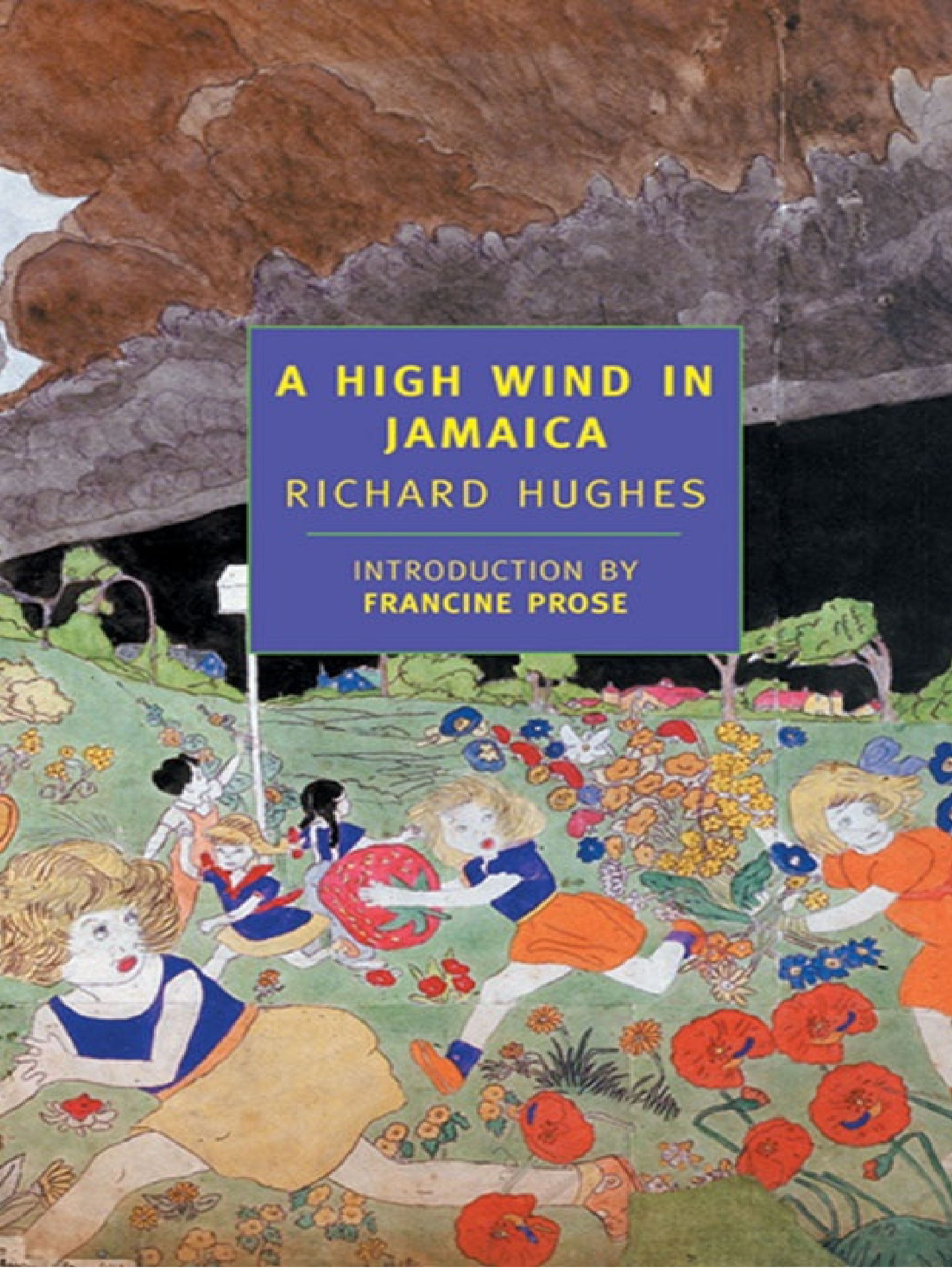
