
RICHARD HUGHES
A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA
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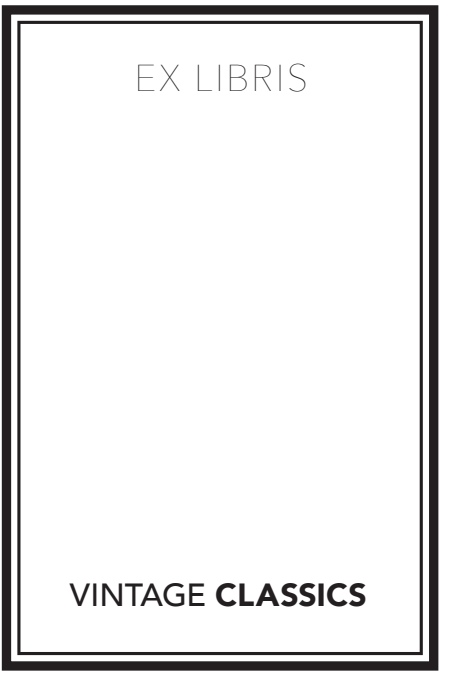

RICHARD HUGHES

Richard Hughes was born in 1900 and educated at Charterhouse School and Oriel College, Oxford. A highly original and idiosyncratic writer, he wrote poems and plays as well as novels, the most famous of which was his first, *A High Wind in Jamaica*, published in 1929. He could number Masefield, Yeats, T. E. Lawrence, Robert Graves, Augustus John and Dylan Thomas amongst his friends and acquaintances. He was married to the painter Frances Bazley. He died in 1976.

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Danger

RICHARD HUGHES

A High Wind in Jamaica

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY MEG ROSOFF

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I

ONE OF THE fruits of Emancipation in the West Indian islands is the number of the ruins, either attached to the houses that remain or within a stone's throw of then: 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 burned down, and the three remaining faithful servants occupied the mansion. The two heiresses of all this, the Miss Parkers, 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 coconut shells on a silver salver. Presently one of the heiresses persuaded her tyrants to lend her an old 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 state 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. Only the overseer's house here 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 the Bas-Thorntons: 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 – or if there are any, never having visited the island since 1860, which is a long time ago now.

But long before that year 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 wild-cat'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 despatch. 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 log-wood, and gorgeous red and green peppers: amongst them, the pool was almost completely shaded. Emily and John set tree-springes 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 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 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 needed 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 localised, 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 night-gown. 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 worth 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 also cool himself in the forbidden pond, and make one repentance cover two crimes. He could not swim, and had only a 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 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.

II

The stream which fed the bathing-hole ran into it down a gully through the bush which offered an enticing vista for exploring: but somehow the children did not often go up it very far. Every stone had to be overturned in the hope of finding crayfish: 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 tops 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 they 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 all the 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 lolled 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, not taking much notice of things, up the river bed 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. Immediately, but with dignity, Emily followed them. 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 half-naked negroes, and totally naked black children, and a few brown ones, 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 fer live here. De piccaninnies, dey never see 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.

III

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 acquainted with, who had a ramshackle estate to the eastward. They invited John and Emily to spend a couple of days with them, but Mrs Thornton was in two minds about letting them go, lest they should learn bad ways. The children there were a wildish lot, and, in the morning at least, would often run about barefoot like negroes, which is a very important point in a place like Jamaica where the whites have to keep up appearances. They had a governess whose blood was possibly not pure, and who used to beat the children

ferociously with a hair-brush. However, the climate at the Fernandez's place was healthy, and also Mrs Thornton thought it good for them to have some intercourse with other children outside their own family, however undesirable: and she let them go.

It was the afternoon after that birthday, and a long buggy-ride. Both fat John and thin Emily were speechless and solemn with excitement: it was the first visit they had ever paid. Hour after hour the buggy laboured over the uneven road. At last the lane to Exeter, the Fernandez's place, was reached. It was evening, the sun about to do his rapid tropical setting. He was unusually large and red, as if he threatened something peculiar. The lane, or drive, was gorgeous: for the first few hundred yards it was entirely hedged with 'seaside grapes,' clusters of fruit half-way between a gooseberry and a golden pippin, with here and there the red berries of coffee trees newly planted among the burnt stumps in a clearing, but already neglected. Then a massive stone gateway in a sort of Colonial Gothic style. This had to be circumvented: no one had taken the trouble to heave open the heavy gates for years. There was no fence, nor ever had been, so the track simply passed it by.

