THE CLOUDY ISLE

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My Editor held a match to the tobacco in his pipe, inhaled deeply and looked at me.

"I can't understand it," he said, and I could tell from his tone how deeply I had offended him.

"Let me explain . . ."

"NO. NO. NO! There's no explanation." He was furious. "I sent you out there precisely because a situation as difficult and complex as that needed a man like you—or the man I thought you to be. Damn it, that's precisely why I sent you to replace Lawton. Simply because he became involved."

"Ah, yes. But on the wrong side. . . ."

He gestured angrily. "Right side. Wrong side. I'm not interested. What I wanted was an objective analysis. Why this discrimination? Is it purely economic? Or are there such psychological and physical incompatibilities that any other way of living would be impossible? That's what I wanted to know. That's the sort of information I expect from my senior correspondents. Instead, you become partisan, brawl . . . you . . ." Words failed him, and he drew at his pipe in short puffs.

"I'll resign," I offered.

"Resign? My God, I've promised the P.M., M.I.5 and various hand-wringing Civil Servants that you'd be sacked on the spot."

"I apologise," I said. "Yet I don't think that I would or that I could behave differently in a similar situation."

He shrugged. I knew he was becoming calmer and I waited.

"It's strange," he said finally, "how that island seems to get into people's blood. They're never the same after they've been there. Well . . . take a couple of weeks' leave. Get it out of your system."

* * *

I discovered, however, that the only way to get it out of my system was to write it out.

It began when Lee, my wife, and I arrived at dawn at Loqua. The sea and sky were ice-green, laced with silver, and on the horizon a range of cloudy mountains surged upwards through

the mist. Our first glimpse of land—the same now as when a storm driven English sailor had seen it over three hundred years ago and had knelt on deck to weep. It was he who was to write afterwards to his Sovereign:

"And so have I added to your most Gracious Majesty's possessions a jewel of exceeding beauty; an isle of flowers bright as gems; of rivers which sparkle as diamonds; of fragrant fruits; a land girded by emerald seas.

And when I beheld the inhabitants, methought we were come upon a crew shipwrecked and flung upon these shores; so like were they unto ourselves, so white of skin and fair. But as we approached I did perceive them to be a people most rare, such as I have never seen, though thrice have I circumnavigated the globe. For they have eyes of a bright yellow colour and this is general to all—to the men, their women and the children, giving them an appearance both wild and strange. Yet these natives were friendly withal and did give us water and green stuffe and so did save our lives, for which we did render grateful thanks unto our Lord.

"And so it please my Gracious Queen, it be my fancy to call this isle Loqua, for until we were come upon it so timely we did not think to hear the human speech again; thus was the barbarous tongue of these yellow-eyed savages pleasing when they did speak and hail us."

It was an early missionary who named these people the Saffronites (soon corrupted to Saffers) to distinguish them from the Azurites, the blue-eyed colonisers from many lands of the North.

Lawton, my colleague, was waiting for us at the docks. He greeted us brusquely, whirled us through Customs and drove us off through the centre of the city. It was almost like any capital of the world, with its towering skyscrapers, heavy traffic and tense pedestrians. Almost, for there was a difference which made it unique. On either side of every street, off the pavement and yet not on the street, was a double wooden partition, forming a narrow passage about three feet wide and three high. These gangways were thronged with people walking in single file. At every intersection four crude wooden bridges spanned the streets, giving the appearance from the air, I imagined, of a curiously-jointed caterpillar. The lamp-posts too were unusual, for attached to each, about three feet from the

ground, was a basin-like receptacle, fitted with a tap and an outlet pipe and placarded with a large notice: KEEP YOUR CITY CLEAN.

As we stopped at a traffic light, I swivelled round and stared back at the people in the nearest gangway—a corpulent man; two women in headscarves; a small boy; three youths. One of the youths, catching sight of me, called out derisively, and as they all looked up I saw they were all Saffers—with bright yellow eyes. I experienced a moment of kinship with the Elizabethan sailor, for their eyes indeed seemed 'most rare'. Yet soon I was to discover that only this did they have in common. Otherwise they were as varied physically and in their needs and desires as any people anywhere in the world. Even the all-embracing term 'yellow-eyed' was a misnomer, for the colour of their eyes ranged from saffron to topaz and celandine.

Lawton was watching me in the rear-view mirror.

"You know, of course," he said, "the reason for these partitions."

"They seem fantastic and absurd," said Lee.

"No. Neither. They're built because the Azurites get physically sick if they have to mingle in the streets with the Saffers."

"But . . ."

