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THE IMPERIAL ICEHOUSE

Of all the grand buildings on my island, the grandest by far was The Imperial Icehouse – white pillars and a shapely roof topped by ornate lettering on a gilded sign. Unlike the warehouses and the shops on the same street, it had no smell. It was whiter than the church, and though you would not mistake it for a church, the fresh paint and elongated windows – and the gold piping on the scrollwork of the sign – gave it at once a look of holiness and purpose. I cannot think of human endeavor without that building coming to mind, shimmering in my memory as it did on the island, the heat distorting it like its reflection in water.

The icehouse did more than cater to the comforts of the islanders. It provided ice for the fisherman's catch and the farmer's delicate produce. A famous Victorian novelist visited us in 1859 and remarked on it, describing it as 'a drinking shop.' It was certainly that, but it was more. It was 'well attended' he said. He was merely passing through, a traveler interested in recording our eccentricities. He could not have known that The Imperial Icehouse was our chief claim to civilization. Ice in that climate! It was shipped to the island whole, and preserved. It was our achievement and our boast.

Then one day, decades later, four men came to town for a wagonload of ice. Three were black and had pretty names; the fourth was a white planter called Mr Hand. He had made the trip with his Negroes because it was high summer and he wanted cold drinks. His plan was to carry away a ton of ice and store it in his estate upcountry. He was a new man on the island and had the strengths and weaknesses peculiar to all new arrivals. He was hardworking and generous; he talked a good deal about progress; he wore his eagerness on his face. He looked stunned and happy and energetic. He did not listen or conceal. On this the most British of the islands it was a satisfaction to newcomers to see the Victoria Statue on Victoria Street, and the horses in Hyde Park, and Nelson in Trafalgar Square. Mr Hand saw no reason why he should not drink here as he had done in England.

He had taken over Martlet's estate, which had been up for sale ever since Martlet's death. That again revealed Mr Hand as a newcomer, considering what had happened to old Martlet. And the estate was as far from town as it was possible to be on this island: Mr Hand, a bachelor, must have needed consolation and encouragement.

He had, against all good advice, taken over the Martlet Negroes, and three of these accompanied him on that trip to town for the ice. Mr Hand closed the deal at the icehouse by having a drink, and he sent a bucket of beer out to his men. They were

called John Paul, Macacque, and Jacket. He had another drink, and another, and sent out more beer for those men who kept in the shade. It was not unlawful for Negro estate workers to drink in the daytime, but it was not the custom either. Even if he had known, Mr Hand probably would not have cared.

The Negroes drank, conversing in whispers, shadows in shadow, accepting what they were offered, and waiting to be summoned to load the ice.

They had arrived in the coolness of early morning, but the drinking meant delay: by noon the wagon was still empty, the four horses still tethered to a tree, the Negroes sitting with their backs to the icehouse and their long legs stretched out. Perhaps the racket from inside told them there would be no hurry. In any case, they expected to leave at dusk, for not even the rankest newcomer would risk hauling ice across the island in the midafternoon heat.

Just as they had begun to doze, they were called. Mr Hand stood and swayed on the verandah. He was ready, he yelled. He had to repeat it before his words were understood. Some other men came out of the icehouse and argued with him. Mr Hand took them over to the wagon and showed them the sheets of canvas he had brought. He urged the men to watch as the Negroes swung the big wagon to the back door; and he supervised the loading, distributing sawdust between the great blocks of ice as if cementing for good the foundations of an imperial building.

For an hour or more the Negroes labored, two men to a cake, and Mr Hand joked to them about it: Had they known water to be so heavy? An enormous block was winched from the door. John Paul, who was the leader of the three, withdrew an ice pick from his shirt and began to work its stiletto point on that block. There was a shout from Mr Hand – again, the unexpected voice – and John Paul stood and patiently wiped the ice pick on his arm. When the block was loaded, the wheels were at a slant and the floor of the wagon had squashed the springs to such an extent that the planks rested on the axle trees. Mr Hand continued to trowel the sawdust and separate the cakes with canvas until at last all the ice was loaded and the four horses hitched.

