

E. R. BRAITHWAITE

From
TO SIR, WITH LOVE

I did not become a teacher out of any sense of vocation; mine was no considered decision in the interests of youthful humanity or the spread of planned education. It was a decision forced on me by the very urgent need to eat; it was a decision brought about by a chain of unhappy experiences which began about a week after my demobilization from the Royal Air Force in 1945.

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At the Demobilization Center, after the usual round of Medical inspection, return of Service equipment, and issue of allowances and civilian clothing, I had been interviewed by an officer whose job it was to advise on careers. On learning that I had a science degree and varied experience in engineering technology, he expressed the opinion that I would have no difficulty in finding a good civilian job. Industry was re-organizing itself for post-war production and there was already an urgent demand for qualified technologists, especially in the field of electronics, which was my special interest. I had been very much encouraged by this, as I had made a point of keeping up with new trends and developments by borrowing books through the Central Library System, and by subscribing to various technical journals and magazines, so I felt quite confident of my ability to hold down a good job. He had given me a letter of introduction to the Higher Appointments Office in Tavistock

Square, London, and suggested that I call on them as soon as I had settled myself in "digs" and had enjoyed a short holiday.

While operating from the R.A.F. Station at Hornchurch in Essex during the war, I had met and been frequently entertained by an elderly couple who lived not far away at Brentwood; I had kept in touch with them ever since and had promised to stay with them after demobilization. I now went to live with them, and soon felt completely at home and at peace. They both professed to be atheists, but, judging by their conduct, they exhibited in their daily lives all those attributes which are fundamental to real, active Christianity. They were thoughtful for my comfort in every way, and shared many of my interests and pursuits with a zest which might well have been envied by much younger people. Together we went down to Torquay for a two-week holiday and returned to Brentwood completely refreshed.

Shortly after our return, I visited the Appointments Office, where I was interviewed by two courteous, impersonal men who questioned me closely on my academic background, service career and experience in industry. I explained that after graduating I had worked for two years as a Communications Engineer for the Standard Oil Company at their Aruba Refinery, earning enough to pay for post-graduate study in England. At the end of the interview they told me that I would be notified of any vacancies suitable to my experience and qualifications. Two weeks later I received a letter from the Appointments Office, together with a list of three firms, each of which had vacancies for qualified Communications Engineers. I promptly wrote to each one, stating my qualifications and experience, and soon received very encouraging replies, each with an invitation to an interview. Everything was working very smoothly and I felt on top of the world.

I was nervous as I stood in front of the Head Office in Mayfair; this firm had a high international reputation and the thought of being associated with it added to my excitement. Anyway, I reasoned, this was the first of the interviews, and if I boomed here there were still two chances remaining. The uniformed commissionaire courteously opened the large doors

for me, and as I approached the receptionist's desk she smiled quite pleasantly.

"Good morning." Her brows were raised in polite inquiry.

"Good morning," I replied. "My name is Braithwaite. I am here for an interview with Mr. Symonds."

I had taken a great deal of care with my appearance that morning. I was wearing my best suit with the right shirt and tie and pocket handkerchief; my shoes were smartly polished, my teeth were well brushed and I was wearing my best smile—all this had passed the very critical inspection of Mr. and Mrs. Belmont with whom I lived. Yet the receptionist's smile suddenly wavered and disappeared. She reached for a large diary and consulted it as if to verify my statement, then she picked up the telephone and, cupping her hand around the mouthpiece as if for greater privacy, spoke rapidly into it, watching me furtively the while.

"Will you come this way?" She set off down a wide corridor, her back straight and stiff with a disapproval which was echoed in the tap-tap of her high heels. As I walked behind her I thought: normally she'd be swinging it from side to side; now it's stiff with anger.

At the end of the corridor we entered an automatic lift: the girl maintained a silent hostility and avoided looking at me. At the second floor we stepped out into a passage on to which several rooms opened; pausing briefly outside one of them she said "In there", and quickly retreated to the lift. I knocked on the door and entered a spacious room where four men were seated at a large table.

One of them rose, walked around to shake hands with me and introduce his colleagues, and then indicated a chair in which I seated myself. After a brief inquiry into my place of birth and R.A.F. service experience, they began to question me closely on telecommunications and the development of electronics in that field. The questions were studied, deliberate, and suddenly the nervousness which had plagued me all the morning disappeared; now I was confident, at ease with a familiar subject. They questioned me on theory, equipment, circuits, operation; on my training in the U.S.A., and on my experience

there and in South America. They were thorough, but I was relaxed now; the years of study, field work and post-graduate research were about to pay off, and I knew that I was holding my own, and even enjoying it.

