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RICHARD HUGHES

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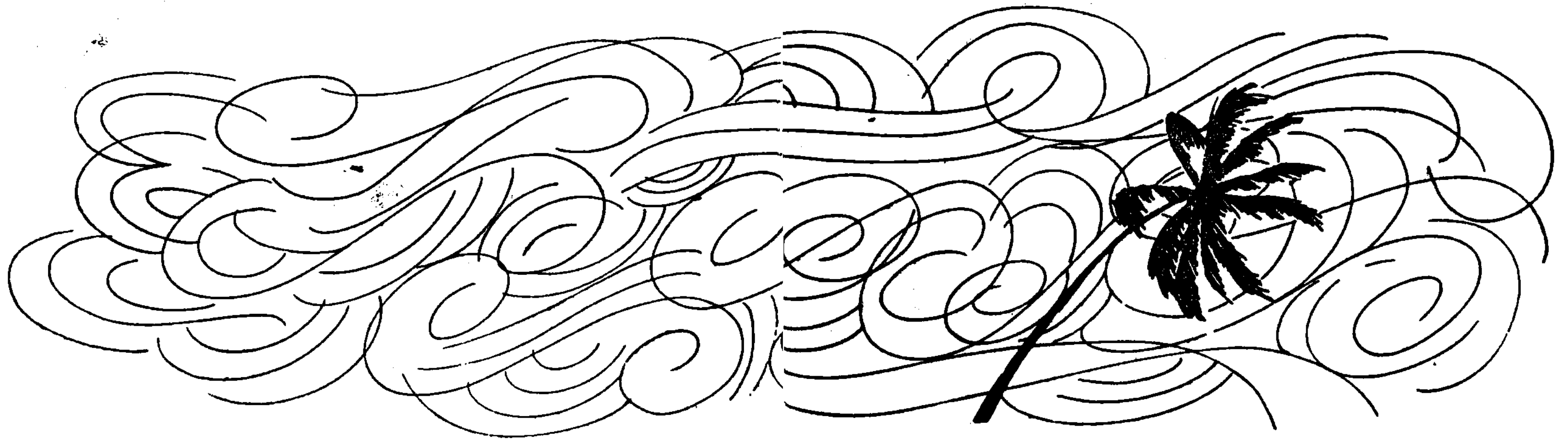
A High Wind in Jamaica



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DANGER

A NOTE BY BURTON RASCOE

A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA (*The Innocent Voyage*) is open to many interpretations, because it is that rare flower, that almost freak or sport in literature, an entirely original product of the subconscious mind, given symmetry and coherence, form and content, beauty and actuality by talent of a most unusually high order. The reader will get from this book precisely what he is able to bring to it. Which is true of all the great allegories in literature from Genesis to *Jurgen*.

I have heard the children in *A High Wind in Jamaica* described variously as natural and as abnormal, as charming and as bestial, as just like children in real life and as creatures of a perverted imagination. I have heard the book described as though it were a clinical report in psychopathology and again as though it were a sweet little nursery tale about pirates. Well, perhaps it is all these things and the children are all the things they have been described as being. But I have heard no one who has read the book speak of it except in those terms which indicate an original and provocative work of genius.

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It is a topsy-turvy world that Richard Hughes has created—if you do not divest your mind of the literary patterns your reading has given you in the past. The pirates are not bloodthirsty and ferocious; and innocent children, in effect, take them captive and subject them to the most complete loss of liberty—the loss of liberty which, as in life, is brought about by the inner compulsion, in this case the instinctive obligation, to feed and care for the young. Yet everything in this world Richard Hughes has created is logical and natural and lifelike. This is because, I suspect, that more than most of us Richard Hughes has retained a memory of how the mind of a child works. Or perhaps because he still retains, for all his adult sophistication and talent, for all his poetic genius and for all his experience in the world, many of the mental qualities of a child.

