, if you ask me,' Correia said. 'I wish they could give me a injection. I not been sleeping on this ship at all. Is the food. All this hispanol this and hispanol that.'

After dinner I went down to the sick bay. The doors were open. All the beds were empty except for one, in the corner, on which the pipe-smoker lay, still in his black serge trousers and blue shirt, a bit of plaster on his forehead. No doors were needed to keep him there.

Very late that evening or very early next morning we were to load up with more emigrants at Grenada, the spice island. It was our last night on board and we had a little party in the bar. The barman had not prepared for us and we quickly exhausted his brandy and Spanish champagne. We roused purser and stewards but could get no more drink. While we were talking to a steward an emigrant from St Kitts said he could help us, if we wanted brandy.

'Let the poor feller keep it,' Mr Mackay said, his soft mood persisting. 'Is probably the first and last bottle of brandy he ever going to buy. When the cold start busting his skin in England he going to be damn glad of that brandy.'

But the emigrant insisted. He was short, middle-aged and fat, with spectacles and a scratched skin.

Kripal Singh and I went down to the emigrant's cabin, going lower and lower, picking our way past babies down polished, hot corridors, catching glimpses of choked little cabins, heads below sheets, one above the other, opened suitcases, hearing sounds of thick muted activity all round us, seeing men and women hurrying to and from lavatories. The emigrant did not let us into his cabin. He half opened his door—four bunks, each dotted with a head emerging out of sheets, and many suitcases—squeezed in, shut the door, and presently came out with a bottle whose label was all gone except for one corner with the word 'brandy'.

Kripal Singh, whom I regarded as an expert in these matters, looked satisfied. He gave the emigrant five dollars and the emigrant, retiring, shut the door of his cabin.

We ran up with the bottle to the deck, where the fresh air revived us.

Philip said, 'This is rum. Even Spanish brandy isn't that colour. This is a thing they call sugarcane brandy.'

We all three went down again to the hot, airless lower decks.

We knocked. The emigrant opened. He was in vest and pants, without his spectacles. He gave us our money back and took his bottle, without a word.

'You see what I mean, Miss Tull,' Mr Mackay said. 'You see how these beasts treat their own people? And he ain't even get to England. When a few white fellers jump on him and mash his arse he will start bawling about colour prejudice.'

We were leaving Grenada in its early morning stillness when I got up next morning. The sun was not out. The sea was bright grey, the sky light, the hills a cool green, the water at their feet shadowed and still. It was like a Sunday morning. After breakfast the sun was high and hot and the emigrants were thick in the bow of the ship. Skirts and dresses flapped in the breeze; they chattered and pointed; they might have been on a day cruise.

We now acknowledged Mr Mackay as our West Indian expert. Philip asked him, 'How about these Grenadians? They does get on with people from St Kitts?'

'You have me there. People from St Kitts don't like people from Antigua. But I don't know about Grenadians. I only hope they don't start fighting before we reach Trinidad.'

Suddenly at lunchtime the water changed from deep blue to olive, and the new current of colour was edged with white froth. We were in the flood waters of the Orinoco River. I had no idea they reached so far north; and I wondered whether it was true, as Columbus reported, that one could find fresh water on one side of the white line and salt on the other.

We were approaching South America: a low grey range of hills in the distance. It was impossible to tell where South America ended and where Trinidad began. The hills could even have been another island. There was nothing, apart from the colour of the water, to tell us that we were near a continent. The hills grew higher, a dip became a separation, and we saw the channel. Columbus gave it its name: the Dragon's Mouth, the treacherous northern entrance to the Gulf of Paria. Venezuela was on our right, a grey haze. Trinidad was on our left: a number of tall rocky islets untidily thatched with green, and beyond them the mountains of the Northern Range blurred in a rainstorm.

It was from the South, through what he called the Serpent's Mouth, that Columbus came into the Gulf of Paria in 1498. The strong currents set up by the flood waters of the Orinoco River as they forced their way into the Gulf of Paria delayed him and nearly wrecked his ship. The currents roared continuously, he wrote; and once, in the middle of the night, when he was on deck, he saw 'the sea rolling from west to east like a mountain as high as the ship, and approaching slowly; and on the top of this rolling sea came a mighty roaring wave. . . . To this day I can feel the fear I then felt.' When at last he came into the Gulf he found that the water was fresh. It was this that encouraged him to announce his most startling discovery. He had discovered, he wrote Ferdinand and Isabella, the approaches of the terrestrial paradise. No river could be as deep or as wide as the Gulf of Paria; and, from his reading of geographers and theologians, he had come to the conclusion that the earth here was shaped like a woman's breast, with the terrestrial paradise at the top of the nipple. The fresh water in the Gulf of Paria flowed down from this paradise which, because of its situation, could not be approached in a ship and certainly not without the permission of God.

Keeping close to Trinidad, hearing the thunder roll around us out of a blue sky, and watching the lightning play on the hills, we swung in a slow wide arc to the left, so that standing amidships on the port deck we could see our wake quickly subsiding to a dimpled glassiness.

The emigrants gesticulated.

'I hope Immigration keep a eye on these fellers,' Mr Mackay said. 'Trinidad is a sort of second paradise to them, you know. Give them the chance and half of them jump ship right here.'

We took on the pilot. We took on the immigration officials.

'Let them look,' Mr Mackay said, referring to the emigrants. 'We have launches here. No damn rowing-boats.'

Flag fluttering stiffly, the launch marked POLICE in heavy, reassuring white letters raced beside us, its occupants immaculately uniformed.

'It ain't a bad little island, you know,' Mr Mackay said.

'I hear they taking college boys in the police these days,' Philip said.

Port of Spain is a disappointing city from the sea. One sees only trees against the hills of the Northern Range. The tower of Queen's Royal College pierces the greenery; so does the blue bulk of the Salvatori building. At the bauxite loading station at Tembladora the air was yellow with bauxite dust.

We docked. The emigrants massed on deck and choked their way down the gangplank to get a glimpse of Trinidad (and a few, according to Mr Mackay, to stay).

'Let the small islanders go first,' he said.

'The prop, man,' someone whispered in my ear. 'The old propagandist.'

It was Boysie.

In my disembarkation suit and with my typewriter (never to be used), I felt I looked the part.

Correia was in a temper. The ship's agent had not arranged for his aeroplane ticket to British Guiana. His angry voice boomed out over the ship, down the gangplank; and I continued to hear it even when he disappeared into a customs shed, Kripal Singh at his heels, looking respectable and unhappy in his suit, smoking nervously, his studying days over. And that was the last I saw of them. Philip disappeared. The Mackays disappeared. Miss Tull disappeared; seventeen days with the emigrants awaited her.

The sky was pastelled in spectacular shades of scarlet and gold; the palm trees and the saman trees were black against it. The bar was as empty and alien as it had been that afternoon in Southampton. The barman wanted someone to buy him a short-sleeved Aertex shirt. He was negotiating with the lunatic keeper who, already red-faced, was in his tourist clothes: red shirt, straw hat, khaki trousers, sandals, with a camera slung over his shoulder.

We drove out of the dock area. The way was choked with emigrants, many of them Indians who had flown from British Guiana. Emigrants everywhere, and everywhere the people who had come to see them off. Cars everywhere. We drove very slowly. At the gates we were stopped, our passes checked.

A policeman said, 'Will you out your cigarette please?'

I outed it.