And then it was all over. Mr. Symonds, the gentleman who had welcomed me, leaned back in his chair and looked from one to another of his associates. They nodded to him, and he said:

"Mr. Braithwaite, my associates and I are completely satisfied with your replies and feel sure that in terms of qualification, ability and experience, you are abundantly suited to the post we have in mind. But we are faced with a certain difficulty. Employing you would mean placing you in a position of authority over a number of our English employees, many of whom have been with us a very long time, and we feel that such an appointment would adversely affect the balance of good relationship which has always obtained in this firm. We could not offer you that post without the responsibility, neither would we ask you to accept the one or two other vacancies of a different type which do exist, for they are unsuitable for someone with your high standard of education and ability. So, I'm afraid, we will not be able to use you." At this he rose, extending his hand in the courtesy of dismissal.

I felt drained of strength and thought; yet somehow I managed to leave that office, navigate the passage, lift and corridor, and walk out of the building into the busy sunlit street. I had just been brought face to face with something I had either forgotten or completely ignored for more than six exciting years—my black skin. It had not mattered when I volunteered for aircrew service in 1940, it had not mattered during the period of flying training or when I received my wings and I was posted to a squadron; it had not mattered in the hectic uncertainties of operational flying, of living and loving from day to day, brothered to men who like myself had no tomorrow and could not afford to fritter away today on the absurdities of prejudice; it had not mattered when, uniformed and winged, I visited theaters and dance-halls, pubs and private houses.

I had forgotten about my black face during those years. I saw

it daily yet never noticed its color. I was an airman in flying kit while on His Majesty's business, smiled at, encouraged, welcomed by grateful civilians in bars or on the street, who saw not me, but the uniform and its relationship to the glorious, undying "Few." Yes, I had forgotten about my skin when I had so eagerly discussed my post-war prospects with the Careers Officer and the Appointments people; I had quite forgotten about it as I jauntily entered that grand, imposing building. . . .

Now, as I walked sadly away, I consciously averted my eyes from the sight of my face reflected fleetingly in the large plate glass shop windows. Disappointment and resentment were a solid bitter rising lump inside me; I hurried into the nearest public lavatory and was violently sick.

Relieved, I walked about, somewhat aimlessly, and tried to pull myself together. The more I thought of it the more I realized that the whole interview had been a waste of time. They had agreed on their decision before I had walked into that office; the receptionist had told them about my black face, and all that followed, had been a cruel, meaningless charade. I stopped suddenly, struck by a new realization. Those folk must have looked at my name on the application forms and immediately assumed that I was white; there was nothing about the name Braithwaite to indicate my color, so the flowery letters and pleasant invitation to interview were really intended for the white applicant they imagined me to be. God, how they must have hated me for the trick I had so unwittingly played on them!

Acting on a sudden impulse, I went into a telephone booth and in turn called the two remaining firms. I explained that I wanted to let them know that I was a Negro, but would be very happy to attend for the interview if my color was no barrier to possible employment. In each case I was thanked for telephoning, but informed that the post had already been filled and it had been their intention to write me to that effect. So that was that. Angered and disgusted, I caught a train to take me as quickly as possible to the only place in all Britain where I knew I would feel safe and wanted—the Belmont home in Brentwood.

Belief in an ideal dies hard. I had believed in an ideal for all

the twenty-eight years of my life—the ideal of the British Way of Life.

It had sustained me when as a youth in a high school of nearly all white students I had had to work harder or run faster than they needed to do in order to make the grade. It had inspired me in my College and University years when ideals were dragged in the dust of disillusionment following the Spanish Civil War. Because of it I had never sought to acquire American citizenship, and when, after graduation and two years of field work in Venezuela, I came to England for post-graduate study in 1939, I felt that at long last I was personally identified with the hub of fairness, tolerance and all the freedoms. It was therefore without any hesitation that I volunteered for service with the Royal Air Force in 1940, willing and ready to lay down my life for the preservation of the ideal which had been my lode-star. But now that self-same ideal was gall and wormwood in my mouth.

The majority of Britons at home have very little appreciation of what that intangible yet amazingly real and invaluable export—the British Way of Life—means to colonial people; and they seem to give little thought to the fantastic phenomenon of races so very different from themselves in pigmentation, and widely scattered geographically, assiduously identifying themselves with British loyalties, beliefs and traditions. This attitude can easily be observed in the way in which the colored Colonial will quote the British systems of Law, Education and Government, and will adopt fashions in dress and social codes, even though his knowledge of these things has depended largely on secondhand information. All this is especially true of the West Indian Colonials, who are predominantly the descendants of slaves who were forever removed from the cultural influence of their forefathers, and who lived, worked, and reared their children through the rigors of slavery and the growing pains of gradual enfranchisement, according to the only example they knew—the British Way.