"Let me tell you what happened to me," he interrupted. "I'd been here a week when I saw an elderly Azurite woman being sick, very genteelly, into one of the receptacles. I stopped the car and gave her a lift home. She told me, when she could speak, that she had suddenly looked at the man sitting next to her at a bus-stop and saw to her horror that he was a Saffer, with results as aforesaid."

"What nonsense!"

"I thought so too, at the time. Particularly when we arrived at her house and the door was opened by her Saffer maid into whose arms she fell, gasping, 'I've had such a terrible experience'."

"Well!"

"Ah," said Lawton, trying desperately to explain: "The significant part of the story isn't the ending, but the beginning. She *was* physically sick. That's what you've got to understand."

There seemed to be nothing we could say. Finally I asked: "How did a Saffer happen to be sitting there?"

"They do it deliberately," he answered. "And there's very

little the police can do, even though any Saffers caught at it are sentenced to eighteen months as receptacle cleaners. As soon as an Azurite starts to retch, the Saffer simply slips into the nearest partition and gets away. One Saffer told me that his record was twelve. He had made 12 Azurites retch in one morning."

We hooted with laughter and then saw that Lawton wasn't even smiling. He was actually mumbling something about ". . . have to make allowances for deep-rooted prejudices . . . the law of the land." In a sudden moment of insight, I understood what had happened to him. He had accepted the illogic of the island and he too was lost. He had, in fact, become Loquacious.

After another uncomfortable pause, I said: "I notice that the inner wall of each partition, the one nearest to the pavement, has gaps every few yards."

"Yes. These coincide with the entrances to the shops. You see," and again there was that desperate earnestness, "mingling in shops doesn't bring on nausea."

"Oh, quite."

"Of course, the Saffers have to bob and curtsey before the shopkeepers serve them."

"Of course, of course."

As we turned a corner I saw, coming towards us, a procession of old and very decrepit men, with a uniformed guard at the head and another at the end of the group. Many of these men were weeping openly, making no effort to wipe away the tears which streamed down their cheeks. One appeared to be arguing and calling out to the passers-by. Alongside ran women and children, crying and fondling the men as they walked. As we drew level I saw that they were all Saffers.

"Why are they under arrest?" I asked.

"They're not exactly under arrest," he replied. "It's a very difficult problem, very difficult. As you know, this is a very small island, and a few cities are terribly overcrowded. So an effort has to be made to reduce the congestion."

"So?"

"Well, by law, the Saffers can live in a city only if they work there. This group of men are too old to work, and as they were city born they have no mountain homes to which they can return. . . ."

"It seems stupid to turn them out of one city to send them to the next," said Lee.

"They ar'n't exactly being sent to the next city," said Lawton. "They're . . ."

"Just being turned out of this one," I finished for him. "Tell me, do they, like the elephants, have their own dying grounds?"

He smiled thinly. "Don't think that this problem isn't receiving the attention of the authorities. Everyone agrees that it's THE PROBLEM and you won't meet anyone who feels that this should be allowed to continue. But it's not easy to find a solution which would satisfy everyone."

"It's very simple," said Lee. "Just let them stay in the cities where they were born."

"It's far more complicated than that. It would result in the very congestion we're trying to avoid. Imagine the chaos!"

"Imagine it!" I echoed.

"By God," said Lawton, "It's not as easy as you think. You won't get very far here, if you begin by criticising."

We were now driving along a mountain road, with great sweeps of sea and white beach below us and the cloud-spun mountain above. There was a tang of pine-scented air, and trees blossoming with scarlet candles lined our way. But the scene was marred by the narrow wooden partitions winding with the road. The spanning bridges were, I noticed, more widely spaced—not more than one every two miles.

Finally we arrived at Lawton's house, built high into the mountainside. Lee and I looked with delight at the house, soon to be ours, shored up against the cliff, high above the silky sea.

That afternoon, Lawton took us, at my insistence, to view my "assignment". We left the city and visited a small fishing village where we watched Azurite children playing in the surf, children beautiful with a bloom of love and security.

Then Lawton took us to a wasteland. The mountain was now barely discernible, the ground flat and marshy, and the stunted trees gave an impression of a closeness and a walling-in. Here, surrounded by high wire fences, were slums such as I had never seen, shacks barely three feet above the earth, bespeaking an indescribable destitution. The people were etched in bone, gaunt with hunger. These were the Saffer settlements.

As Lee and I walked about, staring in stunned disbelief, Lawton commented. "The new gates at the entrance are a great improvement," he said.

While getting back into the car we were disconcerted by the sound of loud, merry laughter. A group of Saffer children were laughing at a small boy who was imitating us—the delicate stepping from the car, the open-mouthed astonishment, the silly staring.