That *A High Wind in Jamaica* will take its place among the strange, individual, beautiful and subtle works of the imagination and will permanently remain there I have no doubt whatever. It is one of the books that belong to Time. That is to say, in my opinion it is a classic.

BURTON RASCOE

January 18, 1930

CHAPTER ONE

One of the fruits of Emancipation in the West Indian islands is the number of ruins, either attached to the houses that remain or within a stone's throw of them: ruined slaves' quarters, ruined sugar-grinding houses, ruined boiling houses; often ruined mansions that were too expensive to maintain. Earthquake, fire, rain, and deadlier vegetation did their work quickly.

One scene is very clear in my mind, in Jamaica. There was a vast stone-built house called Derby Hill (where the Parkers lived). It had been the centre of a very prosperous plantation. With Emancipation, like many others, that went *bung*. The sugar buildings fell down. Bush smothered the cane and guinea-grass. The field Negroes left their cottages in a body, to be somewhere less disturbed by even the possibility of work. Then the house Negroes' quarters burnt down, and the three remaining faithful servants occupied the mansion. The two heiresses of all this, The Misses Parker, grew old; and were by education incapable. And the scene is this. coming to Derby Hill on some business or other, and wading waist-deep in bushes up to

the front door, now lashed permanently open by a rank plant. The jalousies of the house had been all torn down, and then supplanted as darkeners, by powerful vines: and out of this crumbling half-vegetable gloom an old Negress peered, wrapped in filthy brocade. The two old Miss Parkers lived in bed, for the Negroes had taken away all their clothes: they were nearly starved. Drinking-water was brought, in two cracked Worcester cups and three cocoanut shells on a silver salver. Presently one of the heiresses persuaded her tyrants to lend her a print dress, and came and pottered about in the mess half-heartedly: tried to wipe the old blood and feathers of slaughtered chickens from a gilt-and-marble table: tried to talk sensibly: tried to wind an ormolu clock: and then gave it up and mooned away back to bed. Not long after this, I believe, they were both starved altogether to death. Or, if that were hardly possible in so prolific a country, perhaps given ground glass—rumour varied. At any rate, they died.

That is the sort of scene which makes a deep impression on the mind; far deeper than the ordinary, less romantic, everyday thing, which shows the real estate of an island in the statistical sense. Of course, even in the transition period one only found melodrama like this in rare patches. More truly typical was Ferndale, for instance, an estate about fifteen miles away from Derby Hill. Here only the overseer's house remained: the Big House had altogether collapsed and been smothered over. It consisted of a ground floor of stone, given over to goats and the children, and a first floor of wood, the inhabited part, reached from outside by a double flight of wooden steps. When the earthquakes came the upper part only slid about a little, and could be jacked back into position with big levers. The roof was of shingles: after very dry weather it leaked

like a sieve, and the first few days of the rainy season would be spent in a perpetual general-post of beds and other furniture to escape the drips, until the wood swelled.

The people who lived there at the time I have in mind were called Bas-Thornton—not natives of the Island, "Creoles," but a family from England. Mr. Bas-Thornton had a business of some kind in St. Anne's, and used to ride there every day on a mule. He had such long legs that his stunted mount made him look rather ridiculous: and being quite as temperamental as a mule himself, a quarrel between the two was generally worth watching.

Close to the dwelling were the ruined grinding and boiling houses. These two are never quite cheek by jowl: the grinding house is set on higher ground, with a water-wheel to turn the immense iron vertical rollers. From these the cane juice runs down a wedge-shaped trough to the boiling house, where a Negro stands and rinses a little lime wash into it with a grass brush to make it granulate. Then it is emptied into big copper vats, over furnaces burning faggots and *trash*, or squeezed-out cane. "There a few Negroes stand, skimming the poppling vats with long-handled copper ladles, while their friends sit round, eating sugar or chewing trash, in a mist of hot vapour." What they skim off oozes across the floor with an admixture of a good deal of filth—insects, even rats, and whatever sticks to Negroes' feet—into another basin, thence to be distilled into rum.