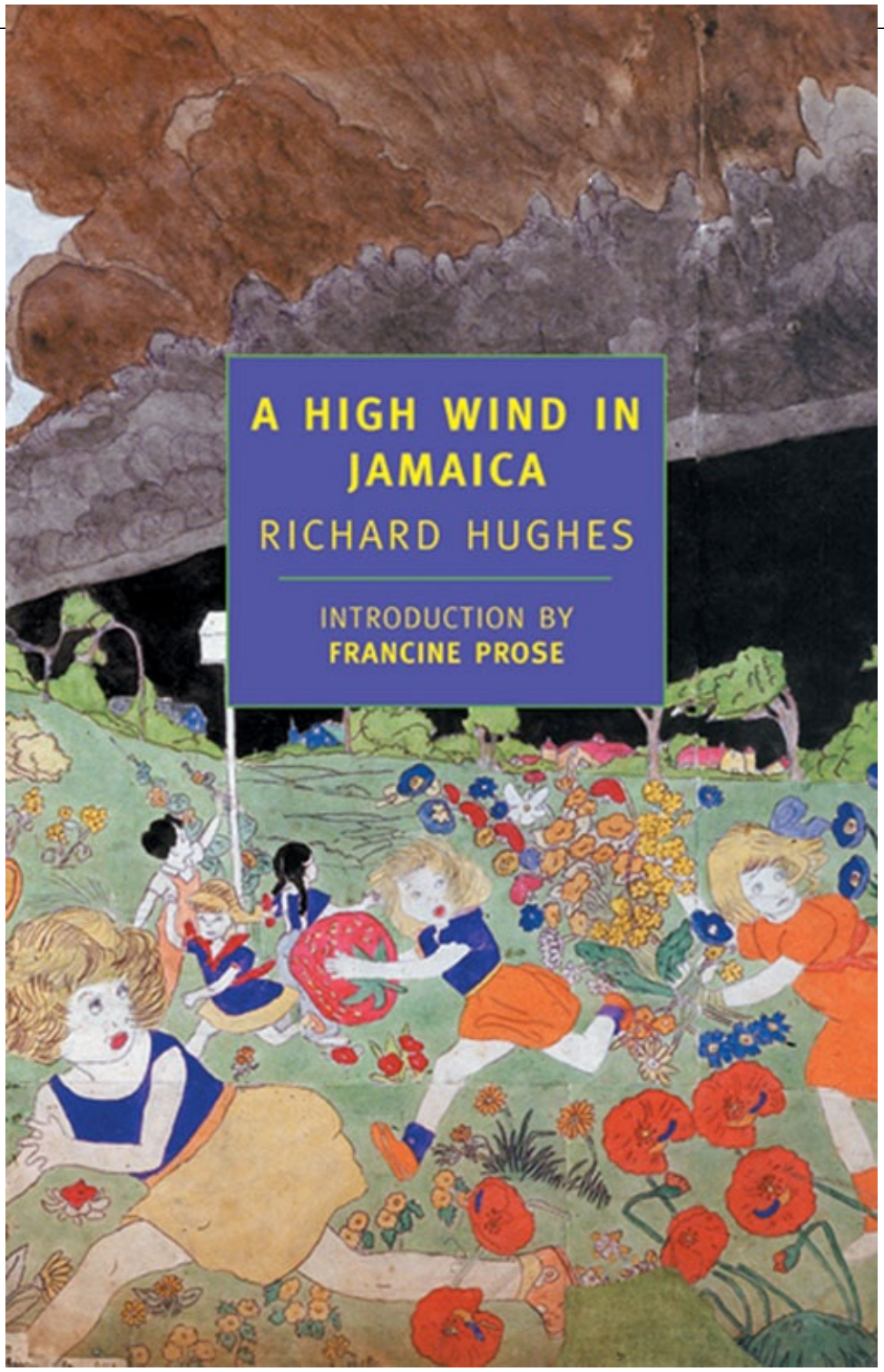


