A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA

(THE INNOCENT VOYAGE)

by RICHARD HUGHES

Introduction by ISABEL PATERSON

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A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA

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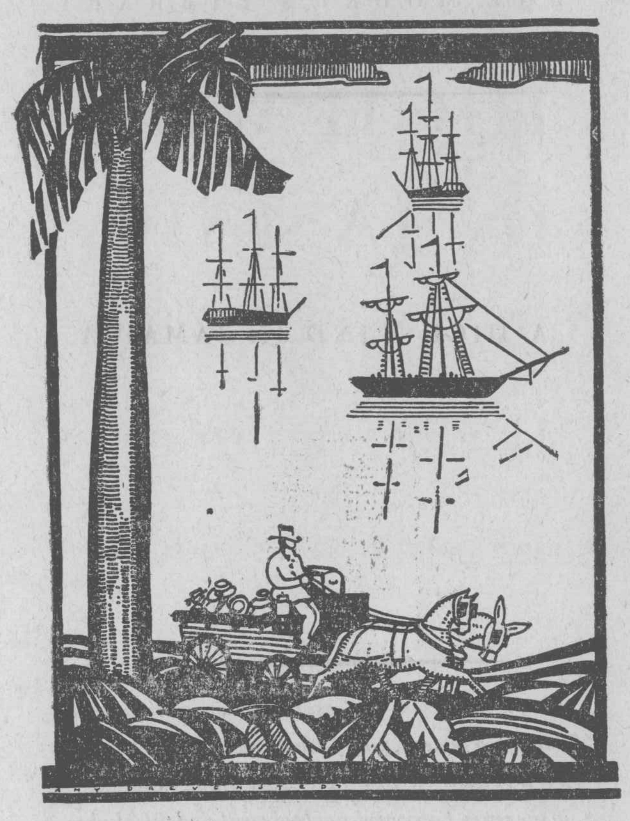

THE FIRST STAGE OF THEIR JOURNEY WAS BY LAND, TO MONTEGO BAY

Preface

On a day otherwise unremembered, *The Innocent Voyage* reposed in a pile of new books at my elbow for several hours, as unsuspected as a stick of dynamite wrapped in gilt paper. The opening chapter had been printed in the *Century Magazine*, with the title *High Wind in Jamaica*. Thus detached, it appeared to be complete; and might be taken for a factual narrative, composed from first-hand accounts, perhaps old letters or journals. It told of a night of terror endured by an English family, the Bas-Thorntons, on a Jamaica plantation. Father, mother and half a dozen children huddled in the cellar, while a hurricane all but unroofed the house. It made a lasting impression of the physical and psychic effects

of a tropic tempest. The presence of the children seemed merely incidental.

While the book lay there meekly awaiting further investigation, a telephone call from Ruth Raphael brought the request that it might be read that evening, if convenient. The author, Richard Hughes, was in New York; and Ruth had an amiable project for tea the next afternoon. It does help to have read an author's book before meeting him. And it is usual to say that one sat up till morning with any volume of exceptional merit. This testimonial is not in my power to bestow, since a novel of average length, absorbed attentively and without omissions, lasts me no more than two or three hours. But I read *The Innocent Voyage* with mounting and mixed emotions. A kind of pleasurable horror, or shocked delight.

In the strictest sense of the word, *The Innocent Voyage* is shocking. It plucks at the roots of one's nerves. It makes one's heart turn

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over, and shakes the bases of logic, leaving a sense of imminent unbalance. Perhaps an earthquake does the same, destroying the unconscious security with which we go our pedestrian way. The earth, of course, is there for us to stand upon. If it isn't going to stay put, where are we?

Now this disturbance is not produced by any description of physical violence. The hurricane is merely an introduction. Thereafter the terror lurks in what doesn't happen. One is suspended over the abyss by a thread which is not allowed to break. But it could break. In life, it does sometimes break. That we know. And here it is brought home inescapably, as a part of personal experience.

At the time, trying to laugh it off, and under the necessity of summarizing the plot, it occurred to me to say that it is an account of the melancholy fate of a crew of well-meaning pirates who fell into the clutches of half a dozen children. To my bewilderment,

very serious critics subsequently expounded this view very seriously.