And beyond the gates an avenue of magnificent cabbage-palms. No tree, not oldest beech nor chestnut, is more spectacular in an avenue: rising a sheer hundred feet with no break in the line before the actual crown of plumes; and palm upon palm, palm upon palm, like a heavenly double row of pillars, leading on interminably, till even the huge house was dwarfed into a sort of ultimate mouse-trap.

As they journeyed on between these palms the sun went suddenly down, darkness flooded up round them out of the ground, retorted to almost immediately by the moon. Presently, shimmering like a ghost, an old blind white donkey stood in their way. Curses did not move him: the driver had to climb down and push him aside. The air was full of the usual tropic din: mosquitoes humming, cicalas trilling, bull-frogs twanging like guitars. That din goes on all night and all day almost: is more insistent, more memorable than the heat itself, even, or the number of things that bite. In the valley

beneath the fire-flies came to life: as if at a signal passed along, wave after wave after wave of light swept down the gorge. From a neighbouring hill the cockatoos began their serenade, an orchestration of drunk men laughing against iron girders tossed at each other and sawn up with rusty hack-saws: the most awful noise. But Emily and John, so far as they noticed it at all, found it vaguely exhilarating. Through it could presently be distinguished another sound: a negro praying. They soon came near him: where an orange tree loaded with golden fruit gleamed dark and bright in the moonlight, veiled in the pinpoint scintillation of a thousand fire-flies sat the old black saint among the branches, talking loudly, drunkenly, and confidentially with God.

Almost unexpectedly they came on the house, and were whisked straight off to bed. Emily omitted to wash, since there seemed such a hurry, but made up for it by spending an unusually long time over her prayers. She pressed her eyeballs devoutly with her fingers to make sparks appear, in spite of the slightly sick feeling it always induced: and then, already sound asleep, clambered, I suppose, into bed.

The next day the sun rose as he had set: large, round, and red. It was blindingly hot, foreboding. Emily, who woke early in a strange bed, stood at the window watching the negroes release the hens from the chicken-houses, where they were shut up at night for fear of John-crows. As each bird hopped sleepily out, the black passed his hand over its stomach to see if it meditated an egg that day: if so, it was confined again, or it would have gone off and laid in the bush. It was already as hot as an oven. Another black, with eschatological yells and tail-twistings and lassoings, was confining a cow in a kind of pillory, that it might have no opportunity of sitting down while being milked. The poor brute's hooves were aching with the heat, its miserable tea-cup of milk fevered in its udder. Even as she stood at the shady window Emily felt as sweaty as if she had been running. The ground was fissured with drought.

Margaret Fernandez, whose room Emily was sharing, slipped out of bed silently and stood beside her, wrinkling the short nose in her pallid face.

'Good morning,' said Emily politely.

'Smells like an earthquake,' said Margaret, and dressed. Emily remembered the awful story about the governess and the hair-brush: certainly Margaret did not use one for its ordinary purpose, though she had long hair: so it must be true.

Margaret was ready long before Emily, and banged out of the room. Emily followed later, neat and nervous, to find no one. The house was empty. Presently she spied John under a tree, talking to a negro boy. By his off-hand manner Emily guessed he was telling *disproportionate* stories (not *lies*) about the importance of Ferndale compared with Exeter. She did not call him, because the house was silent and it was not her place, as guest, to alter anything: so she went out to him. Together they circumnavigated: they found a stable-yard, and negroes preparing ponies, and the Fernandez children, barefoot even as Rumour had whispered. Emily caught her breath, shocked. Even at that moment a chicken, scuttling across the yard, trod on a scorpion and tumbled over stark dead as if shot. But it was not so much the danger which upset Emily as the unconventionality.

'Come on,' said Margaret: 'it's much too hot to stay about here. We'll go down to Exeter Rocks.'

The cavalcade mounted – Emily very conscious of her boots, buttoned respectably half-way up her calf. Somebody had food, and calabashes of water. The ponies evidently knew the way. The sun was still red and large: the sky above cloudless, and like blue glaze poured over baking clay: but close over the ground a dirty grey haze hovered. As they followed the lane towards the sea they came to a place where, yesterday, a fair-sized spring had bubbled up by the roadside. Now it was dry. But even as they passed a kind of gout of water gushed forth: and then it was dry again, although gurgling inwardly to itself. But the cavalcade were hot, far too hot to speak to one another: they sat their ponies as loosely as possible, longing for the sea.

The morning advanced. The heated air grew quite easily hotter, as if from some reserve of enormous blaze on which it could draw at will. Bullocks only shifted their stinging feet