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YOU·CANT·KILL·A·GHOST

BY FRANK
BELKNAP
LONG·Jr.



"He was swaying absurdly back and forth, drinking out of a neckless bottle."

PERHAPS you've seen Talbot's picture in the New York papers—a lean, leisurely young man with wilted collar and bow tie, and a grin reaching from ear to ear. His Haitian revelations put him on a journalistic pinnacle where he *almost* rubbed shoulders with artists. His prose was exceedingly jerky and nervous, but before he had written three articles the yellow journals were roaring for his stuff, and the other papers were making timid bids.

But he gave me his best yarn gratis. You remember, or maybe you don't, that he kept absurdly quiet about his imprisonment. He wasn't ashamed of it, but he knew that I would use it in a story and he

didn't want to spill the beans for me. You see, I had given him two or three good cigars and promised him a week's lodging, and for some reason he had taken a fancy to me. He didn't have a friend when he arrived in New York, and he was going back to Haiti. I argued him out of it, and now there are seventy thousand words more of good journalism in the public libraries.

We sat smoking panetelas in the men's compartment at the rear end of an Overland Express train, and Talbot told his story in a whimsically sonorous voice. I urged him to start at the beginning, but he smiled and shrugged eloquently.

"This story has no beginning," he said. "I was drunk on the night they

arrested me. I can't recall the details, but it seems I borrowed a revolutionist's uniform and paraded about the streets in it.

"In Haiti revolutions start in the mountains and wind up in Cap Haitien or Port au Prince when the rebels cool off. Nine-tenths of them never get into the press dispatches. On every national holiday the president witnesses the amusing spectacle of two or three dozen ruffians in yellow sashes shouting each other down and shooting into store windows. The president usually ties their hands by denying them official recognition.

"But the president refused to ignore me. I didn't hurt a soul but I may have made more noise than the others. Or I may have walked under a ladder or broken a mirror. Anyhow, the president took advantage of my idiocy, and I was arrested and put where I couldn't make a fool of myself."

It gave Talbot exquisite pleasure to contemplate his degradation. A mischievous smile played about his lips, and his eager eyes sparkled.

"The jail was a ramshackle and disgusting affair, and I shared my cell with two revolutionary generals. A revolutionary general in the Black Republic has absolutely nothing to commend him. He is a low creature and his philosophy of life is terrible. He is a fatalist and he wouldn't cross the street to avoid being shot at. And he is unthinkably dirty.

"My companions never washed. Their beards were six inches long, and there was no difference in their appearance. They were so ridiculously alike that I frequently got them mixed up.

"At first I naturally despised them, and thought only of getting out. I pounded on the bars, stamped my feet and shouted until I was red in the face.

"Never in my life had I been so angry. When the jailer came I

glared at him, and I could see that he knew I had something on my mind and that that something meant trouble.

"How long do you think you can keep an American citizen in jail?" I asked.

"The jailer was a small, round-shouldered man between forty and fifty, with puckered, evil eyes and white eyebrows that met above the arch of his nose. His thick lips writhed back from his dirty yellow teeth in a cynical smile.

"You are such a brown American!" he sneered. "Who would believe that you are merely sunburned? You are essentially one of our enemies. The color of your face and uniform combine to make you a rebel."

"I forgot that bars separated us. I reached for his throat, but he jumped back and grinned. In my disappointment I nearly bit my tongue through without feeling it. 'You're too vile to kill,' I raved, 'but if I could get my hands on your superiors—'

"The jailer assured me that my wish could not be granted. 'My superiors are very busy men,' he said. 'But I do not blame you for getting angry. It isn't pleasant to be shot at. But we are obliged to obey orders, and the president hates rebels.'

"He departed, grotesquely sneering.

"I SAT on the edge of my cot and rolled a cigarette with white, nervous fingers. I was horribly upset. One of the generals grunted and swore that the jailer was a pig. He expressed no other emotion, but he added a few words of advice in a curiously colorless voice.

"Look in the soles of your shoes,' he suggested. 'I wouldn't want to see you crying and begging for mercy. It would make the president too indecently happy.'

