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THE VULTURE of PIGNON



Author of "Lips of the Dead" and "Fidel Bassin"

IT WAS in that season of the year when the blistering tropical sun had singed the grassy plains of northern Haiti to a sickly yellow, when all the waterholes about the isolated village of Thomassique were but stagnant and malaria-breeding pools, and all the cattle had slunk away to feed along the green stretches of the Artibonite River some twenty miles distant, that Captain Felix, commandant of the town, realized he must get a message through to Hinche and request medicine, for more than half of his command was suffering from malaria and he anticipated an attack of the Cacos at any time.

He accordingly sent for Corporal Levenz, one of his bravest and most dependable men, who he believed could carry out this hazardous mission if it lay in the power of mortal man.

Presently Levenz entered and stood at salute before his superior.

"The time has come," said the captain in a worried tone, "when we must have more men and medicine. I must tell you that in sending you to perform this mission, I send you into a seething nest of Cacos, where death will be lurking behind every

bush, every stone, and by every watering place. Take two men with you and deliver this message to General Fauche at Hinche. Read it over carefully and commit it to memory so that if capture seems imminent you can cast it away. If Norde were aware of our present straits he would lose no time in attacking."

It was written on a faded leaf of paper. The corporal read it:

General Fauche, Commandant of Hinche:

Half my command unfit for duty with malaria. Norde, the Caco chief, reported to be at Cerca-la-Sourca. Expect attack at any time. Send quinine and three squads at earliest practicable date.

FELIX.

"How soon can you bring me an answer?" asked the captain as the corporal finished reading.

"Before sunset of tomorrow," Levenz replied, "if my horse does not fail me"; and he smiled just enough to show the gold tooth which he, as a true Haitian, considered his most excellent ornament.

"That is all. Good luck," said Felix, as the corporal tucked the message into the inner pocket of his blouse and hurried away to prepare for the journey.

IT WAS 4 o'clock of that afternoon when the three horsemen, dusty and tired, rode down the yellow banks of the Artibonite. As they drew rein and dismounted beneath a giant cottonwood, they were not aware that now, as all day, their every move had been seen and noted by the wary scouts of Norde. After drinking of the cool waters and washing their begrimed faces, Levenz and one trooper stretched themselves upon the ground in the shade for a nap, while the other sat down near by as a sentinel, with his carbine in the hollow of his arm.

Through the vines and shrubbery not fifty yards from the guard, dark and sinister forms glided noiselessly from cover to cover, and in their crouched circlings drew nearer and nearer to the trio. The flashing and murderous eyes of these black minions of Norde gleamed exultingly at the three carbines and the bulging bandoleers of ammunition. This capture would be a wonderful stroke for their chief, who each day felt the necessity of procuring more serviceable arms and ammunition before he could make his long desired attack upon Thomassique.

The sentinel, exhausted by the journey and attacked by that failing so common to the Haitian, the urge to fall asleep in the sun, forgetting that the lives of his comrades and the safe arrival of the message rested entirely upon his vigilance, at length laid his rifle aside, and instantly fell into a heavy and senseless slumber. This was exactly what the scouts had anticipated, and like two lithe, black panthers they stalked the victim. Now they were crouching above the guard. There was the bright flash of the deadly machete lifted high, a sickening, crunching noise, and the hapless sentinel lay a bloody, gurgling corpse, with his skull cleft to the chin.

In spite of the noise of the blow, Levenz and the other trooper still

slept. But they were soon aroused by kicks and curses, to find themselves disarmed, bound and looking up into the flashing eyes of the Cacos, those brutes whom they hated and feared. They well knew the truth of that vague tradition among the Federal soldiers, that at some remote period a squad of troopers had been trapped, captured, led away to the mountains, and but one had returned to recount a horrible tale of torture and death at the hands of Norde, better known as the Vulture of Pignon.

With the legs of their prisoners securely bound beneath the bellies of the horses, they mounted behind them with the carbines and precious ammunition and hurried away toward the lair of their chief, leaving the dead trooper to the tender mercies of the bristly wild boars that roam the banks of the Artibonite in the dry season of the year.

The sun had disappeared behind the gaunt and jagged peaks of Mamon, and long, ominous shadows cast their gloomy forms through the deep and pathless vales. It was the fall of a Haitian twilight, filled with the strange and creepy sounds of the wild and boundless mountains, the sharp chirp of the night birds, the bray of the burros, the dismal and reverberating call of the conch-horn as it summoned back to camp those great black sentinels who guarded all approaches to the lair of the Caco chieftain. By day, every peak for miles beyond the precincts of the camp had shown the restless pacings of silent watchers, but with the fall of night all were called in except a single mounted post of four men stationed in the center of the one narrow gorge that made access to the camp possible during the hours of darkness.