A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA

RICHARD HUGHES

INTRODUCTION BY
FRANCINE PROSE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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

nyrb

RICHARD HUGHES (1900–1976) attended Oxford and lived for most of his life in a castle in Wales. His other books include *The Fox in the Attic* and *The Wooden Shepherdess* , the first two volumes of "The Human Predicament," an unfinished trilogy about the rise of German Fascism and the onset of World War II.

FRANCINE PROSE is the author of nine novels, two story collections, and most recently a collection of novellas, *Guided Tours of Hell* . Her stories and essays have appeared in numerous publications.

A High Wind in Jamaica

Richard Hughes

Introduction by Francine Prose

New York Review Books
New York

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Introduction

First the vague premonitory chill—familiar, seductive, unwelcome—then the syrupy aura coating the visible world, through which its colors and edges appear ever more lurid and sharp...The experience of reading Richard Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica* (a book in which swoons and febrile states play a critical role) evokes the somatic sensations of falling ill, as a child. Indeed it recalls much about childhood that we thought (or might have wished) we had forgotten, while it labors with sly intelligence to dismantle the moral constructs that our adult selves have so painstakingly assembled.

The book opens among the ruined houses of the West Indies, slave quarters and mansions democratically leveled by "earthquake, fire, rain, and deadlier vegetation," and features a frightening cameo appearance of the Misses Parkers, a pair of bedridden elderly heiresses starved to death by their servants amid ormolu clocks and the bloodied feathers of slaughtered chickens. The scene is grim, fantastical, but the novel's language is delicate and precise—there is a humorous, chirpy cerebration to its narrative voice—and right away we are conscious of, and troubled by, the dissonance between tone and content—one that turns out, however, to be central to the shocking story Hughes has to tell. For on the surface, *A High Wind in Jamaica* is an adventure yarn involving five British children captured by a crew of pirates. But underneath this high-spirited romp is a story about murder, senseless violence, gothic sexuality, and capricious betrayal, a narrative that more nearly evokes the pictures of the "outsider"artist Henry Darger than those of, say, Kate Greenaway.

When we first meet the Bas-Thornton family, they are living in Jamaica, where Mr. Thornton is involved in "business of some kind." The children have business of their own, most of it involving the serial cruelty with which they treat the island's hapless indigenous fauna. In this "paradise for English children," John, the eldest son, catches rats for the degustation and sport of Tabby, the family's half-wild pet cat, itself fond of mortal combat with poisonous snakes. Emily, the oldest of three girls, whose deeply peculiar experience and consciousness is at the center of the novel, has a passion for "catching houselizards without their dropping their tails off, which they do when frightened.... Her room was full of these and other pets, some alive, others probably dead."

The younger Thorntons' sphere is so distant—so different—from that of their parents that they might as well be feral children. Mr. and Mrs. Thornton have no idea who their offspring are, or about the steamy, highly charged dramas that they are secretly enacting. "This sort of life was very peaceful, and might be excellent for nervy children like John; but a child like Emily, thought Mrs. Thornton, who is far from nervy, really needs some sort of stimulus and excitement, or there is a danger of her mind going to sleep altogether for ever. This life was too vegetable." It takes a typhoon blowing the roof off the family house—an event upstaged for the children by Tabby's murder by a pack of wild cats amidst thunder and lightning—before the grown-up Thorntons decide that the island life really is unsuitable, and send their brood off to Britain on the *Clorinda*
.

By this point, Hughes has subjected us to a kind of Pavlovian conditioning: every time an animal appears, we brace ourselves for the worst. But even this protective recoil cannot quite prepare us for the grisly scene in which the crew of the *Clorinda* attempts to amputate a monkey's cancerous tail—and in the ensuing mayhem, are overtaken and captured by pirates. Nor can we possibly anticipate the brutality that transpires later, while the pirates are pleasantly occupied with their riotous efforts to make the circus lion and tiger fight. Throughout the book, both nature and human nature are sinister, threatening. The physicality of animal life—when Emily goes for a swim, "hundreds of infant fish were tickling with their inquisitive mouths every inch of her body, a sort of expressionless light kissing"—is "abominable." The setting sun—"unusually large and red, as if he threatened something peculiar"—seems predatory and perverted. The children themselves are, essentially, animate Petri dishes in which a "diabolic yeast" proliferates, and our initial fondness for the bumbling pirates is tempered by some nasty scenes. Captain Jonsen's drunken display of murky attention leads Emily to defend herself by biting his thumb, and later there is a creepy moment when he looks in on the sleeping children and, knowing that Emily is awake and watching, flicks his fingernail against baby Laura's bare and upraised bottom.

Hughes is not afraid to dwell on startling, uncomfortable verities about the world and its inhabitants, and one of the things he does most impressively in *A High Wind in Jamaica* is to put a wicked spin on the Romantic notion of the child—the Wordsworthian innocent-savant. He suggests that children are closer than adults to nature, that the way that they view sex—mysterious, fascinating, incomprehensible, repulsive, responsible for weird alliances and even stranger behavior—is the way sex really is. Passion between consenting adults is a polite convention compared to the immediate realities of the flashy, "twittering" drag queens who assist the pirates in the capture of the *Clorinda* , or the night Emily gets to spend in bed with a pet alligator, or the suffocating kisses little Edward receives from a fat, mustachioed old woman who grabs him during the pirates' Cuban layover ("Edward could no more have struggled than if caught by a boa. Moreover, the portentous woman fascinated him, as if she had been a boa indeed. He lay in her arms limp, self-conscious, and dejected: but without active thought of escape.")

