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Lips of the Dead

By W. J. STAMPER

“DOWN with Théodor! Death to Black Oscar!”

It was the raucous, horrifying yell of the inevitable Haitian mob as it assembled in the historic Champs de Mars outside the palace in Port au Prince, the scene of hundreds of such meetings that had never meant less than murders and gutters flowing red with human blood. The rapacious rule of President Théodor and his favorite general, Black Oscar, was tottering to its fall. That day Théodor had violated a sacred session of the Senate and dissolved it at the point of the bayonet because it had, for the second time, refused to support him in a dastardly measure to filch more money from the already pauper citizenry.

As night came on, aged senators lay cringing in the filthy prison, in the courtyard of the palace, and double sentinels paced the flagstones outside.

In the domed council chamber of the palace sat Papillon, the favorite senator of the common people, bound hand and foot, subjected to the jeers and insults of the two human beasts. Théodor, lean and emaciated, his yellow, pock-marked face pinched with terror, fingered nervously some loose papers that lay on the table. Oscar, a giant in stature, with a waxed mustache curling up crescent-shaped till the two points almost met above his gaping, black nostrils, pounded his huge fist on the table and fixed his sinister gaze on Papillon.

“Do you think we sleep, idiot?” he stormed. “It is your tongue that has sown the seeds of unrest among the populace and stirred them to rebellion against our

authority. What have you to say to this—and this?” He thrust two papers into the face of Papillon, and his black face twitched with rage.

“I should think it would be unnecessary for *le général* to rob the mails for the same information he might easily obtain by listening to any group of citizens conversing on our street corners. It is the sentiment of all true Haitians. You have robbed the coffers of the treasury; you have murdered our best citizens; and now you seek the aid of the Senate in carrying out your cursed schemes,” sarcastically answered Papillon.

Stung by the truth of this remark, Oscar lifted his great fist and crashed it against the thin lips of the helpless prisoner. Blood streamed from the cracked lips, ran down the chin and stained the white bosom of the senator’s shirt. Papillon, still holding high his proud head, mumbled through his bleeding lips:

“’Tis no better nor redder than that you spilled at Mole St. Nicholas when you shot down Vilbrun, or when you butchered the patriot, Céléstin, at Jacmel. It is the blood of Haiti.”

As Papillon finished speaking, in through the window shone the baleful red glare of the torches of the mob, and through the casement came frenzied yells: “Down with Théodor! Death to Oscar!”

“Has not *le général* some plan? Something must be done,” he whined.

“If they become unruly we can toss—we can toss them a head,” answered the black brute as he curled his waxed mustache and shot a wicked glance at the bleeding Papillon.

"I have ever been the first to draw my sword for Haiti—I have lived for her and her misguided people—and, *mon général*, I shall gladly offer my life and my blood for her," came from the puffed lips of the prisoner.

"Cur! Worshipper of Voodoo!" shrieked Théodor as he confronted Papillon. "You shall speak to the vermin from yonder window—order them to return to their homes, or I swear by the great Capois, your head shall roll at their feet."

"Excellency, I am at your service. Such has been the course of liberty for a thousand years—blood, torture, death. Long live the common people! Long live liberty!"

Without another word Théodor seized him by the collar, lifted him from the chair, snatched the gleaming sword from the scabbard and plunged it through the body of the patriot. With a gurgling groan Papillon sank to the floor, while a crimson stream, gushing from a jagged wound in the breast, poured over the carpet of the room. Then with one horrible stroke Théodor severed the head from the trunk. The gory thing, rolling a few feet, stood upright on the bloody, slippery stub, then slid across the room to the wall. There it sat in the pale light of the lamp, and the hair, still unruffled, was smoothly parted in the middle. Then occurred the most singular awe-inspiring thing that ever greeted the eyes and ears of mortal man. What do men yet know of the mysteries of Voodoo—its powers—the miracles it may perform?

Two great tears oozed from the eyes and dropped to the floor. The dead lips moved and a voice issued from the crimson mouth.

"Tomorrow, Théodor, tomorrow!"

Slowly the quivering lids closed over the glazing eyeballs, then opened, and the eyes fixed in the icy stare of death.

