

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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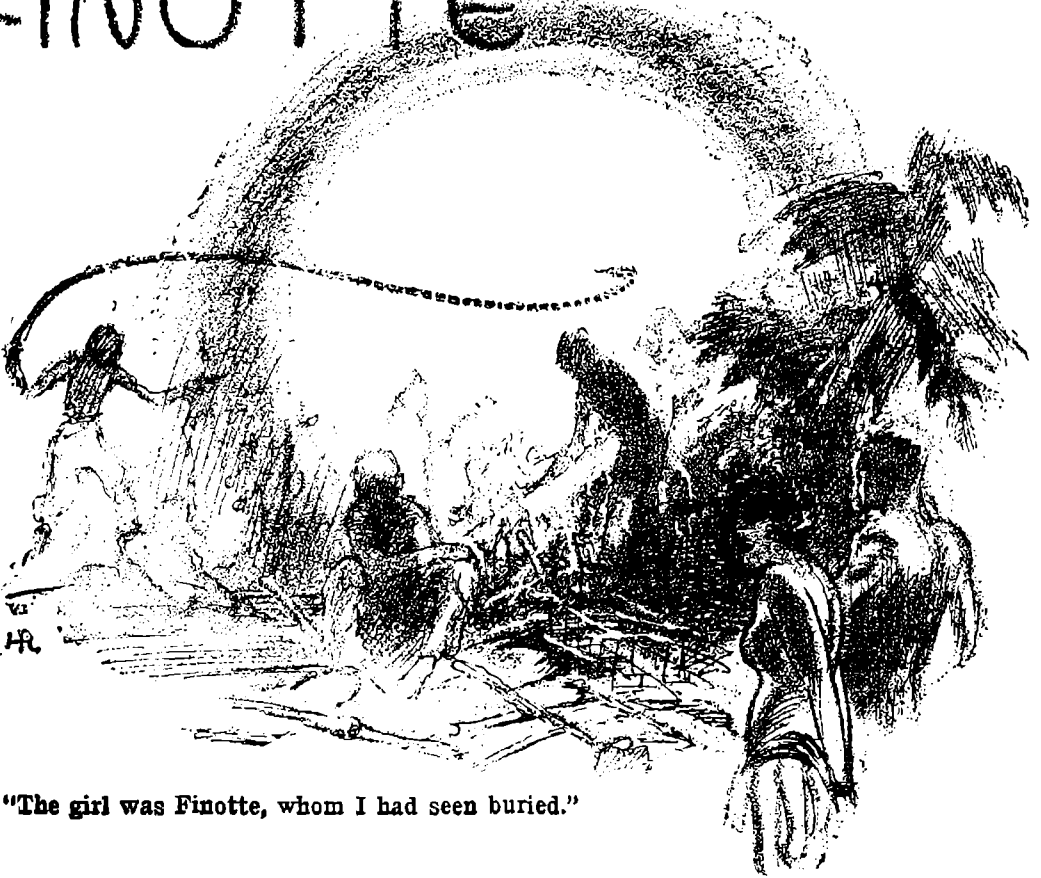
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DEAD GIRL FINOTTE

by
H. de VÈRE
STACPOOLE



"The girl was Finotte, whom I had seen buried."

IF YOU have read Mr. Seabrooke's book on Haiti, *The Magic Island*, recently published, you must have been struck by the chapter entitled *Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields*.

As I was talking recently on this matter to Mr. de Travers the neurologist of Geneva, American born and with a large experience of the West Indies and of the negro mind, he said, "Why not?"

"Because," said I, "it's impossible. It would be easier to make one of Karel Capek's robots than to take a dead man and put motive power into him and turn him into a slave. You know yourself the post-mortem

changes that take place in the tissues of the body; even magic has limits, and——"

"A moment," said he. "I mentioned Mr. Seabrooke's book as confirmation of the story I had to tell you, and perhaps you will suspend judgment on the whole matter till I have finished. The story has to do with Martinique.