The confusions and seductions, horrors and comforts of Emily's relationship with the captain, and later with the bewitching Louisa Dawson—a passenger on the steamer to which the pirates eventually surrender the children, and which brings them to England—belong to the same polymorphous realm of attraction and repugnance as her encounter with the kissing fish. The captain amuses himself by drawing the sort of sexual doodles that might be done by a young boy. At one point he draws over the figures Emily has penciled on the wall of her bunk:

> Jonsen could only draw two things: ships, and naked women.... He took the pencil: and before long there began to appear between Emily's crude uncertain lines round thighs, rounder bellies, high swelling bosoms, all somewhat in the manner of Rubens.

This scene of a grown man amending a girl's scribblings has an upsetting, sensational edge that recalls a child's skewed perspective on physicality; it is all the more disturbing for its weird aspect of innocence. If adult sexuality seems unhealthily like a child's, adult morality is hardly

more mature or developed. Everyone lies and keeps poisonous secrets, especially the children. ("Grown-ups embark on a life of deception with considerable misgivings, and generally fail. But not so children. A child can hide the most appalling secret without the least effort, and is practically secure against detection.") Everyone, of every age, behaves according to an almost psychotically private and individual set of moral criteria: it's wrong to mention underwear and call adults by their first names but permissible (or hardly worth noting) to lie to God in one's prayers and misdirect a court of law convened to try a capital offense. No one has much of a memory; the children adapt quickly to separation from their parents and recover from the shock of a death among them with alarming ease and flexibility. By the end of the book, what the children have been told about their ordeal by the adults (who themselves have little or no interest in the truth) has blended with, or replaced, their sense of what really occurred. And when we meet the lawyers directing the trial that occupies the final section of the novel, we realize that these representatives of justice and high civilization—after all that wildness!—are little better than pirates in robes and periwigs. They are men, Hughes slyly informs us, whose interest in the world is the opposite of a writer's: "It is the novelist who is concerned with facts, whose job it is to say what a particular man did do on a particular occasion: the lawyer does not, cannot be expected to go further than to show what the ordinary man would be most likely to do under presumed circumstances."

Unlike William Golding's far more simplistic *The Lord of the Flies*, to which it is sometimes compared, Richard Hughes's novel resists any attempts to extract from it a moral or sociological lesson, a bit of received wisdom or home truth. It's hard, in fact, to think of another fiction so blithe in its refusal to throw us the tiniest crumb of solace or consolation, to present a single character who functions as a lodestar of rectitude or beneficence. In the end, everything in this luminous, extraordinary novel is so much the reverse of what we think it should be, or what we would expect, that we are left entirely disoriented—unsure of what anything is, or should be. The effect is disturbing and yet beautiful, fantastic but also frighteningly true to life. Published in 1929, just as history was preparing events that would forever revise the terms in which one could talk about innocence and evil, *A High Wind in Jamaica* is one of those prescient works of art that seems somehow to have caught (on the breeze, as it were) a warning scent of danger and blood—that is to say, of the future.

—FRANCINE PROSE

A High Wind in Jamaica

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 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 center 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 halfheartedly: 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—rumor 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 ro-mantic, 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 waterwheel 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 vapor. 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 grindinghouse 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 bathingpool 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 centered, 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 treespringes 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 matchbox. 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 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, headforemost: 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 footbottom 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 bathinghole. 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, 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 labored 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 halfway 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 fireflies came to life: as if at a signal passed along, wave after wave after wave of light swept down the gorge. From a neighboring 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 cir-cumnavigated: they found a stable-yard, and negroes preparing ponies, and the Fernandez children, barefoot even as Rumor 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 gray 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 when they could bear the soil no longer: even the insects were too languorous to pipe, the basking lizards hid themselves and panted. It was so still you could have heard the least buzz a mile off. Not a naked fish would willingly move his tail. The ponies advanced because they must. The children ceased even to muse.

They all very nearly jumped out of their skins; for close at hand a crane had trumpeted once desperately. Then the broken silence closed down as flawless as before. They perspired twice as violently with the stimulus. Their pace grew slower and slower. It was no faster than a procession of snails that at last they reached the sea.

Exeter Rocks is a famous place. A bay of the sea, almost a perfect semicircle, guarded by the reef: shelving white sands to span the few feet from the water to the under-cut turf: and then, almost at the mid point, a jutting-out shelf of rocks right into deep water—fathoms deep. And a narrow fissure in the rocks, leading the water into a small pool, or miniature lagoon, right inside their bastion. There it was, safe from sharks or drowning, that the Fernandez children meant to soak themselves all day, like turtles in a crawl. The water of the bay was as smooth and immovable as basalt, yet clear as the finest gin: albeit the swell muttered a mile away on the reef. The water within the pool itself could not reasonably be smoother. No sea-breeze thought of stirring. No bird trespassed on the inert air.

