

Weird Tales

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STRANGE TALES FROM
SANTO DOMINGO

No.
5

The Phantom Chibo

by Arthur J. Burks



Author of "Luisma's Return," "Thus Spoke the Prophetess," etc.

JOSÉ ESPINOSA, black, wholly a brute, three times a murderer, had escaped from Nigua Prison just a week before the events herein narrated. His sensational break for liberty was the most bewildering in the history of the Dominican Sing Sing. It had taken his jailers three hours to discover how he had won clear of his cell and from the jail. They had opened the cell in the morning, as was customary when there was outside work to be done, and had found their prize bird flown. It developed later that he had escaped through the roof of the cell, after making a four foot leap straight into the air, hanging by one hand while he shifted the iron ventilator to allow for the passage of his body, and then worming his way into an outer corridor through a transom in the office room above—a transom so small that it would hardly have permitted the passage of a half grown boy. Yet Espinosa, weighing almost two hundred pounds, squeezed through it and got out of the prison and out of the stockade—which was twelve feet high and made of viciously barbed wire. He slipped by the sentries, who were posted twelve feet apart around the entire enclosure. He killed the gate-

keeper by strangling him with a sleeve of his prison uniform. Then he changed clothes with the gatekeeper, took the key to the gate, slipped through and away into the darkness, carrying the keeper's automatic and ammunition, sixty rounds of the latter, besides two full clips.

Next day *El Siglo* and the *Listin Diario* were full of the new sensation. And the day following there was more sensation, for Espinosa had sent a letter to each of the papers, stating that he would never go back to Nigua alive, and that he would shoot to kill at the first sight of either *Guardia* or *Policia Municipal* on his trail.

It was common knowledge at once that José came nightly into Villa Francesca, a section of the Dominican capital. He had plenty of friends in this very questionable section, all of which friends were only too willing to aid Espinosa in outwitting them.

In this manner began José Espinosa's reign of terror. No *Guardia* or *Policia* would go against him singly, for all knew that José meant what he had written, and thirty dollars a month is small pay for risking one's life. To seek him in a body were useless, for he had friends on

each and every corner, and any body of men was sufficient excuse for that strange warning whistle invented by Espinosa and his friends.

"*Quidadió!*"

The word in this instance means "take care" and one can render it so closely by whistling that it is understood at once. Try it. José, wherever he might be, would always hear the whistle, for his friends everywhere repeated it, picking it up and passing it on, just as buglers repeat bugle calls. Entering any street in Villa Francesca after dark, if you were a stranger even, you would feel the gooseflesh creep up your spine as you heard the weird sound of warning, and would automatically move out into the center of the street to avoid dark corners. If you knew the story—and you would know it if you had been in Santo Domingo more than twenty-four hours—you would know that José Espinosa, the black brute, was somewhere near and that he was tightening his grip on his automatic, perhaps peering out at you from a crack in the door of a native house. You carried your hand free of your pockets with careful unconcern.

I WAS a member of our secret service at this time and the doings of José Espinosa did not interest me officially. It was a job of the Dominican authorities. These authorities were very much afraid. When a people fears the darkness of night, a flesh and blood brute of a black man becomes a doubly fearful thing.

Then one of my men made a mistake. A costly mistake for him. Lieutenant Ruiz, of the *Policia*, encountered one of my agents in an alley in Villa Francesca and informed him that he had just seen José Espinosa armed to the teeth, drinking openly with a loose woman in the Café de los Santos. My agent asked Ruiz why he did not make José prisoner. Ruiz's shrug was a master-

piece of eloquence. My agent took it upon himself to offer assistance, which was eagerly accepted by Ruiz.

The agent walked to a street corner with Ruiz, and the latter pointed out to him the Café de los Santos. The agent happened to know Espinosa, having seen him repeatedly at Nigua Prison. He walked boldly toward the café. Before he reached it José came out into the street with swaggering unconcern, and looked casually to right and left. He saw my agent and faced him at once, hands on hips and staring belligerently. The agent stopped about ten paces distant.

"I want you, José," he said quietly.

"So do several other people," replied the black, just as quietly, "but they won't take me, and neither will you!"

It was done so quickly that my agent hadn't a chance. He sank to the ground without a sound, a bullet hole squarely between his eyes. José emptied the remainder of the clip into the agent's body. He slipped home another clip and fired bullets into several doors near by, hints for people to keep their heads inside. Then he walked out to the end of the street into the jungle, which was so cut up with trails that pursuit was useless without Dominican guides—and a Dominican guide wouldn't have followed José Espinosa for half the wealth of Santo Domingo!