"Many years ago when quite a young man I lived at St. Pierre, Martinique.

"St. Pierre, now a mound of ashes, stood quite alone amongst the towns of the world: there was no other place like it: gay as Paris with a touch of New Orleans, yellow-tinted and palm-

topped against the burning blue of the sky, its old French houses looked down upon a bay of sapphire rarely stirred by the great winds and heavy seas that torment the northeastern side of the island.

"I lived in the Rue Victor Hugo, a street that traversed the whole length of the town, and I had only to step on to my balcony to look down on a crowd more astonishing than any dream of the *Arabian Nights*. Nearly all creoles of all tints from the octoroon to the chabine, the women gay as tropical birds; idlers, loungers, chatterers, street-singers, itinerant sellers of fruit, fish, pastry and heaven knows what; a moving market; a business scene, touched with the charm of the unreal.

"I had three rooms all on the same floor and for personal servant, Baidaux, a young man, a creole, handsome, dark-eyed, serious and entirely devoted to me; he bought everything and I was never robbed and always sure of the finest mangoes, sapotas and avocats in the market; his coffee was the best in Martinique, and he was always there when wanted. Except on Sundays. It seems he had a girl; she lived away over beyond Morne Rouge toward Grande Anse, a town on the seaboard to the northwest and twenty miles from St. Pierre; her name was Finotte; and every Sunday he would vanish before dawn, taking his way on foot by the great national road La Trace, which, winding like a ribbon over hill and dale, by morne and mountain, cocoa plantation and cane field, took him to Finotte.

"But always on Monday morning at eight o'clock he would be in my room pulling up my blind and handing me my morning coffee.

"*'Bonjour, M'sieur.'*

"*'Bonjour, Baidaux—and how is Finotte?'*

"I dreaded Finotte and the day surely to come when marriage would

join them and separate me from Baidaux.

"Life has many losses; not the least is the loss of a good servant, but Baidaux was not of the precipitate sort; he was laying by and building his nest as a bird might build, only with francs instead of sticks and feathers. I judged from what he said that it would be at least a year before the happy day—and unhappy for me—when Finotte would come to St. Pierre to take her place in that little shop in the Rue du Morne Mirail which he had marked down as their future home.

"Ah, well! One Monday morning he did not return; on the Wednesday he returned, but it was not Baidaux—it was a much older man.

"*'Bonjour, M'sieur.'*

"*'Bonjour, Baidaux—and how is Finotte?'*

"He put up his hands without a word; then I knew she was dead.

"He made the coffee as usual and put out my clothes.

"Yes, she was dead—it all came out gradually; he had arrived to find her dying—she was dead and buried. Of what had she died? He did not know. She was dead. He had seen her buried and had returned. That was all.

"He went on with his work. There was nothing else to do except die, and he was not of that sort, and time passed till a month had slipped away and the carnival came and passed with its rioting and drums sharply cut off by Lent. Then—it might have been a month later—one evening I found him at the street door talking to an old woman, a *capresse*, very old and wrinkled, her head bound up in a foulard turban. It was Maman Robert, the mother of Finotte.

"He told me that, speaking with a look in his eyes I had never seen before, a wild, far-gazing look disturbing as his manner; for he seemed like a person cut off from all reality and he said that he must go away, leave me

for a time, but that he would return soon—perhaps.

“He left that night, and though I did not follow him I knew quite well that his road was the great national road that had led him so often toward Grand Anse and the home of his girl.

2

“**Y**OU know at St. Pierre everyone knew everyone—the washerwomen by the river Roxalanne—the fruit-sellers in the market by the fort—the old women selling carosoles at the street corners—they were like a big family as far as rumors were concerned: a story started at dawn in the Rue du Morne Mirail would travel down to the Rue Victor Hugo by noon and be on the front by night, and you may be sure that the story of Baidaux wasn’t slow in traveling, but no repercussion of it came back to me till one day a *porteuse* in from the hills stopped to speak to my old landlady, Maman Jean, and gave her word of Baidaux.