There was a sound of approaching hoofbeats in the thickening dusk, and the sharp command of the sentinel rang out as he blocked the passage.

"*Halte! Qui vous!*"

"Caco, Caco," came the answer.

The sentinel stood at the ready, with his finger on the trigger, as he ordered: "*Avanz!*"

The sergeant of the watch had stepped outside from the lean-to of bark at the sounds of the voices, and his dark face took on a look of pain and fear, but he uttered no word, as he recognized the bound form of Levenz, a comrade of other days when the two had soldiered together under La Falais at Chardonierres. They had been as brothers for years until the sergeant had been forced to flee and join the Cacos because he had incurred the displeasure of his captain. As he motioned the sentinel to pass the party, there was sorrow in his heart, for he knew the hatred entertained by Norde for captives from the Federal army. He was in high favor with his chief, and he resolved to intercede on behalf of his friend.

The party passed on and arrived at length at the main camp. The prisoners were hurried to a small adobe hut and thrust roughly into a dark and foul-smelling room while the scout in charge made his way to the shack in which the great chief had his headquarters.

NORDE, a great gaunt ape of a man, sat behind a rude table signing some papers for distribution among the peasantry for the purpose of attracting recruits to his standard. He stroked his bearded jowl with one hand, and his face was wreathed in a cruel and sinister smile as he muttered to himself: "I shall sleep in Thomassique within the week, or Norde is a lamb."

At this instant he lifted his shaggy head and saw the scout standing in the doorway, holding the carbines and bandoleers.

"Great work, Baquet!" he exclaimed. "Where did you make the haul?"

The scout explained the happenings of the day and on finishing handed him the crumpled message taken from Levenz.

Norde read the note and as a horrible purpose took root in his blood-reeking soul he said: "Men sick. Reinforcements. Norde at Cerca-la-Source. Old Felix shall have an answer, but it shall be penned by the Vulture of Pignon."

He smiled evilly.

"Baquet, fetch the prisoners," he commanded, and the scout passed out.

Presently he re-entered, and the two troopers stood before the man they feared more than the wild beasts of the mountains.

"Ahem! A corporal," chuckled Norde. "How go things at Thomassique, my fine lad of the gold tooth? How many men has Felix all told, sick and well?"

"I joined only the day before I was sent to carry the message," lied Levenz, "and could not say, sir. I heard rumors that a large patrol of our troops was operating in the vicinity of Cerca-la-Source, but how many were in the patrol I could not say, as they had been sent out before I arrived."

"How soon did your captain expect an answer to this message?" Norde questioned as he unfolded the paper.

"I told him I would bring back an answer before sunset of tomorrow," replied Levenz, and a cold chill stole up his back as he noted the sinister smile of his questioner.

Norde sat for a full minute in deep thought. Could the prisoners have seen behind the veil of that blood-ridden brain, they would have smothered with horror.

At length Norde spoke, and there was a tone of sarcasm in his voice.

"I respect that soldier who can tell his chief that he will carry out orders with the utmost speed and does carry them out. You shall spend the night

in the camp of the Vulture of Pignon and, unless your horse falls you, you shall carry back an answer before sunset of tomorrow, as you promised. I am indeed sorry to detain you over night but I believe you may be of some interest to my followers, many of whom you know, I am sure."

As Norde finished speaking there was noise and bustle outside in the camp, and he led the two prisoners to the door.

FIRES were burning in a dozen places, and around them in hunched circles sat every type of human being that inhabits the plains and mountains of northern Haiti: shriveled old men, smoking long pipes; dirty old hags with stringy and matted hair falling tangled over their bare shoulders; dirty children, both male and female, whining and tugging at their mother's ragged skirts. Some of the women were bolting huge slabs of beef down their skinny throats, others were holding a sort of bowl to their lips and shoveling or raking a greasy mixture of beans and tallow into their mouths. All Haitian generals carry a great troop of camp followers, and Norde was no exception to the rule.

The fires flung bright lights far up against the dark crags of the mountains and played over the black and yellow faces of the Cacos. Everyone sprang up as the guttural and commanding voice of Norde rang out.

"Assemble, Army of Mamon, for we have visitors tonight, and they wear the uniform of that rascal La Falais."

They surged about their chief, uttering oaths and curses as they saw that in fact the prisoners were dressed in the garb of the Federal army.

"Bid Campan David come here," Norde ordered.

A loud and prolonged cheer went up from the whole crowd, for they

knew what it meant when their leader sent for Campan David—a night of merrymaking, a night of bloody torture, and a morning sun blazing upon the drunken and stupefied bodies of every man and woman in camp.