The news of the loading had reached the men drinking in the icehouse. A noisy crowd gathered on the verandah to watch the tipping wagon creak down Regent Street, Mr Hand holding the reins, Macacque and Jacket tugging the bridles of the forward horses, John Paul sauntering at the rear. Their progress was slow, and even before they disappeared past the tile kiln at the far end of the street many of the icehouse men had left the verandah to seek the cool bar.

Past the Wallace estate, and Villeneuve’s dairy, the milestone at the flour mill; children had followed, but they too dropped back because of the heat. Others had watched from doorways, attracted by the size of the load and the rumble and wobble of the wheels in the rutted lanes. Now, no one followed.

There were no more houses. They had begun to climb the first range of hills. In this heat, on the exposed road, the birds were tiny and silent, and the flowers had no aroma. There was only a sawing of locusts and a smell of dust. From time to time, Jacket glimpsed the straining horse he held and looked over at Macacque, who frowned at the higher hills beyond.

The hills loomed; no one saw the hole in the road, only the toppling horses, the one behind Jacket rearing from a broken trace and free of one strap swinging himself and snapping another. Empty, the wagon had seemed secure; but this weight, and the shock of the sudden hole, made it shudder feebly and look as if it might burst. Jacket calmed the horse and quickly roped him. The others steadied the wagon.

Mr Hand, asleep on his seat, had tumbled to his knees. He woke and swore at the men, then at the horses, and he cursed the broken straps. But he had more straps in the chest he had brought, and he was so absorbed in the repair he did not leave the road. He mended the traces – spurning the men's help – in the middle of the North Road, squinting in the sunshine.

They were soon on their way. There was a rime of froth on the necks and fetlocks of the horses, and great syrupy strings of yellow saliva dripped from their jaws. The road narrowed as it grew steep; then it opened again. The horses fought for footing and the wheels chimed as they banged against the wagon. The Negroes did not sing as they had on the early-morning ride, nor did they speak. Mr Hand nodded, sat upright, slumped again, and was asleep.

Sensing the wagon slowing, John Paul put his shoulder under the back flap and gave a push. His shoulder was soaked; the wagon had begun to drip, dark pennies in the dust that dried almost as soon as they formed. He placed his forearms on the flap and put his head down and let the wagon carry him.

Passing the spring where they had stopped that morning for a drink, John Paul called out to Mr Hand and asked if they could rest. No, said Mr Hand, waking again and spreading his fingers to push at the sunlight. They would go on, he said; they were in a hurry. Now Jacket sang out – a brief squawking ditty, interrupting the silence of the hot road. He was answered by John Paul, another birdlike cry, and then Macacque's affirming gabble. John Paul took his ice pick and reached beneath the canvas. He chopped a wedge, and sucked it, then shared it with the two other Negroes. Mr Hand gasped in sleep.

There was a cracking, a splintering of wood like a limb twisting from a tree. John Paul tossed his chunk of ice into the grass by the roadside, and he saw the rear wheel in pieces, a bunch of spokes settling under the wagon.

Glassy eyed from his nap, Mr Hand announced to them that he had a spare wheel. He unbolted it from the bottom of the wagon and fitted it to the axle, but from where the others stood idle they could see that the ice had shifted and cracked the side boards. And yet, when the trip was resumed, the wagon rolled more smoothly, as if the load were lighter than before – the springs had bounce, the wheels were straighter.

More ice was chopped away by John Paul, and this he shared, and while Mr Hand slept the three Negroes quarreled silently, sniffing and sighing, because John Paul had the ice pick and he would not let any of the others use it.

The road became bumpy again; the ice moved in the wagon. It had been securely roped, but now it was loose; it was a smaller load; its jarring woke Mr Hand. He worked himself into a temper when he saw the diminished load. He stopped to tighten the canvas around it and screamed at the puddle that collected under the wagon. He would not let the Negroes drink. There will be cold drinks in plenty, he said, when we arrive home. Later, he got down from the seat on a steep grade and got behind and pushed with his shoulder like John Paul, and he said: That's how we do it.