For a while they had not energy to get into the water, but lay on their faces, looking down, down, down, at the sea-fans and sea-feathers, the scarlet-plumed barnacles and corals, the black and yellow schoolmistress-fish, the rainbow-fish—all that forest of ideal christmas trees which is a tropical sea-bottom. Then they stood up, giddy and seeing black, and in a trice were floating suspended in water like drowned ones, only their noses above the surface, under the shadow of a rocky ledge.

An hour or so after noon they clustered together, puffy from the warm water, in the insufficient shade of a Panama fern: ate such of the food they had brought as they had appetite for; and drank all the water, wishing for more. Then a very odd thing happened: for even as they sat there they heard the most peculiar sound: a strange, rushing sound that passed overhead like a gale of wind—but not a breath of breeze stirred, that was the odd thing: followed by a sharp hissing and hurtling, like a flight of rockets, or gigantic swans—very distant rocs, perhaps—on the wing. They all looked up: but there was nothing at all. The sky was empty and lucid. Long before they were back in the water again all was still. Except that after a while John noticed a sort

of tapping, as if some one were gently knocking the outside of a bath you were in. But the bath they were in had no outside, it was solid world. It was funny.

By sunset they were so weak from long immersion they could barely stand up, and as salted as bacon: but, with some common impulse, just before the sun went down they all left the rocks and went and stood by their clothes, where the ponies were tethered, under some palms. As he sank the sun grew even larger: and instead of red was now a sodden purple. Down he went, behind the western horn of the bay, which blackened till its water-line disappeared and substance and reflection seemed one sharp symmetrical pattern.

Not a breath of breeze even yet ruffled the water: yet momentarily it trembled of its own accord, shattering the reflections: then was glassy again. On that the children held their breath, waiting for it to happen.

A school of fish, terrified by some purely submarine event, thrust their heads right out of the water, squattering across the bay in an arrowy rush, dashing up sparkling ripples with the tiny heave of their shoulders: yet after each disturbance all was soon like hardest, dark, thick, glass.

Once things vibrated slightly, like a chair in a concertroom: and again there was that mysterious winging, though there was nothing visible beneath the swollen iridescent stars.

Then it came. The water of the bay began to ebb away, as if some one had pulled up the plug: a foot or so of sand and coral gleamed for a moment new to the air: then back the sea rushed in miniature rollers which splashed right up to the feet of the palms. Mouthfuls of turf were torn away: and on the far side of the bay a small piece of cliff tumbled into the water: sand and twigs showered down, dew fell from the trees like diamonds: birds and beasts, their tongues at last loosed, screamed and bellowed: the ponies, though quite unalarmed, lifted up their heads and yelled.

That was all: a few moments. Then silence, with a rapid countermarch, recovered all his rebellious kingdom. Stillness again. The trees moved as little as the pillars of a ruin, each leaf laid sleekly in place. The bubbling foam subsided: the reflections of the stars came out among it as if from clouds. Silent, still, dark, placid, as if there could never have been a disturbance. The naked children too continued to stand motionless beside the quiet ponies, dew on their hair and eyelashes, shine on their infantile round paunches.

But as for Emily, it was too much. The earthquake went completely to her head. She began to dance, hopping laboriously from one foot on to another. John caught the infection. He turned head over heels on the damp sand, over and over in an elliptical course, till before he knew it he was in the water, and so giddy as hardly to be able to tell up from down.

At that, Emily knew what it was she wanted to do. She scrambled on to a pony and galloped him up and down the beach, trying to bark like a dog. The Fernandez children stared, solemn but not disapproving. John, shaping a course for Cuba, was swimming as if sharks were paring his toe-nails. Emily rode her pony into the sea, and beat and beat him till he swam: and so she followed John towards the reef, yapping herself hoarse.

It must have been fully a hundred yards before they were spent. Then they turned for the shore, John holding on to Emily’s leg, puffing and gasping, both a little overdone, their emotion run down. Presently John gasped:

“You shouldn’t ride on your bare skin, you’ll catch ringworm.”

“I don’t care if I do,” said Emily.

“You would if you did,” said John.

“I don’t care!” chanted Emily.

It seemed a long way to the shore. When they reached it the others had dressed and were preparing to start. Soon the whole party were on their way home in the dark. Presently Margaret said:

“So that’s that.”

No one answered.

“I could smell it was an earthquake coming when I got up. Didn’t I say so, Emily?”

“You and your smells!” said Jimmie Fernandez. “You’re always smelling things!”

