 CHAPTER 2

JAMAICA (1873–1876)

TO THE WEST INDIES

The passage to the West Indies in the 1870s took about twenty days. In a typical voyage, after boarding at Southampton, one left behind the Wolf Rock lighthouse on the Scillies—the last sight of Britain and, indeed, of any land worth mentioning. Then one spent the next four miserable days tossing on the Bay of Biscay and another two weeks or so crossing the Atlantic deeps in the company of a cow, some sheep, and a small poultry-yard; a menagerie whose initial racket diminished steadily as the voyage went on. There was plenty to eat, hot water to wash with, but only cold seawater baths. Unless marred by a hurricane, the trip was safe, comfortable, and monotonous, the featureless days broken only by meals, watching petrels and flying fish, and the sweepstake on the ship’s daily run.

Like everyone else on board the Don, the Allens were heartily glad to make a first landfall at St. Thomas, an island that was then a Danish colony. From a distance the view was picturesque enough. Before them lay a wide, calm bay with the white houses rising beyond with their green shutters and red shingled roofs. But as they drew into the harbor with the bum-boats crowding eagerly around, this, their first glimpse of the West Indies, was far less prepossessing. Allen had seen something of the tropics already, having traveled in the southern United States as a teenager before leaving for Europe, so he was fairly prepared for the reality of Caribbean life, but it was still a shock. There was the ferocious heat, for a start, “like a Dutch oven.” He liked the look of the people: he described them as “Anglicized negroes, with a touch of American smartness” very unlike the Jamaicans as he was to know them later with their “listless laisser-aller” style; and different too from the “sauntering Spanish nigger of Cuba, or the independent and relapsing African of Haiti.” Their town, though, was alarming. St. Thomas was a bustling trading port, but that was about all one could say for it. The Allens surveyed the houses (“mean and shabby-looking”), winced at the assault on the senses, and they did not like it. (“The smells are terrific, the dirt undisguised,
and the heat past human endurance. A broiling sun pours down upon the whole festering mass of unwashed humanity, crowded negro huts, narrow lanes, decaying rubbish, and dry dust.”) Everywhere they heard the opinion that “nobody ever dreams of living at St Thomas unless he has business in the town; and then his one object is to save up money and go away again.” It was not reassuring to the ears of two young people who had just let themselves in for a working life of indeterminate length in the Caribbean.

When the Allens finally anchored in Kingston harbor a few days later on June 20, 1873, it was St. Thomas all over again, only worse. In the foreground was a long low sandy beach, from which palms rose at all angles with their foliage covered in an inch of grey dust. Beyond, the town appeared as “a ruinous mass of flat wooden shops and houses, in every stage of decay” running back from the sea on a low, sweltering, swampy plain. In the background were the Blue Mountains—not blue at all, but a dark mass silhouetted against the whitish-grey horizon. Over everything lay a blanket of damp heat, while a pitiless flood of light revealed every sordid detail.¹

That Allen’s first impression was no exaggeration is well attested to by other visitors at about this time. One of them described Kingston as “a town which has lost its self-respect. Like a man who has seen better days, it has given up attending even to its personal appearance.”² Fourteen years earlier, that inveterate and generous-minded traveler Anthony Trollope had been blunter still: “of all towns that I ever saw, Kingston is perhaps, on the whole, the least alluring, and is the more absolutely without any point of attraction for the stranger than any other.”³ Ruined, even burnt-out, buildings were everywhere. The houses, flimsy constructions, consisted of low brick walls and posts supporting the roof, with the space in between filled with jalousies like Venetian blinds, mostly faded to a dusky olive green. In the unvarying seasons nothing more was necessary and the frequent hurricanes and fires did not invite any more solid construction. Since these blinds were normally kept closed against the heat, the houses looked permanently vacant. None of the streets, not even Harbour Street, the main thoroughfare, was hard-surfaced and every visitor commented on their state: “as dingy, dirty, gloomy ones as I ever encountered,” said one.⁴ The streets had no sidewalks and were quite unlit at night. There were few facilities to welcome the visitor: no hotels or boarding houses of quality, just a couple of not very inviting “halls” or inns. The main public buildings were a prison, an old barracks then being converted into a court-house, a little theater, a lunatic asylum, a hospital and a circular building of corrugated iron which was the central market. All were exceptionally ugly. There were few organized decent amusements, either public or private. The main leisure activity was strolling the streets or driving about in the cool of the evening. The population of Kingston was about 35,000, and of the whole island, about half a million. Four-fifths of them were illiterate.

Ninety percent of Jamaicans were Negroes, the descendants of West African slaves imported to grow sugar. In Kingston itself, however, Negroes formed rather less than half the population. The balance was made up of