"A few years ago they wouldn't have dared", said Lawton.

The drive home was a silent one, until we saw, at the gate of one of the mountain homesteads, a policeman and a man and a woman gesticulating and talking excitedly.

"What . . .?" I asked, my professional nostrils quivering.

"Probably a Saffer mating at the wrong time," said Lawton.

"WHAT!"

"Saffers who 'live-in' as domestic servants are permitted to mate only at certain times; the second Saturday of every month, I think. What you saw was probably an arrest—an impatient husband."

I had a sensation of drowning.

"To prevent congestion?" I asked when I could speak.

"You know," said Lawton, manoeuvring the car into his driveway, "everyone talks about over-population and the propensity of the under-privileged to breed like rabbits. Yet only the Azurites have the honesty to look this problem squarely in the face and to do something about it. They don't just talk. They go ahead with something practical. And if this makes them unpopular in certain quarters, in world councils, they can take it. This you must grant them. They're DOING something."

Later, as we had iced whiskey on the verandah, he gave us some parting advice. "What I feel you should understand," he said, "is that you can't judge anything by the usual standards here. That settlement, for instance. The Saffers have never known anything else. I mean, they'd be unhappy if we tried to force them to live as we do. After all, they were savages when Loqua was colonised."

"The Britons were running around naked when Caesar landed," I said.

He snorted, and the conversation seemed to die.

When Lawton left, Lee and I were entertained, both officially and unofficially, on a scale we had never before experienced. Perhaps because my paper was so respected and respectable, the Azurites felt that I was the one to whom everything should be made known. Never before had I met a people so anxious, so

determined to explain and to make me see their point of view. In self-defence, Lee and I evolved a code which categorised all Azurite conversation. It was very simple:

An Azurite Church Dignitary:	"Our State, of course, is founded on God and the family, but you must understand that we have to keep our corpuscles clean" —MUMBO.
An Azurite Politician:	"My dear fellow, of course, the Saffers have to live, but it's a simple question of multiplication." —JUMBO.
An Azurite Housewife:	"I must say, I'm very good to them." —HUMBO.
Another Politician: (ponderously)	"We're doing all we can, but do you expect us to span three centuries in a single leap?" —SLUMBO.

We had been in Loqua for two months when I came upon four husky Azurites battering and thrashing a Saffer.

"What the hell d'you think you're doing?" I shouted.

One of the assailants turned on me. "Keep out of this," he threatened. "We're teaching this Saffer to respect us. He didn't tug his forelock as he passed us on the way out of this shop. So mind your own . . ."

I punched him on the nose, and as the result of the melée which followed, I spent a week in a nursing home. It was during this week that Lee covered a three hour political meeting for me with the terse report: "MUMBO, JUMBO AND SLUMBO."

The local press played up the fight, with banner headlines: "FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT IN UNSEEMLY FRACAS", "UNWARRANTED INTERFERENCE IN DOMESTIC AFFAIR." My Editor's comment, in a note to me, was brief and pained.

My fall from grace was accelerated when, six weeks later, our Saffer cook walked through a public park on his afternoon off, without his apron and cap, thus causing great discomfort to six elderly Azurite women, taking the air. As the Magistrate said, the worst feature of the case was that there was only one receptacle within reach, with horrible consequences. My

testimony, that I had given the cook permission to doff his uniform, was coldly received.

Then, within six months, I became, as my Editor said with commendable understatement, 'involved'. Let me set down the incident here, stripped of the sensational detail with which the world press embroidered it.

The Azurite police, on a routine mating raid, heard unmistakable sounds coming from a maid's room. Bursting in, they found that the participants were the Azurite son of the household and the Saffer maid. He was allowed to go free, as his ancestors had shed their blood to ensure that their descendants would suffer no limitation of their appetites. But when the maid was sentenced, not only to imprisonment, but to be branded, I intervened. I abducted her, and she was hidden by the Saffer underground. Lee flew out by the first plane, missing the police dragnet by an hour. I took refuge with our Consul; but when he reluctantly prepared to hand me over, the underground went into action once more. I cannot, of course, give any details of the way in which I left Loqua.

* * *

I had written this when Lee and I returned from our leave, but I felt the story was incomplete. It needed a footnote. This was supplied shortly afterwards by the Azurite Minister of Public Relations, whom I met at a Press Conference in London. He sought me out.

"Remember," he said, bitterly. "If we Azurites one day lose Loqua to the Saffers, it will be because of you and your ilk—with your lies, your distortions and your interference in our affairs. Just remember it!"

I assured him I would.