They passed a fragrant valley. Negroes in that valley whispered and laughed and jeered at the Negroes in this procession. Now the ice was melting so quickly there was a stream of water pouring from the wagon and its cracks. The mockery was loud and several Negroes followed for some distance, yelling about the melting ice and the trail of mud they left through the pretty valley. The wagon wood was dark with moisture, as dark as the Negroes' faces, which were streaming with sweat.

Mr Hand began to talk – crazy talk about England – and his men laughed at the pitch of his voice, which was a child's complaint. They did not understand his words; he ignored their laughter.

The left trace snapped as the right had done, a spoke worked loose and dropped from a wheel, although the wheel itself remained in position. One horse's shoe clanged as he kicked it into the belly of the wagon. These incidents were commented upon, and now the Negroes talked loudly of the stupidity of the trip, the waste of effort, the wrong time of day, the color of Mr Hand's cheeks. Mr Hand sat holding the reins loosely, his head tipped onto his shoulder. His straw hat fell off and the Negroes left it on the road where it fell. John Paul looked back and saw his footprint crushed into the crown.

They had gained the second range of hills, and descending – slowly, so that the wagon would not be shot forward – the late-afternoon sun, unshielded by any living tree, struck their faces like metal. The road was strewn with boulders on which the horses did a tired dance, stepping back. There was a curve, another upward grade, and at that corner the horses paused to crop the grass.

There was no sound from Mr Hand. He was a crouching infant in his seat, in the sun's glare, his mouth open. The horses tore at the grass with their lips. The Negroes crept under the wagon, and there they stayed in the coolness, for an hour or more, the cold water dripping on them.

Mr Hand woke, stamping his feet on the planks. They scrambled to their places.

His anger was exhausted in three shouts. He promised them ice, cold drinks, a share for everyone, and as he spoke the Negroes could see how the ice beneath the sagging canvas was a quarter the size of what it had been. Divided, it would be nothing. They did not respond to Mr Hand's offer: it was a promise of water, which they had already as their right, from their own spring.

Mr Hand tugged the reins and the men helped the horses, dragged the wagon, dragged the ice, dragged this man through the tide of heat. Mr Hand chattered, repeating his promises, but when he saw the impassive faces of the Negroes he menaced them with whining words. He spoke sharply, like an insect stirred by the sun.

If you don't pull hard, he said to the men, I'll free the horses and hitch you to the wagon – and you'll take us home. He thwacked the canvas with his whip. There was no thud, nothing solid, only a thin echoless smack, and he clawed open the canvas. Shrunken ice blocks rattled on the planks.

He stopped the wagon and leaped out and faced each man in turn and accused him. The men did nothing; they waited for him to move. And he did. He hit Macacque and called him a thief. Jacket was lazy, he said, and he hit him. John Paul prepared himself for worse. Mr Hand came close to him and screamed and, as he did, the wagon lurched. The horses had found grass: they pulled the wagon to the roadside.

The sounds of the horses chewing, the dripping of the wagon in the heat; it was regular, like time leaking away. Mr Hand raised his whip and rushed at John Paul. And then, in that low sun, Mr Hand cast three shadows; two helped him aside, and he struggled until a sound came, the sound John Paul had made in town with his ice pick, like ice being chipped, or bone struck, and the hatless man cried out – plea, promise, threat, all at once – and staggered to the wagon and shouted at the water dripping into the dust. The ice was no larger than a man, and bleeding in the same way.

At last it was cool and dark and they were passing the first fences of the farm and turning into the drive. There were lighted huts and lights moving toward them, swinging tamely on nothing in the darkness. Voices near those lanterns cried out – timid questions. The three men answered in triumph from the top of the heavy wagon, which rumbled in the road like a broken catafalque, streaming, still streaming, though all the ice was gone.