“She’s awfully good at smells,” said the youngest, Harry, proudly, to John. “She can sort out people’s dirty clothes for the wash by smell: who they belong to.”

“She can’t really,” said Jimmie: “she fakes it. As if every one smelt different!”

“I can!”

“Dogs can, anyway,” said John.

Emily said nothing. Of course people smelt different: it didn’t need arguing. She could always tell her own towel from John’s, for instance: or even knew if one of the others had used it. But it just showed what sort of people Creoles were, to *talk* about Smell, in that open way.

“Well, anyhow I said there was going to be an earthquake and there was one,” said Margaret. That was what Emily was waiting for! So it really had been an Earthquake (she had not liked to ask, it seemed so ignorant, but now Margaret had said in so many words that it was one).

If ever she went back to England, she could now say to people, “ *I have been in an Earthquake* .”

With that certainty, her soused excitement began to revive. For there was nothing, no adventure from the hands of God or Man, to equal it. Realize that if she had suddenly found she could fly it would not have seemed more miraculous to her. Heaven had played its last, most terrible card; and small Emily had survived, where even grown men (such as Korah, Dathan, and Abiram) had succumbed.

Life seemed suddenly a little empty: for never again could there happen to her anything so dangerous, so sublime.

Meanwhile, Margaret and Jimmie were still arguing:

“Well, there’s one thing, there’ll be plenty of eggs tomorrow,” said Jimmie. “There’s nothing like an earthquake for making them lay.”

How funny Creoles were! They didn’t seem to realize the difference it made to a person’s whole after-life to have been in an Earthquake.

When they got home, Martha, the black housemaid, had hard things to say about the sublime cataclysm. She had dusted the drawing-room china only the day before: and now everything was covered again in a fine penetrating film of dust.

IV

The next morning, Sunday, they went home. Emily was still so saturated in earthquake as to be dumb. She ate earthquake and slept earthquake: her fingers and legs were earthquake. With John it was ponies. The earthquake had been fun: but it was the ponies that mattered. But at present it did not worry Emily that she was alone in her sense of proportion. She was too completely possessed to be able to see anything, or realize that any one else pretended to even a self-delusive fiction of existence.

Their mother met them at the door. She bubbled questions: John chattered ponies, but Emily was still tonguetied. She was, in her mind, like a child who has eaten too much even to be able to be sick.

Mrs. Thornton got a little worried about her at times. This sort of life was very peaceful, and might be excellent for nervy children like John: but a child like Emily, thought Mrs. Thornton, who is far from nervy, really needs some sort of stimulus and excitement, or there is a danger of her mind going to sleep altogether for ever. This life was too vegetable. Consequently Mrs. Thornton always spoke to Emily in her brightest manner, as if everything was of the greatest possible interest. She had hoped, too, the visit to Exeter might liven her up: but she had come back as silent and expressionless as ever. It had evidently made no impression on her at all.

John marshaled the small ones in the cellar, and round and round they marched, wooden swords at the slope, singing “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” Emily did not join them. What did it now matter, that earlier woe, that being a girl she could never when grown up become a real soldier with a real sword? She had been in an Earthquake.

Nor did the others keep it up very long. (Sometimes they would go on for three or four hours.) For, whatever it might have done for Emily’s soul, the earthquake had done little to clear the air. It was as hot as ever. In the animal world there seemed some strange commotion, as if they had wind of something. The usual lizards and mosquitoes were still absent: but in their place the earth’s most horrid progeny, creatures of darkness, sought the open: land-crabs wandered about aimlessly, angrily twiddling their claws: and the ground seemed almost alive with red ants and cockroaches. Up on the roof the pigeons were gathered, talking to each other fearfully.

The cellar (or rather, ground floor), where they were playing, had no communication with the wooden structure above, but had an opening of its own under the twin flight of steps leading to the front door; and there the children presently gathered in the shadow. Out in the compound lay one of Mr. Thornton’s best handkerchiefs. He must have dropped it that morning. But none of them felt the energy to go and retrieve it, out into the sun. Then, as they stood there, they saw Lame-foot Sam come limping across the yard. Seeing the prize, he was about to carry it off. Suddenly he remembered it was Sunday. He dropped it like a hot brick, and began to cover it with sand, exactly where he had found it.

“Please God, I thieve you to-morrow,” he explained hopefully. “Please God, you still there?”

A low mutter of thunder seemed to offer grudging assent.

“Thank you, Lord,” said Sam, bowing to a low bank of cloud. He hobbled off: but then, not too sure perhaps that Heaven would keep Its promise, changed his mind: snatched up the handkerchief and made off for his cottage. The thunder muttered louder and more angrily: but Sam ignored the warning.