This, at any rate, is how it used to be done. I know nothing of modern methods—nor if there are any, never having visited the island since 1860, which is a long time ago now.

But long before that, even, all this was over at Ferndale: the big copper vats were overturned, and up in the

grinding house the three great rollers lay about loose. No water reached it: the stream had gone about its own business elsewhere. The Bas-Thornton children used to crawl into the cut-well through the vent, among dead leaves and the wreck of the wheel. There, one day, they found a wildcat's nest, with the mother away. The kittens were tiny, and Emily tried to carry them home in her pinafore; but they bit and scratched so fiercely, right through her thin frock, that she was very glad—except for pride—that they all escaped but one. This one, Tom, grew up; though he was never really tamed. Later he begat several litters on an old tame cat they had, Kitty Cranbrook; and the only survivor of this progeny, Tabby, became rather a famous cat in his way. (But Tom soon took to the jungle altogether.) Tabby was faithful, and a good swimmer, which he would do for pleasure, sculling around the bathing-pool behind the children, giving an occasional yowl of excitement. Also, he had mortal sport with snakes: would wait for a rattler or a black-snake like a mere mouse, drop on it from a tree or somewhere and fight it to death. Once he got bitten, and they all wept bitterly, expecting to see a spectacular death-agony; but he just went off into the bush and probably ate something, for he came back in a few days quite cock-a-hoop and as ready to eat snakes as ever.

Red-headed John's room was full of rats: he used to catch them in big gins, and then let them go for Tabby to dispatch. Once the cat was so impatient he seized trap and all and caterwauled off into the night banging it on the stones and sending up showers of sparks. Again he returned in a few days, very sleek and pleased: but John never saw his trap again.

Another plague of his were the bats, which also infested

his room in hundreds. Mr. Bas-Thornton could crack a stockwhip, and used to kill a bat on the wing with it most neatly. But the din this made in that little box of a room at midnight was infernal: earsplitting cracks, and the air already full of the tiny penetrating squeaks of the vermin.

It was a kind of paradise for English children to come to, whatever it might be for their parents: especially at that time, when no one lived in at all a wild way at home. Here, one had to be a little ahead of the times: or decadent, whichever you like to call it. The difference between boys and girls, for instance, had to be left to look after itself. Long hair would have made the evening search for grass-ticks and nits interminable: Emily and Rachel had their hair cut short, and were allowed to do everything the boys did: to climb trees, swim, and trap animals and birds. They even had two pockets in their frocks.

It was round the bathing pool their life centred, more than the house. Every year, when the rains were over, a dam was built across the stream, so that all through the dry season there was quite a large pool to swim in. There were trees all round: enormous fluffed cotton trees, with coffee trees between their paws, and, in contrast to the general shapeless enormousness of the vegetation, delicate log-wood, and gorgeous red and green peppers: amongst them, the pool was almost completely shaded. Emily and John set tree-springs in them—Lame-foot Sam taught them how. Cut a bendy stick, and tie a string to one end. Then sharpen the other, so that it can impale a fruit as bait. Just at the base of this point flatten it a little, and bore a hole through the flat part. Cut a little peg that will just stick in the mouth of this hole. Then make a loop in the end of the string. Bend the stick, as in stringing a bow, till the loop will thread through the little hole, and jam it

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with the peg, along which the loop should lie spread. Bait the point, and hang it in a tree among the twigs: the bird alights on the peg to peck the fruit, the peg falls out, the loop whips tight round its ankles: then away up out of the water like pink predatory monkeys, and decide by "Eena, deena, dina, do," or some such rigmarole, whether to twist its neck or let it go free—thus the excitement and suspense, both for child and bird, can be prolonged even beyond the moment of capture.

