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A Chat With the Readers

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A Terrible Revenge Was That of Caracol, As Related One Day in "La Mème Chose"

JEAN BEAUCE

By W. J. STAMPER

Author of "The Vulture of Pignon," "Lips of the Dead," etc.

IT WAS in an unpretentious and squalid little restaurant in the shabbiest quarter of the city of Cap Haitien that I accidentally became acquainted with a man who knew more about those fearful and tragic times preceding the American Occupation of Haiti than any other living person.

During the later and cooler hours of the day it was my custom to rove about the city in search of fragments of information concerning that dark period of crime and blood, which have not yet been, and perhaps never will be, recorded in the pages of history. On one of these walks I found myself before the above mentioned restaurant. There certainly was nothing to recommend it to a white man as a fit place to seek dinner, but the sign which overhung the door was so utterly novel that it struck me with a peculiar curiosity. It was made of a smooth board on which was the picture of two clasped hands and a French phrase which read as follows: "LA MÈME CHOSE."

"The Same Thing," I translated, and immediately decided that the person who put out such a sign as this, and manifestly for the purpose of drawing trade, must indeed be an interesting one to meet. That this particular sign had a certain meaning for patrons, I did not doubt for a moment, and hence arose my eagerness to meet the proprietor and learn the secret.

"The owner of this place has a vivid imagination or else knows more about the natives than anyone I have ever met," I thought, as I took off my hat and stepped through the door.

I was not a little surprised to be addressed in perfect English by a thin, olive-skinned man of fifty years as he motioned toward a table at the opposite side of the room.

"Welcome to the American," he said. "It is not often that my humble place is honored by the white man."

"I hope you will pardon me, sir," I answered, "but I must confess that I entered more as a matter of curiosity than for the purpose of dining. The sign above your door is so very extraordinary—"

"But that is a long story," he broke in, "a story that is always unpleasant to recount, touching as it does the most vital chords of my unhappy existence. My friends, such as are yet alive, are acquainted with my story and they come to spend their gourdes at my rude tables, for they know what I have suffered."

I was struck so forcibly by the note of sadness in his voice and a gentility of manner so unlike other Haitians, that I felt a peculiar sympathy welling up in my heart for this alien black man.

"Let us at least have a bottle of wine together," said I, as I walked over and sat down at a table.

As he followed me to the table, I noticed that he appeared nervous.

His gait was halting, and as he sat down, I saw that his right hand was gone and a red stub of a wrist peeped out from his white sleeve. His forehead was broad and intelligent; his lips were thin and finely formed; his eyes were black and piercing. There were abilities in this man which might have given him a high place in any society.

"Petite," he called in his soft voice, "bring the old wine and close the door. There will be no more business today, for I have a guest with whom I wish to converse for a long time."

I had not seen any persons in the room when I entered, but at the sound of his voice, there emerged from behind the curtains at the rear, the figure of a girl, and she carried in her left hand a large tray on which rested glasses and a tall bottle of red wine. As she tripped lightly across the floor toward us, I was astonished by her marvelous beauty. She was lithe and willowy, easy of movement, dark of complexion, and a perfect type of that haunting beauty with which tropical suns touch maidens for a brief period. She wore a flowing white gown and her long black tresses almost covered the rings of old gold that hung from her finely formed ears. She placed the tray on the table, closed the outer door as directed, and again disappeared behind the curtains.

"I know what you are thinking, my American friend," said the host. "She is beautiful, damnably beautiful; but she is the curse of her father," he added, as he poured out the sparkling wine.

"A curse?" I repeated. "I do not understand you, sir, for I have never seen a more beautiful woman."

"That also is a part of my story," he replied, as he lifted a glass to his lips.

We drank in silence; to whom he drank I do not know, but I drank to

the strange beauty of the woman behind the curtains.

"I AM Jean Beauce," he began. "I have seen presidents rise and fall overnight. I have seen the crimson stains bespatter the flagstones of every street and the very gutters flow red with human blood. Now to my story.

"My mother was a Haitian negress, my father a Frenchman from Marseilles. He came to Cap Haitien and my mother was his mistress. When I was five years of age I stood with her in the early morning on the promontory of Picolet and watched the white sails of a schooner fade into the distance, the sails that carried him back to France; and I have heard it said that at a drunken carousal the night before his departure, he was chided by some of his friends for leaving his offspring to the gutters of Cap Haitien and he replied with a swaggering jest, 'The boy is a negro. Let him grow up here in Haiti as is fitting. He will be happy in his ignorance as he gnaws his stalk of sugar cane and his mangoes.'