"I looked up, and for an instant he smiled into my astonished eyes. Then he moved slowly to the other side of the wall. 'Sometimes you don't find the metal,' his companion volunteered. 'But if you are wearing a regulation army shoe you are in luck.'

"I wanted very much to believe them. I looked down at my shoes. They were not army shoes, but I didn't let that discourage me. I wanted to pay the jailer out for his insults. I laughed when I thought how angry and disappointed he would be to find the bars sawed through and the bird flown. The American bird! I was thinking: 'Now he'll laugh on the other side of his face. Did he really think that he could keep an American in his filthy old jail?'

"The generals watched me with tolerant and cynical eyes. They winked at each other and ran their fingers through their brittle black beards. But I knew that there was no use bothering about them. I held the key to my own salvation and it was up to me to make good.

"A sense of something like exultation stole over me. I unlaced my shoes and examined them. There were unquestionably pieces of metal in the soles. I was ready to shout. I worked at the stiff leather, tearing it apart with my fingers and teeth, until the blood pounded in my ears and I very nearly keeled over.

"'It's better than being shot,' one of the generals said, but I scarcely heard him. When I got the metal out I did a voodoo dance on the cell floor.

"One of the generals scowled. It was perfectly apparent that he didn't like my enthusiasm. He stood there endeavoring to be civil, but there was an expression in his small blue eyes that told me clearer than words how he despised that sort of thing. I brought myself up with a jerk.

"'I didn't intend to go on so,' I explained. 'But this thing means a lot to me. I'm only twenty-two and it isn't pleasant to be taken out and shot. Leastwise, it's not pleasant to be shot by mistake. I wouldn't mind ordinarily——'

"I saw that I had taken the wrong tack. The general's scowl grew in volume. 'You shouldn't anticipate, my friend,' he said. 'You have first to saw through the bars, and there's a guard stationed outside.'

"I saw then what I had let myself in for. My spirits dropped. It would take at least two days to saw the bars through, and I didn't see how I could conceal my progress from the jailer. I was in a tight place and said so. I'll never forget the decent way in which the general met my objection.

"'You mustn't eat your bread,' he said. 'Rub it on the floor when the pig isn't looking and use it on the bars.'

"But after that he got pretty silent, and I couldn't persuade him to escape with me. 'It is very easy to die when ten men shoot at you at the same time,' he said, and his companion added that life was a very stupid affair.

"Naturally their logic repelled me, but what could I do? I didn't like the idea of leaving them there to shoulder the blame, but it was no good arguing with them. When a Haitian's mind is made up it is made up. I told them to think of their wives, but when they swore at me I gave it up.

"The jailer seemed to suspect something when he brought the bread, but I didn't give him half a chance to talk to the generals. I hung on to the bars and insulted him until I was blue in the face. He put the bread on the floor and looked inquiringly at the generals. I think that he was amused and a little frightened.

"As soon as he left I seized my portion of bread and rubbed it on the floor until it was blacker than the president's beard. Then I kneaded it between my fingers. The generals watched me indifferently and I knew that they grimly appreciated the silent comedy of an American endeavoring to escape from a Haitian pig-sty. I made a violent effort to control myself, and went to work on the bars without so much as a groan to let them know what I was suffering. My heart kept coming up in my throat and flopping over. I couldn't forget the risk I was running, and I began to fear I'd funk the job sure.

"There were five bars, and the window was two feet broad and eighteen inches high. It would be necessary to work against time, but I figured it wouldn't take me more than two days to get out. I'd forgotten that a man has to eat and sleep. Sawing through bars is the hardest kind of work and no man can stand it more than eight hours on a stretch.

"I worked steadily for six hours, and all the time the generals were snickering and comparing notes behind my back. However, I tried to keep thinking of what I would say to the consul when I got out. I didn't even stop to drink. My right arm got so devilishly stiff that it almost killed me to move it. But I wasn't going to weaken before those generals.

"At the end of nine hours I got dizzy and weak. I had a small pocket mirror, and when I looked at myself I found I was yellow under the gills. The water was running in streams down my face and I had sense enough left to quit, after smearing the bars with the sooty bread to conceal what I had done. I had filed completely through one of the bars! But before I'd had time to congratulate myself I found myself on the floor in a heap, and my brain getting cloudy.