It was the custom that, whenever Mr. Thornton had been to St. Anne’s, John and Emily should run out to meet him, and ride back with him, one perched on each of his stirrups.

That Sunday evening they ran out as soon as they saw him coming, in spite of the thunderstorm that by now was clattering over their very heads—and not only over their heads either, for in the Tropics a thunderstorm is not a remote affair up in the sky, as it is in England, but is all round you: lightning plays ducks and drakes across the water, bounds from tree to tree, bounces about the ground, while the thunder seems to proceed from violent explosions in your own very core.

“Go back! Go back, you damned little fools!” he yelled furiously: “Get into the house!”

They stopped, aghast: and began to realize that after all it was a storm of more than ordinary violence. They discovered that they were drenched to the skin—must have been the moment they left the house. The lightning kept up a continuous blaze: it was playing about their father’s very stirrup-irons; and all of a sudden they realized that he was afraid. They fled to the house, shocked to the heart: and he was in the house almost as soon as they were. Mrs. Thornton rushed out:

“My dear, I’m so glad...”

“I’ve never seen such a storm! Why on earth did you let the children come out?”

“I never dreamt they would be so silly! And all the time I was thinking—but thank Heaven you’re back!”

“I think the worst is over now.”

Perhaps it was; but all through supper the lightning shone almost without flickering. And John and Emily could hardly eat: the memory of that momentary look on their father’s face haunted them.

It was an unpleasant meal altogether. Mrs. Thornton had prepared for her husband his “favorite dish”: than which no action could more annoy a man of whim. In the middle of it all in burst Sam, ceremony dropped: he flung the handkerchief angrily on the table and stumped out.

“What on earth...” began Mr. Thornton.

But John and Emily knew: and thoroughly agreed with Sam as to the cause of the storm. Stealing was bad enough anyway, but on a Sunday!

Meanwhile, the lightning kept up its play. The thunder made talking arduous, but no one was anyhow in a mood to chatter. Only thunder was heard, and the hammering of the rain. But suddenly, close under the window, there burst out the most appalling inhuman shriek of terror.

“Tabby!” cried John, and they all rushed to the window.

But Tabby had already flashed into the house: and behind him was a whole club of wild cats in hot pursuit. John momentarily opened the dining-room door and puss slipped in, disheveled and panting. Not even then did the brutes desist: what insane fury led these jungle creatures to pursue him into the very house is unimaginable; but there they were, in the passage, caterwauling in concert: and as if at their incantation the thunder awoke anew, and the lightning nullified the meager table lamp. It was such a din as you could not speak through. Tabby, his fur on end, pranced up and down the room, his eyes blazing, talking and sometimes exclaiming in a tone of voice the children had never heard him use before and which made their blood run cold. He seemed like one inspired in the presence of Death, he had gone utterly Delphic: and without in the passage Hell’s pandemonium reigned terrifically.

The check could only be a short one. Outside the door stood the big filter, and above the door the fanlight was long since broken. Something black and yelling flashed through the fanlight, landing clean in the middle of the supper table, scattering the forks and spoons and

upsetting the lamp. And another and another—but already Tabby was through the window and streaking again for the bush. The whole dozen of those wild cats leapt one after the other from the top of the filter clean through the fanlight onto the supper table, and away from there only too hot in his tracks: in a moment the whole devil-hunt and its hopeless quarry had vanished into the night.

"Oh Tabby, my darling Tabby!" wailed John; while Emily rushed again to the window.

They were gone. The lightning behind the creepers in the jungle lit them up like giant cobwebs: but of Tabby and his pursuers there was nothing to be seen.

John burst into tears, the first time for several years, and flung himself on his mother: Emily stood transfixed at the window, her eyes glued in horror on what she could not, in fact, see: and all of a sudden was sick.

"God, what an evening!" groaned Mr. Bas-Thornton, groping in the darkness for what might be left of their supper.

Shortly after that Sam's hut burst into flames. They saw, from the dining-room, the old negro stagger dramatically out into the darkness. He was throwing stones at the sky. In a lull they heard him cry: "I gib it back, didn't I? I gib de nasty t'ing back?"

Then there was another blinding flash, and Sam fell where he stood. Mr. Thornton pulled the children roughly back and said something like "I'll go and see. Keep them from the window."

Then he closed and barred the shutters, and was gone.

John and the little ones kept up a continuous sobbing. Emily wished some one would light a lamp, she wanted to read. Anything, so as not to think about poor Tabby.