Théodor laughed a hoarse, bestial laugh,

wiped the thickening gore from his blade on the leg of his trousers and said: "Tomorrow, Théodor, tomorrow! A pretty speech indeed, General."

PICKING up the ghastly head by the long black hair and holding it as far away as possible, Théodor walked to the window and deliberately hurled it out into the very face of the mob, yelling through the casement as he watched it catapult across the street: "Haitians, this is but the beginning! Depart at once, lest all the others meet the fate of Papillon."

Screams of rage rent the night. Crash on crash of musketry raked the street below. The mob had rushed the gate and the troops had opened fire.

It was the terrified voice of Théodor. "We must flee, General! To the French legation for our lives!"

"My soldiers will defend the palace to the last man, Excellency. If we must go down, let us go down in a blaze of blood. To the prison!"

The helpless senators cringed beneath the covers as the sentinel passed. His clanking bayonet scabbard sent a hollow sound through the corridors, while his footfalls sounded like some weird echo in an empty tomb.

A key grated in the lock. Théodor and Oscar entered, and the murderous work began. Silently they went from man to man. There was a sickening slushing sound as the sharp points of their blades found the vitals of those dark masses beneath the ragged covers of the rickety bunks.

Now and then a stifed groan, a rattle in the throat, which was suddenly choked by a rush of blood. This ghastly work lasted but a few minutes, and a crime was consummated that will forever brand Haiti as an outlaw among nations. With his own hands, Oscar put out the one dim light, and following in the wake of the

butcher, left the room to darkness and the dead.

Their vile work finished, Théodor and Oscar fled through the night and sought shelter at the French legation.

Daylight revealed their absence from the palace. News of the massacre spread like wildfire to every nook and corner of the city. The troops defending the palace fled when they discovered their chiefs had deserted them. Papillon had been followed in death by all the other senators, and their souls cried aloud for vengeance.

Groups of cursing men and weeping women rushed from house to house, from hiding-place to hiding-place. Swift horsemen galloped over the roads leading to Gonaïves and Saint Marc in search of the fugitives.

The sun was low in the heavens, when at length came word that Théodor and Oscar had been found in hiding at the French legation. The bugles sounded the assembly, and the bloodthirsty mob, armed with axes, spades, and whatever other weapons could be procured, moved upon the legation. The streets were choked with a seething, writhing mass of humanity, undulating like some huge serpent as it approaches its prey.

The warning voice of the gray-haired consul, as he stood on the portico of the legation house, pleading with the bloodthirsty mob to remember the sacredness of an embassy, was drowned with rasping yells.

"Give us Théodor! Give us Black Oscar!"

There was a sudden irresistible surge of that black mass. The gate and fence went down with a crash. On, on, up to the very doors it went. There was a splintering of wood, a rattling of broken glass, screams and shrieks. Oscar was dragged out first, and his body riddled with bullets.

As his black carcass lay in the gutter,

oozing red from a thousand punctures, and the thick tongue lolled out from between the yellow teeth, cheer after cheer went up from the multitude.

THE exit of Théodor was more orderly. With downcast eyes his lean figure shambled out of the building between three huge blacks, one of whom carried three stout ropes. The mob gave back to permit ample passage, and strangely enough the street looking westward was without a single soul. There was at last a peculiar system, even in its innate madness, in which this mob carried out its vengeance.

The prisoner arrived at the edge of the street amid deafening shouts: "Murderer, where is our Papillon?"

A buggy arrived, pulled by a strong Haitian mule.

Now, as if by mutual consent, the three blacks took charge of the situation. They proceeded to secure the end of one rope about the neck of Théodor, the other end to the axle of the buggy. The other two ropes were fastened above the ankles, leaving one end of each free. The ropes about the ankles were, however, much longer than the one about the neck. As certain ones of the mob grasped the intention of the three blacks they gave loud and prolonged cheers of approval.

At last all was ready. The buggy was in motion toward the west. Théodor, striving to keep on his feet, had his legs jerked from under him by the two men manning the loose ends of the ropes about the ankles. He was bruised beyond description. His neck was scarred and bleeding from the noose, his tongue swollen and covered with dust. Bloody froth oozed from his nose and mouth as he was jolted from one side of the street to the other.