The ties which bind them to Britain are strong, and this is very apparent on each occasion of a Royal visit, when all of them young and old, rich and poor, join happily together in

unrestrained and joyful demonstrations of welcome. Yes, it is wonderful to be British—until one comes to Britain. By dint of careful saving or through hard-won scholarships many of them arrive in Britain to be educated in the Arts and Sciences and in the varied processes of legislative and administrative government. They come, bolstered by a firm, conditioned belief that Britain and the British stand for all that is best in both Christian and Democratic terms; in their naiveté they ascribe these high principles to all Britons, without exception.

I had grown up British in every way. Myself, my parents and my parents' parents, none of us knew or could know any other way of living, of thinking, of being; we knew no other cultural pattern, and I had never heard any of my forebears complain about being British. As a boy I was taught to appreciate English literature, poetry and prose, classical and contemporary, and it was absolutely natural for me to identify myself with the British heroes of the adventure stories against the villains of the piece who were invariably non-British and so, to my boyish mind, more easily capable of villainous conduct. The more selective reading of my college and university life was marked by the same predilection for English literature, and I did not hesitate to defend my preferences to my American colleagues. In fact, all the while in America, I vigorously resisted any criticism of Britain or British policy, even when in the privacy of my own room, closer examination clearly proved the reasonableness of such criticism.

It is possible to measure with considerable accuracy the rise and fall of the tides, or the behavior in space of objects invisible to the naked eye. But who can measure the depths of disillusionment? Within the somewhat restricted sphere of an academic institution, the Colonial student learns to heal, debate, to paint and to think; outside that sphere he has to meet the indignities and rebuffs of intolerance, prejudice and hate. After qualification and establishment in practice or position, the trials and successes of academic life are half forgotten in the hurly-burly of living, but the hurts are not so easily forgotten. Who can predict the end result of a landlady's coldness, a waiter's discourtesy, or the refusal of a young woman to dance?

The student of today may be the Prime Minister of tomorrow. Might not some future important political decision be influenced by a remembered slight or festering resentment? Is it reasonable to expect that those sons of Nigeria, the West Indies, British Guiana, Honduras, Malaya, Ceylon, Hong Kong and others who are constitutionally agitating for self-government, are completely unaffected by experiences of intolerance suffered in Britain and elsewhere?

To many in Britain a Negro is a "darky" or a "nigger" or a "black"; he is identified, in their minds, with inexhaustible brute strength; and often I would hear the remark "working like a nigger" or "laboring like a black" used to emphasize some occasion of sustained effort. They expect of him a courteous subservience and contentment with a lowly state of menial employment and slum accommodation. It is true that here and there one sees Negroes as doctors, lawyers or talented entertainers, but they are somehow considered "different" and not to be confused with the mass.

I am a Negro, and what had happened to me at that interview constituted, to my mind, a betrayal of faith. I had believed in freedom, in the freedom to live in the kind of dwelling I wanted, providing I was able and willing to pay the price; and in the freedom to work at the kind of profession for which I was qualified, without reference to my racial or religious origins. All the big talk of Democracy and Human Rights seemed as spurious as the glib guarantees with which some manufacturers underwrite their products in the confident hope that they will never be challenged. The Briton at home takes no responsibility for the protestations and promises made in his name by British officials overseas.

I reflected on my life in the U.S.A. There, when prejudice is felt, it is open, obvious, blatant; the white man makes his position very clear, and the black man fights those prejudices with equal openness and fervor, using every constitutional device available to him. The rest of the world in general and Britain in particular are prone to point an angrily critical finger at American intolerance, forgetting that in its short history as a nation it has granted to its Negro citizens more opportunities for

advancement and betterment, *per capita*, than any other nation in the world with an indigenous Negro population. Each violent episode, though greatly to be deplored, has invariably preceded some change, some improvement in the American Negro's position. The things they have wanted were important enough for them to fight and die for, and those who died did not give their lives in vain. Furthermore, American Negroes have been generally established in communities in which their abilities as laborer, artisan, doctor, lawyer, scientist, educator and entertainer have been directly or indirectly of benefit to that community; in terms of social and religious intercourse they have been largely independent of white people.

In Britain I found things to be very different. I have yet to meet a single English person who has actually admitted to anti-Negro prejudice; it is even generally believed that no such thing exists here. A Negro is free to board any bus or train and sit anywhere, provided he has paid the appropriate fare; the fact that many people might pointedly avoid sitting near him is casually overlooked. He is free to seek accommodation in any licensed hotel or boarding house—the courteous refusal which frequently follows is never ascribed to prejudice. The betrayal I now felt was greater because it had been perpetrated with the greatest of charm and courtesy.

I realized at that moment that I was British, but evidently not a Briton, and that fine differentiation was now very important; I would need to re-examine myself and my whole future in terms of this new appraisal.