Next day there was a new challenge in the papers. José had cast his defiance into the teeth of the Forces of Occupation! He knew that agent and thought that the secret service of the Occupation was on his trail—which it was as soon as knowledge of the killing came to the ears of the governor.

I was given the job of hunting down the killer—and as much assistance as I might require.

This was in the morning after the killing. Late that night while I, in civilian clothes, was riding in a

Dominican car down one of the streets in Villa Francesca, I heard the murderous pow of a service automatic and fancied I could hear the bullet sizzle as it flipped past in front of my face. I jumped out and spent two hours in the search for the would-be assassin—without avail. Next day I received a note from Espinosa, in which he deplored his marksmanship and promised that he would take more care next time!

Then began a game of hide-and-seek that lasted for three weeks, ending at last in the marsh of the phantom *chibo*. "Chibo" is the Dominican word for goat. The marsh is outside the limits of the capital and is formed by the rise and fall of the tide, which sets back into Ozama River. The marsh lies in the southern angle formed by the joining of the two rivers. A dank, evil-smelling place, overgrown with giant tules.

The phantom *chibo* was a contemporary of Espinosa's. Its story began a few days after the escape from prison of the murderer. Rumor had it that every night, just as the bells on Cathedral Colon boomed out the hour of midnight, the piteous bleating of a goat could be heard from the midst of the marsh. This bleating lasted for ten minutes, never longer. It was first noticed by people who were compelled to pass Agnadulcie (the name of the swamp) after night-fall. They were country folk who had been kept after hours in the marts of trade.

The phantom was investigated by Dominican police and no footprints were found, except a few marks of human feet. Goat-owners were ordered to lock up their animals after dark and they obeyed the order. Yet, each night after the order went into effect, that piteous bleating came from the swamp and lasted exactly ten minutes. And every goat in the section was carefully accounted for! So the natives named it a phantom

and gave Agnadulcie a wide berth after nightfall.

Two weeks after José's insulting note to me I received another from him, which said that he would be in the marsh of the phantom *chibo* at exactly midnight of the night following, and if I wasn't afraid of ghostly animals to come and get him. He generously allowed me to bring another man along—to carry me home, he said!

Ten minutes before the time for the strange tryst with the black, another agent, than whom there was no nervier in any of Uncle Sam's services, and myself, stood in the opaque shadow of a bayohunda tree at the edge of the swamp, our eyes striving to pierce the gloom of the evil-smelling quagmire. A lane, free of tules, led directly away from us into the heart of the marsh. It was a blacker wedge of gloom in the darkness. The tules waved oddly in the light breeze and some of their dry tops rubbed together with a soft grating sound. I looked at the radium-dial of my wrist-watch. Five minutes to 12.

I sat down quietly and removed shoes and stockings. The swamp could be waded easily, if one felt one's way and fought free of sinkholes, but it would be an evil task. I instructed my agent to watch the lane and whatever came out of it.

Then it came. Prepared as I was for its coming, I started back and wiped the cold sweat from my brow. That piteous bleating from the very heart of the swamp! Weird, ghostly, unearthly, strangely challenging.

I fought down my dread and sprang directly into that dark lane through the swamp, sinking almost to my hips at once. I floundered directly toward the weird bleating. I fancied that there was a note of fierce exultation in the sound as the noise of my coming fled before me. I held an automatic in each hand. I fell once

and filled the muzzle of one of them with ooze. I thrust the useless weapon into my waistband with an oath of exasperation. The bleating was much closer each second. Would it last ten minutes this time? I plunged ahead.

Whatever it was that made the noise had begun to move, making a wide circle around me, heading for the shore. I swung toward it and felt myself plunging into a sinkhole. I regained the path, such it was, and moved on in the original direction. Then the bleating ceased, with an odd crescendo of sound, right at the edge of the swamp where I had left the other agent.

"My God! Edwards, come back—"

It was the voice of the agent, broken off short, a gurgling mumble, a strangling cough. I turned to retrace my steps, my mind swamped with horror. A heavy blow landed at the base of my brain. Even as I landed in the soft ooze I could feel strange hands seize me under the armpits. Then I knew no more.

I came to myself with a curse of pain and sat up. I was lying at the river side of the swamp, with the lower part of my body in the water—and crabs were nibbling at my bare feet! I had seen drowned men taken from the river after they had been at the mercy of the crabs and fishes, and I couldn't get away from that place quick enough. I floundered back along that trail to where I had left that other agent.