It was only natural that Emily should have great ideas of improving the Negroes. They were, of course, Christians, so there was nothing to be done about their morals: nor were they in need of soup, or knitted things; but they were sadly ignorant. After a good deal of negotiation they consented in the end to let her teach Little Jim to read: but she had no success. Also she had a passion for catching house-lizards without their dropping their tails off, which they do when frightened: it wanted endless patience to get them whole and unalarmed into a match box. Catching green grass-lizards was also very delicate. She would sit and whistle, like Orpheus, till they came out of their crannies and showed their emotion by puffing out their pink throats: then, very gently, she would lasso them with a long blade of grass. Her room was full of these and other pets, some alive, others probably dead. She also had tame fairies; and a familiar, or oracle, the White Mouse with an Elastic Tail, who was always ready to settle any point in question, and whose rule was a rule of iron—especially over Rachel, Edward, and Laura, the little ones (or Liddlies, as they came to be known in the family). To Emily, his interpreter, he allowed of course certain privileges: and with John, who was older than Emily, he quite wisely did not interfere.

He was omnipresent; the fairies were more localized, living in a small hole in the hill guarded by two dagger-plants.

The best fun at the bathing-pool was had with a big forked log. John would sit astride the main stem, and the others pushed him about by the two prongs. The little ones, of course, only splashed about the shallow end: but John and Emily dived. John, that is to say, dived properly, head-foremost: Emily only jumped in feet first, stiff as a rod; but she, on the other hand, would go off higher boughs than he would. Once, when she was eight, Mrs. Thornton had thought she was too big to bathe naked any more. The only bathing-dress she could rig was an old cotton nightgown. Emily jumped in as usual: first the balloons of air tipped her upside down, and then the wet cotton wrapped itself round her head and arms and nearly drowned her. After that, decency was let go hang again: it is hardly being drowned for—at least, it does not at first sight appear to be.

But once a Negro really was drowned in the pool. He had gorged himself full of stolen mangoes and, feeling guilty, thought he might as well cool himself in the forbidden pond as well, and make one repentance cover two crimes. He could not swim, and had only a black child (Little Jim) with him. The cold water and the surfeit brought on an apoplexy: Jim poked at him with a piece of stick a little, and then ran away in a fright. Whether the man died of the apoplexy or the drowning was a point for an inquest; and the doctor, after staying at Ferndale for a week, decided it was from drowning, but that he was full of green mangoes right up to his mouth. The great advantage of this was that no Negro would bathe there again, for fear the dead man's "duppy," or ghost, should catch

him. So if any black even came near while they were bathing John and Emily would pretend the duppy had grabbed at them, and off he would go, terribly upset. Only one of the Negroes at Ferndale had ever actually seen a duppy, but that was quite enough. They cannot be mistaken for living people, because their heads are turned backwards on their shoulders, and they carry a chain: moreover one must never call them duppies to their faces, as it gives them power. This poor man forgot, and called out "*Duppy!*" when he saw it. He got terrible rheumatics.

Lame-foot Sam was the one who told most stories. He used to sit all day on the stone barbecues where the pimento was dried, digging maggots out of his toes. This seemed at first very horrid to the children, but he seemed quite contented; and when jiggers got under their own skins, and laid their little bags of eggs there, it was not absolutely unpleasant. John used to get quite a sort of thrill from rubbing the place. Sam told them the Anansi stories: Anansi and the Tiger, and how Anansi looked after the Crocodile's nursery, and so on. Also he had a little poem which impressed them very much:

> Quacko Sam
> Him bery fine man:
> Him dance all de dances dat de darkies can:
> Him dance de schottische, him dance de Cod Reel:
> Him dance ebery kind of dance till him foot-bottom peel.

Perhaps that was how old Sam's own affliction first came about: he was very sociable. He was *said* to have a great many children.