“I must tell you a *porteuse* is—alas! was—a sort of girl commercial traveler; barefooted and with a great bundle on her head she would take goods from the city all over the island through the country parts, and this girl just in from the northwest had seen Baidaux near Grande Anse. He was looking very wild, living on the plantation of a creole named Jean Labat and—it was a pity.

“Those were her words.

“Yes, it was a pity, a thousand pities when I remembered him as he had been, so bright, intelligent, well-groomed and efficient, and he had been fond of me.

“The fondness of a good servant for his master, and conversely, is a thing apart from all other forms of attachment, and those four words of the *porteuse* seemed somehow intended for me, as one might say, ‘Can you do nothing for him?’

“I took them to heart and deter-

mined to go over to Grande Anse, hunt about, try to find him and if possible bring him back to himself and my service. I started next day, taking with me a bag with a few things and hiring a two-horse trap.

3

“**I**T WAS only twenty miles from St. Pierre to Grande Anse—all the same a long journey; for the great national road winds over hill and dale and it is squealing brakes and laboring horses a good part of the way, but no road in the world is just like that for scenery; the purple mornes and blue distances, the fields of cane and the high woods of balisier and palm and mahogany all lie beneath a blinding light that has got in it something of the mournful nature of darkness.

“Here, indeed, to the European mind, is a land of things unknown, half known, and dimly suspected, for under this riot of color and light lies the poison of the manchaneel apple and the centipede and the fer de lance, the poison of plants dealing in death, delirium or madness and old superstitions from the shores of far-off Africa transplanted but growing firmly.

“Grand Anse is a little town lying right on the coast. Here there are great cliffs hundreds of feet in height and the beach is of black sand and nearly always alive with a thunderous surf. The cliffs form two promontories, the Pointe du Rochet and the Pointe de Croche Mort. Such is Grande Anse, and I put up at the chief inn of the town and later that day began to make inquiries about Baidaux.

“No one knew of him.

“He was interesting to St. Pierre folk because he had been born there, but here he was of no interest. Then I asked about Maman Robert, the mother of Finotte.

“Ah, yes, Finotte, she who had died some months ago. Well, she and her mother had lived in the little hamlet

of Mirail close to the plantation of Jean Labat. The mother lived there still. Then came silence, and the cause of it was Labat, whose plantation lay near the village. He was both disliked and feared. I could tell that at once by the faces and the shrugs and the drawing back as if from the very name. He grew cocoa and sugar and had a distillery—*rhommerie*—but people did not visit that plantation.

“Would anyone lead me to the house of Finotte’s mother? No; it was close to the plantation and Jean Labat had dogs.

“I might have started out myself despite the dogs and made an attempt to find the place, feeling sure that Finotte’s mother would be able to put me on the traces of Bidaux—but things turned out differently.

4

“IT WAS the second evening of my stay at Grande Anse and I had gone for a walk on the black sands to watch the waves coming in under the last of the sunset; then, turning at dark, I began to climb the stiff path that leads up from the beach along the side of the great swell of ground that forms the side of the *Poïnte du Rochet*.

“The night was moonless but alight with stars, and it was my idea to reach the top of the bluff, have a look at the starlit world from there and then return to Grande Anse by the track the goats have trodden out in the basalt. The lights had gone out in the little town, where everybody turns in at dark, but I was sure of the inn being open.

“More than half-way up I paused. On the sky-line just above I saw two men. A man of vast stature and a man of ordinary size, they were walking in single file and the latter was leading. Then they stopped. I thought they had seen me, but that was not so. They stopped only for a moment and then the smaller man pointed straight ahead; that is to say, where the bluff

ended at the cliff edge and a fall of four hundred feet sheer with nothing but the waves below.

“At the pointing the tall man went straight ahead in the direction indicated, but I had never seen a man walk like that before, the way he raised his feet, the way he held himself—why, he seemed a mechanical figure, not a man; a thing wound up to go, not a thing going of its own volition.