"Twelve hours later one of the generals kicked me awake and told me that I'd nearly spoiled my chances.

"The jailer hadn't been able to discover anything, but my exhaustion had puzzled him. He had poked into corners and questioned the generals, and he had come near to trying the bars. I had a queer, dizzy feeling in my head, but I had no intention of taking a day off.

"I set to work on the bars again, and by the end of the day I had sawed through the second one. My fingers were bleeding and my brain reeled, and the generals didn't say anything to encourage me. But I felt that my luck wasn't bad under the circumstances, and maybe I wasn't happy when I thought of how I would fool the jailer!

"By sundown the next day I had completed the job. The generals stared and shrugged their shoulders and urged me to escape immediately. I rolled a cigarette and puffed it until I had made a halo of blue-gray smoke about my head. I felt like a hero, standing there before those indifferent fools. 'I'll get out when it's dark,' I said, 'and not before. I'm not taking unnecessary chances.'

"A couple of hours later I crawled to the bars and waited for the moon to get behind a cloud. The generals started laughing and I thought sure they'd give the game away. I was hopelessly upset, but it was no good being angry with them.

"**T**HE bars came out easier than children's first teeth. I simply stood up and pulled and there was an opening large enough to admit two men. In a moment I was half-way through the opening and wishing that I'd been more civil to the generals.

"But I might have known there would be a hitch somewhere. My coat got caught on a nail and I stuck. I wriggled and wriggled, but I couldn't get my legs over.

"I lay wedged between the bars, and things began to look pretty black. At any moment I might be discovered by the jailer, and the generals wouldn't be any help to me. And then I did a foolish thing. I struggled until something snapped and a sudden pain gripped my right leg. I groaned aloud, and to make matters worse the moon came out and flooded the clearing with light.

"And then I saw him. He was standing against the wall, swaying absurdly back and forth and drinking out of a neckless bottle. At first he did not notice me, but when his eyes finally rested on my agonized face he removed his great hat and bowed.

"'Another newspaper man, I presume,' he said. 'Our little revolution certainly makes copy. But personally, I don't think we're worth it. This is strictly between you and me, you understand.'

"'Do I look like a newspaper man?' I snapped. I was in no humor to discuss trivialities with him. I could see that he was absurdly drunk, but it did not occur to me that I might find him useful.

"'Permit me to introduce myself,' he continued. 'I am the president's right-hand man—some call me his shadow. He couldn't get along without me. We have too much in common. And yet I am but a pale reflection of his greatness. I am called Henriquez, but to you, who are an American, it shall be Henry. I should not even object to Harry. It seems that we are endeavoring to escape from prison. I can sympathize with the gesture. All human beings desire liberty. I myself have longed for liberty. They would not even permit me to drink the rich, red wine; it was necessary that I set the army a good example. But I fooled them. Today I am as free as the air and I have no responsibilities. I have escaped from my prison. Shall I help you to escape from yours?'

"'Why should you?' I roared. 'Why don't you call the guards and have them put me back again?'

"He smiled good-humoredly. 'That would be such a waste of time!' he said. 'And besides, the guard might shoot you. I shouldn't care to see you shot. Is it not strange how I differ from the president? The president hates rebels—and yet I am his shadow. But you seem to be having some trouble with those bars.'

"He suddenly became serious, and stepping quickly forward he looked me straight in the eyes. 'Do you really wish to escape?' he said.

"I nodded and groaned. 'With every drop of blood in my body,' I said, 'I wish to escape. They have promised to shoot me. I am only twenty-two, and at my age it is not pleasant to be shot.'

"He nodded sympathetically. 'I think I can help you,' he said. 'I do not wish to make any promises, but I think I can help.'

"He stepped forward and seized one of the remaining bars in his hairy hand. I saw the muscles of his enormous arms contract, and a hard, set expression come into his face. Merely to loosen the bar took a tremendous effort, and for a moment I did not think that he could possibly succeed. But slowly the bar gave way and then he literally tore it from its fastenings.

"A sudden sense of unspeakable joy possessed me. I hurled myself forward and nearly succeeded in wriggling free; but I could not quite pass my hips through. Henriquez was not discouraged. He beamed encouragement, and set himself the task of loosening the last bar. He succeeded in tearing the coat from my back, but the bar stuck.