"When I grew old enough to hear of these cruel words, they rankled in my bosom and I determined to make a man of myself in spite of that fate which had hurled me a black and fatherless illegitimate among a heathen people. I was black like them, but a white heart, passionate, proud and ambitious, the heart of a Frenchman, throbbed in my breast.

"Soon after, my mother, broken down with poverty and disease, passed on and left me a homeless and friendless waif among the alleys of Cap Haitien.

"If my youth was any different from that of all these ragged and filthy children you see daily fishing among the garbage on the waterfront for a crust of bread, it was worse; worse because there was in me that

unquenchable spark of pride which was my birthright.

"The age of fifteen found me toiling beneath the heavy sacks of coffee for loading the ships destined for foreign ports. I often wondered as I dropped my heavy load down the dark holds, if my father would drink that coffee. In my labors I had my visions, visions of some day being a coffee king, of controlling all those thousands of pounds of the green berries that daily departed for every point of the compass. I worked; and saved; and starved. But I gradually gained a foothold among the business men of the city.

"The age of thirty found me the absolute ruler of the coffee trade. I was rich; I was happily married to a lady of my own color and was looking forward to a serene and peaceful life of plenty. I was at that time the most prosperous man in the city.

"Then vague rumors came drifting in from Bahon and Ouanaminthe. A revolution was afoot for deposing Callet, the then ruling power of Cap Haitien. I well knew the terrible results of revolution, property seized and confiscated, families outraged and murder stalking naked in the streets of the city. Callet demanded a sum of money from me for the purpose of buying arms for the defense of the city and I was compelled to furnish the funds he desired.

"Caracol was the name of the revolutionary leader, and he rapidly gained ground and at length drew near the city. Rumor had it that this chief had been absent in France for a long time studying military tactics and that he had a number of trained lieutenants with him.

"You can readily see the effect of such reports among the poorly trained and ill-armed gendarmes of Callet. They deserted in companies, and when Caracol appeared before the walls of the city there remained a single platoon of loyal troops to dis-

pute his advance on the palace. From the barred windows of my home I saw the wild and yelling marauders of Caracol surge down the street with flaming torches toward the gate of the palace. Beneath my very window I saw the flash of machete, heard the dull crash of metal against bone, and saw heads bouncing about the street, finally to stop grinning and gaping against the curbstones. Screams of terror and the curses of coarse men were all. Onward this terrible serpent of death made its way, and when it arrived before the palace there were a few scattered shots, the gate went down with a roar, and yelling demons rushed up the staircase to the hiding place of Callet.

"What took place in that room God only knows; but I do know that the next morning a cheering procession passed under my window and in front strutted a huge black, bearing on the point of his sharp lance the gory and reeking head of Callet.

"**B**Y OFFICIAL proclamation Caracol declared himself ruler of Haiti and called upon all the men of affairs to present themselves before him on a certain date to advise and confer as to the adoption of a new constitution for the government of the country.

"On the appointed day we appeared at the palace, happy in the thought that a man had at last gained power who would insure the safety of our property and lead Haiti into the path of progress. There were besides myself, Morat, the exporter of sugar, and René, the dealer in castor beans.

"As we stood outside waiting to be admitted, I saw a native arrive carrying three small black boxes, made of coffee-wood. They were beautifully polished, and about eight inches long by six in width. He entered the gate and disappeared into the palace. For some unknown reason I began to wonder what these boxes were intended for. Harmless enough they

seemed, but something about them aroused a sinister dread in my brain. Had you lived in Haiti and seen what I have seen, my friend, you could appreciate the terrible meanings such little things often suggested. I did not confide my fears to my companions but just prayed that all might yet be well.

"We were at length admitted and led up the staircase and through a long, gloomy hallway to a room outside of which was a sign denoting the council chamber. We entered, preceded by a footman, and found ourselves within a vast and circular room. All the walls were hung with a black and velvety cloth; the one solitary window was covered by dark red curtains that billowed unceasingly in the breezes from the bay, and the sunbeams broke through in a faint and flickering light; black carpets in which we sank to our ankles covered the floor—together these ghostly things seemed to betoken nothing less than death.

"Suddenly my eyes wandered toward the left, and there I saw something that made my blood curdle in its course.

"There, suspended to a silken rope which hung from the ceiling, was the head of Callet. The hair was twisted into a knot on top of the head and secured to the end of the rope; the eyes were like milk; the mouth was gaping. As we stared, struck dumb with horror, there was a moaning gust of wind. The red curtains flapped and the gruesome head oscillated back and forth like a great pendulum. Still he uttered no syllable. Then I noticed beneath the head a small, plush-covered mahogany table on which rested the three black boxes I had seen the native carrying before we entered the palace.