“He kept on till he reached the cliff edge, but he did not stop—he stepped over and in an instant there was nothing but the night, the stars and the roar of the sea—and the other man. The other man was Bidaux. I could see that now as he came closer along the sky-line. He came to the cliff edge and looked down; then he stood with arms folded looking at the sea.

“I had found him—but heavens, what was all this?

“I am a man nervous by nature, but still I have courage if the cause is good or if a certain thing has to be done.

“I had to find out about this and I continued climbing till I reached the top of the bluff just as he was turning from the sea and coming back toward me.

“He did not stop on seeing me; he seemed quite indifferent to this new person the night had sprung on him. Close up he recognized me.

“‘Bidaux,’ I said. ‘What is this?’

“He stood for a moment without speaking; then he heaved a great sigh as though awakened from sleep. ‘It is I, Bidaux,’ said he; ‘you have seen him. It is long since we parted, and it is right that you should know about him and about her.’

“He was no longer a servant or an ex-servant, just a being level in station with myself but with a feeling from the past that it was right that I should know his affairs. He who had told me of his girl and his plans for the future had now to tell me what had happened to him, culminating in

the amazing tragedy of a few moments ago.

"He led the way down the slope by way of the goat track, and then in the shelter from the wind and by a great clump of tree ferns he sat down on the ground, still warm from the vanished sun, and motioned me to his side.

" 'In St. Pierre,' said he, 'you were good to me and I opened my heart, telling you of my affairs and of my girl; you remember, on the Sundays I used to come over here starting before the light of day and whilst the *Cabribois* still filled the woods with sound. Then the day came when I found my girl dying. Maman Robert, her mother, could not say what ailed her, and Maman Faly, who is the doctor for all the workers round these parts, said she had been seized with a fever from the woods. No matter, she died—but you will remember all this; I only say it to keep my mind from traveling astray as one might follow a string in the dark, for the things I have to tell belong indeed to the darkness that is deeper than night.

" 'I came back to you and life went on. I had no need of it but I could not cast it away; it is not easy for a man to lose the habit of living even after it becomes an evil habit to him.

" 'I went on as one dead might go on with his work, could he be moved by some spirit of life.

" 'Then one evening Cyrilla, who was the girl of the landlady where your rooms were, came to me and said:

" ' "There is one who wishes to speak to you, Baidaux."

" 'I went to the door and there I found the mother of my girl, Maman Robert.

" 'I said to her, "What do you want?" and she said, "I have come to speak to you about Finotte."

" 'I said, "What then about Finotte?" thinking the old woman had come to me for money as is the way

with relatives of those one loves, but I had done her a wrong.

" 'She answered, "I have come to you from Finotte—and I would bring you to her," and as she spoke the flesh crawled on my bones, for I had seen Finotte buried in the place where the people are buried by the palmiste grove near her home—where of a Sunday we used sometimes to go to look on the graves of the dead and say to ourselves, "Without doubt some day we will be here," for I never had the fancy to be buried at St. Pierre.

" 'I listened to what the old woman said and I could say nothing to her in reply, till my lips moved and they said, "Very well—but not now—leave me and I will come."

" 'You remember, I did not leave you at once after that old woman had been there. In fact I was afraid. I said to myself, "Maybe that old woman is not a woman but a *Zombie* come to betray me and steal my soul." I knew her well—how should one not know the mother of one's girl?—but a man's mind is strange and full of fear in the dark and in the unknown.

" 'Then I put all that by and said to myself, "I will go."

" 'I had always set out on foot on my journeys to Finotte and before dawn, so as to get there in the early day. I could have taken the stage to Morne Rouge and got a horse from there, but I could go as I had always gone, on foot; so I went past Morne Rouge and the old Calebasse road past Ajoupa-Bouillon, past the Rivière Falaise, pausing only to rest for a moment by the great gommier that marks where the path to the village of Mirail strikes off from the road.

" 'Here I stayed an hour, resting in the shade, so that it was past noon when, taking the path, I sought the little house of Maman Robert.