Presently there came writhing through the multitude an awful and disgusting form. It was Campan David, the notorious voodoo priest, the demon who sat by day in his unspeakable filth and vermin, and planned every cursed form of torture the brain of a beast could devise.

He was tall and skinny, bare to the waist, his body greased with the foul-smelling sheep tallow. His black face was drawn and emaciated. Each cheek, and his forehead, showed a splotch of white paint. His blood-shot eyes, wildly rolling, seemed seeking a victim to be rent and destroyed, and he grinned like a demon as he spied the prisoners. Two decayed and yellow fangs protruded from beneath his bestial lip. Around his long and flabby neck he wore a string from which dangled and rattled a score of human teeth; and some of the teeth had gold fillings in them. As no men of the North had fillings of gold in their teeth except Federal soldiers sent from Port-au-Prince, the story of a squad that had died at the hands of Norde came back to the helpless prisoners with certain and awful truth. From his waist down Campan David wore a sort of skirt, made from the untanned hide of a bull, killed but two days before, and the stench from that green and disgusting thing was horrible. The tail of the bull dragged along behind and was still full of mountain burs.

On arriving before Norde, he lifted high above his head his black and grease-smears arms, shrieking with a shrill voice: "Ai-ai-ai."

As his accents slowly fell and swung into a singsong chant, every one stood with bowed head.

Finally he addressed Norde.

"Most noble chief, Campan David has come. What does his Excellency desire?"

"We have here, holy Campan," answered Norde, "two of the soldiers of La Falais, the man who has stolen away Haitian liberty. It is my wish that the sacred rites be performed and that their blood be spilled in retaliation for the lives of those of our number who have fallen before the bullets and bayonets of the Federal soldiery."

"It shall be as you say, worthy chief," replied the festering beast.

A LARGE circle was formed, in the center of which was placed a smooth white stone. At a word from Campan, a half dozen Cacos seized the prisoners, ripped off their clothing and bound them hand and foot to two posts near the stone. Dozens and dozens of gourds were brought, many of them holding as much as four gallons of taffia, or white rum. The fires leaped higher and higher as great loads of brushwood were piled on by the expectant Cacos. When all were seated a bull was led sniffing into the center of the circle where Campan and Norde stood beside the prisoners. At the direction of the priest one of the blacks plunged a bayonet into the bull's chest, just behind its left foreleg. There was a elushing sound and it sank quivering to its haunches. Its throat was opened and Campan caught the blood in a gourd, uttering as he marked the glazing eyes and throbbing stream, that weird and awe inspiring chant: "*Al-ai-ai-ai.*"

As the bull rolled over on its side and its head flopped against the ground in death, the priest dipped his long finger in the blood, stooped over the smooth white stone and made a cross, while the chant went on in measured beat. He then poured some of the thick blood into each of

the other gourds of taffia and stirred it up with his grimy hands as all the Cacos looked on and longed for the signal to throw that terrible mess down their throats.

All was ready for the night of debauchery and death. The liquor must go the rounds before the torture began.

"Summon the third relief from its post," ordered Norde. "No enemy will come tonight. Federal soldiers do not march when they have malaria and are commanded by such a spineless pig as old Felix. Not one of my men shall miss this rare treat.

"Drink to the sack of Thomassique and the torture of our enemies," he yelled as he lifted a gourd with both hands to his black lips.

Like thirsty dogs the whole multitude gulped down the loathsome liquid and cheered: "To the sack of Thomassique and the torture of our enemies."

At this moment the third relief arrived, and the sergeant, after making his way through the crowd with great difficulty, stopped with downcast face before the Caco chief.

"Excellency," he began, "I have served you long and faithfully. I carried you wounded and bleeding from the field of Anses-à-Pitre when you were about to fall into the hands of La Falais. I have stood by you always and in everything. I come now to ask of you a small favor. Spare this corporal the terrible torture at the hands of Campan David. If he must die, strike him down mercifully with sudden death, for he is a brave man and deserves a better fate."

"That the Vulture of Pignon should see that day," stormed Norde, as his black face twisted in anger, "when his most trusted sergeant should come forth to plead the cause of a Federal soldier, in opposition to that torture demanded by the sacred rites of voodoo!"

"It is but a little thing I ask, Excellency, and I ask it in the fair name of justice, than which there is nothing more sacred."

"No more of his sacrilegious prattle!" broke in Campan David, as he strode nearer with the rotting and putrid bull-hide flapping against his bony knees. "He is a traitor, to thus seek to defeat the holy mandates of voodoo. The great chief has asked that the sacred rites be performed. Let the sergeant's blood also stain the holy stone lest the great and powerful gods of our religion forbid the consummation of that scheme dearest to the heart of our leader. A sad day it is when a puny and prating sergeant presumes to dictate to his chief."