Certainly it is concerned with children and pirates. After the hurricane, the Bas-Thorntons sent their children to England for schooling and for safety. At this period, which must have been about a century ago, there were still a few down-at-heel buccaneers marauding languidly in West Indian waters, and making a very poor living at it. Some of these boarded the ship on which the children were embarked. For convenience, while the looting was in progress, the children were removed to the pirate ship. There they remained, by accident, to the vast embarrassment of their captors. Months elapsed before the pirates could think of any humane way to get rid of their unwelcome passengers. Meantime there was no lack of incident, tragic, comic, grotesque. But throughout it is the might-have-been, the moral implications, that stop the breath.

The sharp contrast inherent in the situation

points a profound study of the growth of consciousness in the mind of a child, its difficult and partly reluctant transition from a juvenile to an adult scale of values. This seems to have wrought confusion to readers, who became actually indignant at the children. Argument raged whether children really are like that. Parents were obscurely wounded. They denied in particular that it was possible that several children, all under the age of twelve, should not observe, discuss or mourn for the absence of one of their number. Little monsters. . . .

The fact that to children every occurrence is arbitrary, that they are wholly at the disposal of their elders, whose edicts are clothed with the sacred character of absolute authority, not to be questioned without calling down rebuke, seems to have been overlooked. Having been taken away from the plantation which constituted their sole point of reference, bundled onto a ship, and informed that

they were bound for some dim unknown place called England, one ship was no more surprising to them than another. After a short stay in a strange port, little John was no longer with them. But they were already separated from their parents; how should they know what else to expect? The eldest child, Emily, had a vague apprehension, sufficient to silence her. She enjoined the other children not to speak of John. When in doubt, a child learns to say nothing.

On the intellectual plane, it is true that young children are amoral. They have only two rules of conduct: instinct, and the obedience enforced upon them by the mysterious beings who tower above them like Olympian deities. Unfolding intelligence at first serves merely to get them into trouble. It leads them to investigations and experiments which are bound to be unsuccessful, being based upon inadequate information and unripe judgment. Viewed objectively, and disregarding their

charm, they are nuisances and bores. To a harassed guardian, original sin is a convenient definition of the motive of their activities. Translated into terms of impulse and environmental resistance, original sin is a fact. All animals, man included, seek satisfaction of the primal appetites: they must have nourishment, shelter, and free muscular play. Also there is the social need for approval and affection. Frustration evokes anger and all the other elements of the seven deadly sins. But normal children cannot reasonably be called monsters. They obey natural law. They are not even anti-social, since they adapt themselves to discipline as well as they know how. Wickedness involves knowledge of the nature of good and evil. The Bas-Thornton children were quite innocent.

To regard them as monsters is a rather curious confession, an adult evasion of responsibility. It is to expect that children should learn without being taught, discriminate

without experience, and save themselves by their own wits.

Miss Rebecca West adumbrated this in her critical comment. She suggested that children have been made the emotional scapegoats of the modern conscience, as women were assigned the funtion of "vessels of iniquity" by early Christian theologians of the ascetic school. Miss West cited in support of this theory the works of André Gide and other writers with a leaning toward the perverse.

It may be so, though we should not have read any such intention into what Richard Hughes wrote.

What he seems to stress is the complete disparity between the two worlds of childhood and maturity, which are materially the same world. The difference is psychological, and results in wholly different standards.

Those of the Bas-Thornton children who escaped unharmed from their piratical excursion, would remember most clearly the two

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pigs they played with on the pirate ship, and the monkey which they emulated. To Emily Bas-Thornton the terror of the hurricane was epitomized in the death of the family cat. Being unaware of the bloody business of the pirates, Emily found their society agreeable, until one of them ordered her to stop sliding down the deck because she would wear out her drawers. She was unable to believe her ears. The mention of drawers in mixed company was an unthinkable indecency. After being rescued, she was equally outraged by the suggestion of a refined young lady, that Emily should address her by her first name. It was very near to sacrilege.