" 'It lies by the cocoa fields, and a great wood of balissiers shelters it from the trade wind; you can hear like the voice in the shell the sea on the beach of Grande Anse and now

and then from the wood the call of the *siffleur de montagne*.

“Beyond the cocoa fields lies the *rhommerie* and beyond that the house of Jean Labat. It is all only two kilometers from here where I sit talking to you now, and the graveyard where the creoles are buried lies only half a kilometer from the house of Maman Robert.

“I found her in the house, but she would say nothing of the business I had come on—only this: “I will take you after dark.”

5

“AND then it happened. The moon had risen, and leading me by the shadows of the trees she crossed a cultivated field to the barren part where the wild canes and sword-grass grew.

“Here she paused where before us lay a field preparing for cultivation of manioc, and lifting up a finger she said, “Listen!”

“I heard nothing—nothing but the canes talking to the wind and the voice of the sea very far away.

“Again she said, “Listen!” yet I heard nothing but the cry of a night bird, far beyond the manioc field.

“Then the clink of iron, and they came round the bend of the cane clump, breaking the earth with their hoes, followed at a little distance by a boy with a goad, as oxen are followed by their driver.

“Four figures in the moonlight. Three men and a girl, walking not as men walk, working as the spindles in the cotton mill, without sense of mind, followed by the boy their driver—and the girl was Finotte whom I had seen buried and the tallest of the men was Jaquin who had died six months before and I was looking at them and I went not mad.

“For I knew. I, Baidaux, am not an ignorant man and I knew of the *culte* which is brother to the *Culte des Morts*: Look you, they give a man a drink that brings the fever; he dies;

he is buried—but he is not dead; he only sleeps without breathing; his people mourn him and bury him and leave him in the grave. Then come the wicked ones and dig him up; he breathes again and lives, yet he is not truly alive like you and me, for his mind has left him, for the drug has killed his brain. He can hear and obey but he can not think, so he can hew wood and draw water and hoe the fields and cut the cane, without thought, without word, without pay—except a handful of food.

“Ah! Jean Labat, it was an evil day for you when you took the girl of Baidaux for your slave—but it is finished.

““Come,” I said to the old woman who was holding to me and pointing; “our place is not here; lead me to the house of Maman Faly, the woman who deals in herbs and who helped to lay out your daughter who was once my girl.”

“I knew, for my mind had taken the sight of a vulture.

“At the little house where the evil woman lived I knocked, and she opened and with my knife-point at her throat she told all.

““Come,” I said, “the drug, the drug, I have need of the drug; prepare it or die.” She had it ready prepared and she gave it to me. “If this fails I will return and kill you,” I said. “It will not fail,” she replied, and I knew she spoke the truth and I killed her with a thrust of the knife and was caught up in a flame that carried me to the house of Jean Labat, where he lived alone with his wickedness.

“I beat on his door and he opened it and I drove him with my knife into a room. He was a big man but I was a legion; he was a coward because he was wicked.

“I made him lie upon the floor. He chose the drug rather than instant death and he could not return it for my knife was at his throat. The fever came on before daybreak and I sat

with him to nurse him till the man came who looked after the cooking and house-tending; then I left him, and calling all the hands of the plantation I spoke to them of their wickedness and they fled; so that there was nothing left but the crowing of cocks and the clapping of doors to the wind and the creeping of the great centipedes that live among the walls of the *rhommerie* and the three dead men and the girl in the shed where they rested when not at work, and me—me, Baidaux—and Labat.

“‘I had thought to play with him

and torment him and make him my slave—but you can not play with a machine. Tonight I made him drown in the sea. He was no other use.’

“‘And the three dead men and the girl?’ I asked.

“Baidaux laughed, and rose up and walked away without a word of good-bye, and though he had not replied to my question I knew that they were no longer working on that plantation.

“I watched him away down the goat track and then passing beyond the trees at the rise of the bluff.

“‘I never saw him again.’”