"As thus we stood and waited for whatever fate had in store for us, a man stepped softly from behind the curtains and stopped before us in the

center of the room. He was bearded, tall and stooping, but a white man.

"'It is unnecessary,' he said in a hollow voice, 'for me to tell you whose head it is that hangs yonder. Such shall be the fate of those who presume to oppose the will of Jules Caracol. So far as a constitution for Haiti is concerned, I am that constitution, the power supreme. I have evidence that the three of you assisted my late rival in procuring arms to repel my attack, and all your combined wealth is not sufficient to purchase immunity from the hatred I bear for you. Your treachery must be paid for with your blood.'

"He clapped his hands together and soldiers appeared from the curtains on every side, encircling us with flashing bayonets. The dastardly deed had been well planned and no orders were issued.

"Presently one of the blacks dragged from the curtains a block of mahogany wood, in the top of which stuck a gleaming ax. Morat was seized roughly and his bare right wrist placed upon the block.

"'This is the well-merited punishment for opposing me, fool,' said the bearded butcher.

"As the ax rose high above the head of Caracol, I closed my eyes and shuddered. There was a grinding, crunching sound. I looked and saw Morat's face twitch in spasms of pain as he grasped the bloody stub of his wrist and sought to stop the flowing stream. There lay the lifeless hand and the fingers were spread far apart.

"The same fate befell poor René, and then my turn came. I laid my bare wrist across the fatal block and again closed my eyes. The ax fell and I felt a sickening, dulling pain for an instant. I looked and saw my yellow and severed hand as it lay clenched on the black carpet of the floor. The narrow band of gold on my ring finger shone with a peculiar brilliance.

"Then a terrible and awe-inspiring thing occurred. Though those severed members lay a dozen feet apart, the hands of Morat and René quivered, the index fingers pointed at the butcher, then with a convulsive jump they met and clasped on the black of the carpet as if in solemn promise of friendship.

"There was awful silence in the room. We dared not move, but stood grasping our gory stubs and waited. Darkness fell like a pall. The light on the black table was lighted and shone with weak and unsteady glimmer. The wind flapped the red curtains. The grisly head of Callet spun around and oscillated back and forth.

"Caracol opened the boxes that lay on the table, and then the realization of the horrible thing he intended to perpetrate burst upon me. They were lined inside with white cloth and were shaped for a human hand. With a malicious smile he picked up the hands, and it was with great difficulty that he opened mine so it would fit into its coffin. As he closed the shiny lid I noted that there was a phrase written on it which read: '*LA MÈME CHOSE.*'

"Then Caracol announced in a loud voice to a number of his attendants who had entered as if by previous plan:

"These boxes, the symbols of my absolute power over Haitian life and limb, will be opened publicly at the eating and drinking places of the city and then sent to the respective families of these traitors who have opposed my will."

"It was midnight when we were dismissed to our homes. The terrible order had been executed.

"**A** NEVER-TO-BE-FORGOTTEN day was that next. As I lay tossing in the grip of a burning fever that had seized my body because of the loss of blood and the horror of the previous

day, a messenger came to tell me that the minions of Caracol had rifed my vaults and were now on their way to my home. I struggled out of my bed, and as I peered through the casement of my window, I saw that the torch had been applied, and my wealth, the labor of years, was ascending on high in sheets of leaping flame and canopies of black smoke. My servants hurried me away, and from the battlements of Sans Souci I watched with wild and staring eyes my fortune sinking into ashes and ruin.

"Now my home in Despies Street burst into a mass of flame and I wept like a child as my good wife led me out of sight of that awful scene.

"The third day after, we moved farther up the mountain for safety till the wrath of Caracol had cooled. As I lay in my grass hut, a fugitive from the city of my birth and labors, one of my servants, on returning from the market place for food, told me that Morat and René had suffered the same fate as I, but had been smuggled aboard a schooner for South America.

"Six months later I returned to the city with my wife, for my power was broken and Caracol could have no further reasons for molesting me. On the day of our return a daughter was born to us."

Now the old man was trembling and I saw a tear trickle down his withered cheek. He called out in his soft but mournful voice:

"Petite, come to your father."

The curtains moved ever so gently. She came slowly toward us and sank into a chair beside her father. She laid her right arm upon the table, and what I saw made me shudder, for out of her white sleeve I saw moving—a red and grisly stub of a wrist.

As the father and daughter bowed their heads and great choking sobs shook their bodies, I quietly arose from the table and walked sorrowfully out of "*LA MÈME CHOSE.*"