Norde, his beastly brain beclouded by the stupefying taffia and maddened by Campan's intimation that unless the sergeant's blood were shed the heathen gods would defeat his long-cherished desire of capturing and sacking Thomassique, jerked his heavy machete from his girdle and slashed down upon the sergeant's shoulder a terrible and crunching blow. All the leaders and bones were severed. The left arm and part of the side were sheared off. The heart and left lung were plainly visible as the victim sank to the ground with a choking sob. As he lay quivering and bleeding on the sand, Campan stooped, dipped his talonlike finger in the reddening pool and made another cross on the smooth, white stone.

Again went up that weird and hair-raising chant from the priest: "*AI-ai-ai.*"

The fiery liquor went the rounds a hundred times. The tomtoms began their doleful and measured beat. The yelling and drunken Cacos, blood-mad, swayed around the prisoners to the awful sounds of the death march. The prisoners stared blankly at the miserable scene and awaited the inevitable end. The red flames leaping

up from the fires disclosed a fearful sight, worse than hell itself. The corpse still lay twitching and gaping in the bloody sand alongside the stiffening bull.

THE time had arrived for the human torture. Norde and hisimps of Satan sat down and hunched themselves in a circle where they could see every move of the torturer. They grinned and cursed, uttering drunken words of approval as Campan selected a flaming firebrand.

He approached Levenz brandishing the fatal brand and his wild eyes gleamed with hatred as he broke into the chant: "*AI-ai-ai.*"

He thrust forward the blazing point and placed it against the bare stomach of the victim. It sank slowly into the sensitive tissues, through and into the intestines with crackling and frying sound. Levenz bit his thin lips till the blood ran out and trickled down his bare and heaving chest. A man with less fortitude and endurance would have died instantly before this ghastly ordeal. The brand was withdrawn, leaving a cavernous and charred hole. The same process was followed with the other prisoner. He screamed with mortal agony. His body convulsed. A shiver ran through him. He moaned and was dead. When the priest saw that death had come, he leaped forward like a madman and clawed the dead face with his talons till the blood oozed out and wet his fingers; then he stooped and made a cross on the smooth, white stone.

The gourds were refilled, emptied, and the dance began once more to the beat of the tomtom, while Levenz stared on the ghastly scene with fast-glazing eyeballs, bulging out and then receding into their sockets.

They danced and yelled in their drunken fury till, exhausted, they began to fall, one at a time, upon the ground. Old hags of women with

their bushy hair flying in the wind leaped up and down till they were hoarse from screaming, dropped down in huddled heaps and snored. At length no one remained on his feet except Campan and Norde, who staggered around holding each other's hands.

Finally they reeled up to Levenz, and they saw he still breathed. Campan picked up a rough stone, smashed out the gold tooth that had showed so plainly when the corporal last spoke to his captain, and fastened it to the string about his neck. He swiped his hand across the bleeding mouth of the victim, reeled over to the smooth stone and made such a splotch with his bloody hand that all the crosses were blotted out in one solid stain of red. Then he sank down to snore in his rotting bull-hide, while Norde, with yet a little of his cursed reason left, staggered away to execute the other dastardly deed he had planned in his more sober moments.

MIDNIGHT came, and the fires burned themselves down into heaps of white ashes; and after hours of silence, broken only by the snores and moans of the drunken beasts, the sun blazed up over the eastern mountains, and a horse, the horse of Corporal Levenz, loosed by the hands of

the Vulture of Pignon, sped down the silent gorge and flew like the wind across the seared plains toward the Artibonite.

The day was far spent when Captain Felix, shading his eyes with his hands, gazed long and anxiously to the northward for the first signs of dust that would betoken the return of his patrol and an answer to his message. It was now late, but he felt the answer would come, for Levenz had said he would bring it before sunset, and Levenz had never disappointed him.

A cloud of dust suddenly became visible far out the trail and then the figure of a horse. Onward it came. But what was that the captain saw? The horse was riderless, and as it stopped before him, panting, foam-flaked and dusty, he noticed that it carried only a *macout* or double bag.

With trembling hand he lifted the flap and drew forth a loathsome, gory and ghastly thing—a human head!

It was the head of Corporal Levenz. The gold tooth was gone, but between the others there was tightly clenched a message, an answer; and there was a signature: "*The Vulture of Pignon.*"

And the sun went down.

Note.—"Jean Beauce," another of W. J. Stamper's tales of the Black Republic, will appear in WEIRD TALES next month.