2

The stream which fed the bathing-hole ran into it down a gully through the bush. It offered an enticing vista for exploring: but somehow the children did not often go up it very far. Every stone on the way had to be overturned, in the hope of finding cray-fish: or if not, John had to take a sporting gun, which he bulleted with spoonfuls of water to shoot humming-birds on the wing—too tiny, frail quarry for any solider projectile. For, only a few yards up, there was a Frangipani tree: a mass of brilliant blossom and no leaves, which was almost hidden in a cloud of humming-birds so vivid as much to outshine the flowers. Writers have often lost their way trying to explain how brilliant a jewel the humming-bird is: it cannot be done.

They build their wee woollen nests on the tips of twigs, where no snake can reach them. They are devoted to their eggs, and will not move though you touch them. But they are so delicate the children never did that: they held their breath and stared and stared—and were out-stared.

Somehow, the celestial vividness of this barrier generally arrested them. It was seldom any of them explored further: only once, I think, on a day when Emily was feeling peculiarly irritated.

It was her own tenth birthday. They had frittered away the whole morning in the glass-like gloom of the bathing hole. Now John sat naked on the bank making a wicker trap. In the shallows the small ones rolled and chuckled. Emily, for coolness, sat up to her chin in water, and hundreds of infant fish were tickling with their inquisitive mouths every inch of her body, a sort of expressionless light kissing.

Anyhow, she had lately come to hate being touched—but this was abominable. At last, when she could stand it no longer, she clambered out and dressed. Rachel and Laura were too small for a long walk, and the last thing, she felt, that she wanted was to have one of the boys with her: so she stole quietly past John's back, scowling balefully at him for no particular reason. Soon she was out of sight among the bushes.

She pushed on rather fast up the river bed, not taking much notice of things, for about three miles. She had never been so far afield before. Then her attention was caught by a clearing leading down to the water: and here was the source of the river. She caught her breath delightedly: it bubbled up clear and cold, through three distinct springs, under a clump of bamboos, just as a river should: the greatest possible find, and a private discovery of her own. She gave instantaneous inward thanks to God for thinking of such a perfect birthday treat, especially as things had seemed to be going all wrong; and then began to ferret in the limestone sources with the whole length of her arm, among the ferns and cresses.

Hearing a splash, she looked round. Some half-dozen strange Negro children had come down the clearing to fetch water, and were staring at her in astonishment. Emily stared back. In sudden terror they flung down their calabashes and galloped away up the clearing like hares. Emily followed them: immediately, but with dignity. The clearing narrowed to a path, and the path led in a very short time to a village.

It was all ragged and unkempt, and shrill with voices. There were small one-storey wattle huts dotted about, completely overhung by the most enormous trees. There was no sort of order: they appeared anywhere: there were no railings, and only one or two of the most terribly

starved mangy cattle to keep in or out. In the middle of all was an indeterminate quagmire or muddy pond, where a group of Negroes were splashing with geese and ducks.

Emily stared: they stared back. She made a movement towards them: they separated at once into the various huts, and watched her from there. Encouraged by the comfortable feeling of inspiring fright, she advanced, and at last found an old creature who would talk: Dis Liberty Hill, dis Black Man's Town. Old-time niggers, dey go fer run from de bushas (overseers), go for live here. De piccaninnies, dey neber seen buckras (whites) . . . And so on. It was a refuge, built by runaway slaves, and still inhabited.

And then, that her cup of happiness might be full, some of the bolder children crept out and respectfully offered her flowers—really to get a better look at her pallid face. Her heart bubbled up in her, she swelled with glory: and taking leave with the greatest condescension, she trod all the long way home on veritable air, back to her beloved family, back to a birthday cake wreathed with stephanotis, lit with ten candles, and in which it so happened that the sixpenny piece was invariably found in the birthday-person's slice.

3

This was, fairly typically, the life of an English family in Jamaica. Mostly these only stayed a few years. The Creoles—families who had been in the West Indies for more than one generation—gradually evolved something a little more distinctive. They lost some of the traditional mental mechanism of Europe, and the outlines of a new one began to appear.

There was one such family the Bas-Thorntons were

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