The implicit shudder is not wholly derived from the unsuspecting helplessness of the children against the powers of evil. A rather ragged illusion of justice might be patched up by calling in heaven to compensate such tender victims, with the assurance of divine vengeance upon the villains. But what is to be said

of the principles of the universe, of man's position in the divine scheme, when the pirates are hanged because they yielded to their kindlier impulses? Furthermore, they are brought to the gallows, for a murder actually committed by one of the children, and on the testimony of the child who did the deed! There is also the irreconcilable fact that the children were fond of the pirates. Emily had no notion what interpretation would be put upon her agonized protest against being forced to remember the occasion on which she had been equally forced to kill a man, without volition, without understanding. What is God to do about Emily and the pirate, on the Last Day?

This awful distribution of guilt, and continual imminence of peril, not bodily danger alone, but spiritual destruction, is so inescapably brought home by the logic of events, that there is no need for the author to labor the point. He does not philosophize; he presents the great problems in terms of life.

The genesis of such a book is purely intellectual, and the form is bound to be largely a matter of accident. Richard Hughes has explained that the first suggestion came to him from "a page or two of foolscap, on which an old lady had described how she, as a child, had been on board the brig *Zephyr* when it was captured by pirates off the Cuban coast. The children had actually spent an hour or so on board the pirate vessel, where they had been treated with every kindness before being returned to their own ship. But suppose, I thought, they had never been returned to the brig; and instead, the pirates had somehow been landed with this uncomfortable booty? The idea took fire in my mind. I looked up the records of the case; and even found an account afterwards written by the mate of the *Zephyr*, who was carried off by the pirates and lived with them for two years."

Ford Madox Ford, in his *Return to Yesterday*, identifies the historical incident with the

career of Aaron Smith, "the last pirate who was ever tried at the Old Bailey." An account of the trial, to which he was directed by Dr. Garnett in the British Museum, supplied Ford and Joseph Conrad with the elements of the plot of *Romance*, on which they collaborated. A comparison of the two stories, drawn from the same source, indicates the transforming power of the creative imagination. Mr. Ford remarks: "I had made him (Aaron Smith) an agreeable person who ended up as a country gentleman. Mr. Hughes made him a lousy and lachrymose scoundrel who was duly hanged in chains on Thames Bank at Gallions Reach." And Mr. Ford adds that he considers *The Innocent Voyage* "the best thing that had come out of Wales or the British Empire since the war."

Five years elapsed before Mr. Hughes was ready to work out completely the idea of *The Innocent Voyage*. It was begun in Wales, and brooded over during a six-month sojourn on

an Adriatic island; but twelve months went to the writing of the first chapter, and it was finished in an old farmhouse in Connecticut. So it happened that it was published over here; the American edition is the first edition.

Mr. Hughes was in the United States not as a visiting celebrity; he came over obscurely and uncomfortably in the steerage, moved by a desire to see the world. He has been here three times in the course of his peregrinations. His is a restless spirit, combining the elements of a mixed inheritance. His family was of Welsh extraction, of that adventurous strain which followed the Tudors to the wider field of English life. They exchanged their Welsh nobility for the lot of English country gentlemen, and furnished several admirals to the British Navy. Yet after three hundred years Mr. Hughes returned to Wales as to his home. Wales was "the right place." There he keeps a small cottage as a point of departure for his wanderings. But the scope of his experience is rather re-

markable. He has roamed through the United States in a flivver, taken part in Balkan conspiracies, camped with the tribesmen of Morocco. Yet he always meant to be a writer; and he thinks these escapes were necessitated by the intense pressure incident to writing. "From an early age," he confessed, "I have been under a sort of compulsion to write. . . . I do not think it was before six that I really decided to be a writer by profession—or, at any rate, decided that my main purpose in life was to be writing, for I never then expected to be able to make a living out of it."

He had, to begin with, the inestimable advantage of knowing that there is such a craft as writing; that it is something more than laying so many words end to end on paper. One grandfather was "a playwright, a wit, and a bankrupt"; other members of the family had produced books. The youthful Richard Hughes was always clearly informed that there was an absolute distinction between the

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