I suppose the wind must have begun to rise some while before this, but now, by the time Mr. Thornton had managed to carry old Sam's body into the house, it was more than a gale. The old man, stiff in the joints as he might have been in life, had gone as limp as a worm. Emily and John, who had slipped unbeknownst into the passage, were thrilled beyond measure at the way he dangled: they could hardly tear themselves away, and be back in the dining-room, before they should be discovered.

There Mrs. Thornton sat heroically in a chair, her brood all grouped round her, saying the Psalms, and the poems of Sir Walter Scott, over by heart: while Emily tried to keep her mind off Tabby by going over in her head all the details of her Earthquake. At times the din, the rocketing of the thunder and torrential shriek of the wind, became so loud as almost to impinge on her inner world: she wished this wretched thunderstorm would hurry up and get over. First she held an actual performance of the earthquake, went over it direct, as if it was again happening. Then she put it into Oratio Recta, told it as a story, beginning with that magic phrase, "Once I was in an Earthquake." But before long the dramatic element reappeared—this time, the awed comments of her imaginary English audience. When that was done, she put it into the Historical—a Voice, declaring that a girl called Emily was once in an Earthquake. And so on, right through the whole thing a third time.

The horrid fate of poor Tabby appeared suddenly before her eyes, caught her unawares: and she was all but sick again. Even her earthquake had failed her. Caught by the incubus, her mind struggled frantically to clutch at even the outside world, as an only remaining straw. She tried to fix her interest on every least detail of the scene around her—to count the slats in the shutters, any least detail that was *outward* . So it was that for the first time she really began to notice the

weather.

The wind by now was more than redoubled. The shutters were bulging as if tired elephants were leaning against them, and Father was trying to tie the fastening with that handkerchief. But to push against this wind was like pushing against rock. The handkerchief, shutters, everything burst: the rain poured in like the sea into a sinking ship, the wind occupied the room, snatching pictures from the wall, sweeping the table bare. Through the gaping frames the lightning-lit scene without was visible. The creepers, which before had looked like cobwebs, now streamed up into the sky like new-combed hair. Bushes were lying flat, laid back on the ground as close as a rabbit lays back his ears. Branches were leaping about loose in the sky. The negro huts were clean gone, and the negroes crawling on their stomachs across the compound to gain the shelter of the house. The bouncing rain seemed to cover the ground with a white smoke, a sort of sea in which the blacks wallowed like porpoises. One niggerboy began to roll away: his mother, forgetting caution, rose to her feet: and immediately the fat old beldam was blown clean away, bowling along across fields and hedgerows like some one in a funny fairy-story, till she fetched up against a wall and was pinned there, unable to move. But the others managed to reach the house, and soon could be heard in the cellar underneath.

Moreover the very floor began to ripple, as a loose carpet will ripple on a gusty day: in opening the cellar door the blacks had let the wind in, and now for some time they could not shut it again. The wind, to push against, was more like a solid block than a current of air.

Mr. Thornton went round the house—to see what could be done, he said. He soon realized that the next thing to go would be the roof. So he returned to the Niobe-group in the dining-room. Mrs. Thornton was half-way through *The Lady of the Lake* , the smaller children listening with rapt attention. Exasperated, he told them that they would probably not be alive in half an hour. No one seemed particularly interested in his news: Mrs. Thornton continued her recitation with faultless memory.

After another couple of cantos the threatened roof went. Fortunately, the wind taking it from inside, most of it was blown clear of the house: but one of the couples collapsed skew-eyed, and was hung up on what was left of the dining-room door—within an ace of hitting John. Emily, to her intense resentment, suddenly felt cold. All at once, she found she had had enough of the storm: it had become intolerable, instead of a welcome distraction.

Mr. Thornton began to look for something to break through the floor. If only he could make a hole in it, he might get his wife and children down into the cellar. Fortunately he did not have to look far: one arm of the fallen couple had already done the work for him. Laura, Rachel, Emily, Edward and John, Mrs. Thornton and finally Mr. Thornton himself, were passed down into the darkness already thronged with negroes and goats.

With great good sense, Mr. Thornton brought with him from the room above a couple of decanters of madeira, and every one had a swig, from Laura to the oldest negro. All the children made the most of this unholy chance, but somehow to Emily the bottle got passed twice, and each time she took a good pull. It was enough, at their age; and while what was left of the house was blown away over their heads, through the lull and the ensuing aerial return match, John, Emily, Edward, Rachel, and Laura, blind drunk, slept in a heap on the cellar floor: a sleep over which the appalling fate of Tabby, torn to pieces by those fiends almost under their very eyes, dominated with the easy empire of nightmare.

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