Suddenly he ceased to struggle and strive to keep his feet. There was apparent a certain limpness of the body that gave

evidence of unconsciousness. Two trails of red showed in the street behind where the body was being dragged. Sharp stones wearing through the clothing had bit into the bare flesh.

Onward this weird procession went, followed by the crowding, yelling, approving mob, onward toward the west. At length the buggy stopped beneath the shadow of the Sacred Arch. The mob, like hungry vultures encircling a piece of carrion, surged around in a great circle with eyes staring and necks craning lest one single detail of this noisome scene be missed.

There fell upon this vengeful multitude a solemn silence, as from somewhere came the measured beat of the tom-tom—a terrible sound, such a sound as is heard in the fastness of the northern mountains when the priests lead the death-march. One of the blacks was untying the ropes from the gory victim; another was removing the grime and dirt from the distorted face with a damp gunny-sack.

What could this mean? Could it be that the hearts of those two men were relenting? Low growls and sharp hisses escaped from the mob. A bottle of spirits, the powerful heathen rum, was held beneath the distended nostrils. A few drops were poured into the gaping, bruised mouth.

A convulsive shudder passed through the body. The chest heaved, rose and fell. Consciousness was returning.

The circle had narrowed and the mob was on the point of pouncing upon the reviving victim, when one of the blacks, rising from where he knelt over the prostrate figure, extended his ham-like hand high above his head and shouted with such a stentorian voice that it could be heard by the most distant one of the crowd:

"Are you fools, Haitians? Would you have this beast who has glutted himself upon our reddest blood die before your vengeance has been appeased? Let him

writhe in agony; is that not good, countrymen?"

"Yes, yes!" came the answer from every mouth of that vast and blood-craving throng.

A ladder was placed against the face of the Sacred Arch. The last rays of the setting sun shed a purplish light over the city; the drums beat the measured march of the dead. Théodor opened his bleary eyes and shuddered.

Two long ropes were tied under the armpits. Two heavy stones, attached to the other ends, were hurled over the top of the arch. Slowly, but without much difficulty, two men hoisted upward the spare, bedraggled figure of Théodor; upward, till it dangled against the solid wall of the archway. Loud jeers rent the gathering dusk of approaching night: "*Vive le Président! Vive Théodor!*"

Now one of the blacks was mounting the ladder. He carried under his arm a small chest, such as carpenters use.

The mob, expectant, gloating, their hawk-like eyes on the cruel scene, stood breathless—waiting.

At last the top was reached. The black secured the peculiar chest to the topmost rung. The mob surged up about the foot of the ladder. A thousand eager, curious faces were upturned, as he seized the right arm of Théodor, extended it to full length along the wall and, without looking, scrambled among the contents of the chest. He drew out a small hand-ax and a long spike. With one powerful blow he drove the pointed nail through the bony hand, deep into the adobe of the wall.

Beads of black blood trickled down and spattered in the dust below. Mortal agony twisted and distorted the pock-marked face of Théodor, and sharp rasping cries issued from the swollen mouth. Another blow, in strange unison with the beat of the tom-tom, pinioned the other arm. The legs dangled; the body writhed in the throes of

approaching death. The skinny legs were drawn apart. Again, and yet again, rose and fell the fatal ax. There was a gritting sound, such as is made by the surgeon's saw, when the cruel spikes pierced the bones of the feet.

"Vive Théodor! Vive Théodor!" shrieked the demoniacal mob.

Mortal man could not long survive such torture. Slowly the head sank down upon the scrawny chest, the eyes bulged from their sockets. The cooling blood had ceased to flow and now merely oozed from around the nails.

Grasping the disheveled hair with his left hand, the black straightened up the bowed head, the ax ascended once more

and fell upon the distended leaders of the bare throat.

The mob slunk back as the gory head dropped to the street, rolled a few feet, stood upright on the bloody stub of the neck.

As the glazing eyeballs fixed in the cold stare of death, there issued from the purple lips a scarcely audible murmur:

"Today, Papillon, today!"

Had Black Oscar been yet among the living, he alone, of all that multitude, would have noted how strangely these words from dead lips appeared an answer to the words from other dead lips, once sadly murmured at dead of night, in the domed council chamber of the palace.