I found him there, faithful to the last, but with a gash in his throat through which the life blood had long since oozed away. His body was cold, proof that I had been unconscious for a long time. I knew that José Espinosa had done enough for one night and that he was perhaps a long way off now. I knew that I could now use my flashlight with perfect safety. I directed the beam here and there, and found a queer mark in the soft earth. The depressions which I saw seemed

to have been made by dragging a heavy body along, with the legs touching the ground. The trail was muddy and easily followed; but I lost it on a piece of high ground above Agudalcie, where it vanished among the great hummocks of coral rock with which the place is strewn.

Heart-heavy with dread and sorrow, I lifted my faithful agent and carried him back toward the city.

Next day I received another note from José Espinosa. He stated that he had left me alive because I was furnishing him with more amusement and sport than he had ever experienced in his life before. He hinted that he might tire of even this; and when he did—

I COULDN'T get that bleating sound out of my mind that day—it haunted me even in the glaring sunlight of noon. Imagine my horror and amaze when, walking down Separacion Street for my lunch, I heard that very sound issue from the canopy of the Sacred Arch of the Conde, which is at the western end of the street!

I faced about and hurried back. A crippled Haitian squatted there in the shade and he was making that eery noise for the edification of a mob of schoolchildren, who stood grouped about him. This man, a beggar of some note, was so badly crippled that he was compelled to move along the streets on his hands and knees, his black head, adorned with a spade beard at the chin, wagging from side to side, drooling sounds issuing from his lips. His fame as a mimic was known throughout the capital city. It was his stock in trade.

I spoke to him and he looked up sullenly, refusing to say a word, glaring at me with rheumy eyes that were red-rimmed. I saw that it was useless to question him, so turned to the policeman who is stationed always in the Arch, and asked him about the

black man, whom I took to be a Haitian.

"Oh, that is only Felipe La Chucha, a nineteen-year-old imbecile. He is perfectly harmless. Just as you came up he was mimicking the phantom *chibo* for the kids here!"

I looked at the man's shriveled legs and recalled the strange depressions in the soft earth beside my murdered agent the night before. Then I swore at myself for an imaginative fool. Felipe could never have traveled to Aguadulcie on those deformed limbs of his. I was creating a mare's nest.

Then I received another note from José Espinosa, repeating word for word the very challenge he had sent me before, in accepting which I had lost my bravest and best agent.

He named the next night for the tryst and told me to come alone this time.

I thought it over carefully. I wished to bring in this fellow with my own hands. But what single pair of hands could compass the deed? I decided that it was foolish to take the risk. His life was already forfeit many times over.

But I stood alone the next night on the same spot where I had stood that other night, which had ended so fatally. I am sure, however, that José never suspected that in the woods just back of me were four other men, each lying with his cheek against the stock of a Lewis machine gun, extra belts of ammunition within reach. Not even our breathing could be heard as we waited for midnight and the eery bleating of the phantom *chibo*.

I HEARD first the distant booming of the bells on Cathedral Colon. The sound was drowned out by that weird bleating—as of a frightened goat sinking to his death in the quagmire. I heard one of my men utter a startled oath, quickly muffled. I stood still and waited quietly, for ten minutes.

The bleating ceased, and silence settled over the swamp. I knew that José must be satisfied that I had refused his challenge this time. I gripped my flashlight, finger on the switch, in my left hand, holding my automatic firmly in my right. Five minutes—ten! I heard a gentle swishing, sucking sound from that opaque wedge before me. The sound was approaching slowly. A pause. The sound continued. Always approaching. Another pause and I knew that the time had come.

"Now!" I shouted.

I threw a wedge of light directly into that oozy lane.

I saw a tall, mud-covered figure—with a strange, animal-like creature dangling, face to the front, across the upright figure's shoulder! A black creature, ugly, deformed, a knife held in the teeth above the spade beard! A head that moved slowly from right to left—always wagging. The tall figure sank into the ooze and the whole face of the black creature disappeared with the putttttttttt! of the four machine guns.

The firing ceased, and silence, deep and significant, fell over Aguadulcie.

WE EXAMINED them by the glow of our flashes. José had paid his score and the phantom *chibo* had been laid. The tule-bordered lane was a shambles.

Later I learned that Felipe La Chucha was José's son, by a woman of long ago—a woman whom a one-time president had sent to Beatta Island to die of her many diseases, and who had left this thing of hers behind to be made a mock of by the Dominican populace in the city streets—and to amuse the younger generation that was rising in the land!

NOTE.—This series of "Strange Tales From Santa Domingo" began in the February number of WEIRD TALES. Back copies will be supplied by the publishers, postpaid, for 25 cents each.