"He backed away, still smiling. He seemed bracing himself for a titanic effort. He advanced again and took the last bar firmly between his two hands. He pulled and pulled.

The bar gave way and bent outward; then it came away with a loud retching sound that I feared would bring the jailer on a run. I struggled through the window and collapsed in Henriquez's arms. I could not stand. I was bleeding from a dozen wounds, and I had evidently sprained my hips, for when I moved it gave me exquisite pain.

"'I can't walk, Henry,' I said. 'What shall I do?'"

"'Have no fear, my lad,' responded Henriquez. 'I have carried heavier than you. There is an American ship in the bay and if we hurry I can put you on board before dawn. What do you say?'"

"I nodded a silent approval. Henriquez laughed and lifted me on his huge shoulders. He made as if he would pick up the discarded bottle, but then he wavered and kicked it aside with the toe of his boot. 'The president would have been very angry,' he chuckled.

"WITH rapid steps he left the courtyard and proceeded cautiously along a white road. No doubt he found me heavy, for he stopped from time to time to mop his brow with his coat-sleeve. 'The president,' he kept muttering, 'would never have understood.'

"'Stop there!' A blue-coated sentry stood on a muddy embankment and challenged Henriquez with leveled gun. Henriquez stood very still in the center of the road and whistled. 'Don't you know me?' he vociferated. 'I'm on official business. Let me pass.'

"The sentry scowled. 'What have you got on your back?' he asked.

"I heard Henriquez curse under his breath. 'Mind your own business, my friend,' he said, 'and let me pass. It is evident that you do not who I am!'"

"'You are a traitor to the president,' said the sentry. 'You carry

upon your back the rebel traitor who calls himself an American.'

"Henriquez suddenly crouched in the road. I felt his body grow taut beneath me. The muscles of his great arms tightened. He hissed through his teeth.

"Cautiously he advanced a few paces toward the embankment. 'Stop!' ordered the sentry. But Henriquez did not stop. He dropped me like a leaden weight and sprang forward.

"I rolled into a muddy ditch and lay still. My whole body was one great wound. My teeth were knocking together like billiard balls. I heard a brief gasp, and then a torrent of frightened words issued from beneath the embankment. 'I thought you were a man! For heaven's sake pity me! I didn't know—I didn't, so help me God! Please don't! I beg you on my knees to pity me!'"

"There followed the sounds of a scuffle, terminating in a prolonged scream: 'Ah-h-h-h!'"

"Another moment and Henriquez was picking me up. 'It's all right now, lad,' he said. 'I'm sorry I had to drop you, but it was the only way!'"

"We passed through gray, deserted orchards and along horribly muddy roads. Once a shot rang out behind us. A tremor passed over my friend's huge form and he whistled through his teeth.

"'Another guard!' he muttered. 'The president was unduly cautious. But I can not blame him. He suspects all rebels, and there are so many attacks upon his life.'

"Henriquez was breathing so heavily that I urged him to rest, but he only grunted and plunged doggedly forward.

"I can assure you that we were welcome on board the American ship. We were toasted and treated like kings, but it took some time to dis-

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You Can't Kill a Ghost

(Continued from page 170)

cover that Henriquez had been shot through the chest. He was a sly dog, was Henriquez. *And his wound didn't bleed!* Even the captain did not suspect. But he collapsed in the arms of the mate when he attempted to leave the ship."

"He died?" I asked.

Talbot threw away his cigar and laughed. "Nothing could kill Henriquez—not even a bullet. But I never saw him again. He slipped overboard that night and swam ashore."

"Did the president forgive him?" I asked.

Talbot grunted. "Henriquez was the president," he replied.

I stared.

"But that isn't all of my story," he continued. "I said nothing could kill him. You can't kill a ghost. Henriquez was assassinated before I escaped from prison. You may have read about him in the papers."

"And you mean to say——?" I stammered.

"A rather unusual story, isn't it?" grinned Talbot. "Of course none of the conventional magazines would take it. They detest the unusual and amazing in fiction. But you can mention my name and perhaps some civilized editor will run it. You know, it's beastly exhilarating to be carried on the back of a ghost!"

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