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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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Fidel Bassin

by W. J. Stamper

After the assassination of Julius Caesar, in Shakespeare's play, a voice from the crowd expresses the fear that the now-dead dictator will be replaced by someone worse. We do not have to look very far to see examples of it in our own times, and certainly the motif runs through history. So this story of Haiti is by no means a relic of a forgotten past, nor is its horror something safely put behind us.

"IT CANNOT BE done. It would be the most dastardly deed in the annals of Haiti. Send all prisoners to Port au Prince with the utmost celerity. The general orders. The general be damned!"

Thus spoke Captain Vilnord of the Haitian army as he finished reading the latest dispatch from headquarters. He was the most gentle and by far the most humane officer yet sent to Hinche to combat the ravages of the Cacos, the small bandity that continually terrorized the interior. Although he realized

that many a brave comrade had lost his head for words not half so strong as those he had just uttered, he did not care, for he had almost reached the breaking point. For months he had observed the cruelty with which the government at the capital dealt with the ignorant and half-clothed peasantry of the Department of the North. His nature revolted at the execution of the commands of General La Falais, the favorite general of the administration at Port au Prince. Hardly a day came but brought an order directing the imprison-

ment of some citizen, the ravage of some section with fire and sword, the wanton slaughtering of cattle or the burning of peaceful homes. He was a servant of the people and he had obeyed orders; but this last was too much.

"Any news of my captivity?" inquired the rotund lieutenant, Fidel Bassin, as his chief finished the dispatch.

For answer Vilmord crumpled the message in his hand, threw it in the face of his subordinate and strode angrily out of the office. He went straight to the prison and entered without even returning the salute of the sentinel on duty.

He had viewed that noisome scene every day for weeks, powerless to aid or ameliorate the suffering. No food, no clothing, no medicine had arrived from Port au Prince, despite his urgent and repeated appeals. As he passed through the gloomy portal, a resolve was taking root in his bosom, and another sight of the victims would launch him upon the hazardous course he had seen opening for months.

The prison was a long, low adobe structure with three small grated windows but a foot from the roof. These furnished little ventilation, for the heat was stifling and the odors sickened him. Two hundred helpless men and women were crammed into this pesthouse of vermin and disease, and all under the pretext of

their being friendly to the Cacos. Old men lay writhing on the floor with dirty rags bound tightly about their shriveled black skulls, and as Vilmord passed they held up their skinny arms and pleaded for food. Withered old women sat hunched against the walls and rocked back and forth like maniacs. The younger men who yet had strength to stand, paced restlessly up and down with sullen and haggard faces. From every dusky corner shone eyes staring with horror. Ineffable despair overhung them all.

Vilmord stooped over an emaciated old man, who seemed striving to speak through his swollen lips, and asked, "What is it, papa?"

"It is the dread scourge, *Capitaine*," he rasped, "the black dysentery. I must have medicine or I go like my poor brother, Oreste."

He pointed to a mass of rags beside him.

Without fear of the disease whose odor pervaded the whole room, Vilmord gently lifted the remains of a filthy shirt under which Oreste had crept to die.

No man who has never looked upon a victim of tropical dysentery after life has fled can imagine the horror of the thing. The lips were so charred with the accompanying fever that they had turned inside out, and from the corners of the gaping mouth there oozed a thick and green-

ish fluid. The skin was drawn tightly over the bony cheeks, and the eyes had entirely disappeared, leaving but dark and ghastly holes. He had been dead for hours. With a scream like a wounded animal, Vilnord rushed from the charnel-house and to his office, where Fidel was still waiting.

He opened the drawer of his desk, pulled out a parchment neatly bound with ribbon, and to the amazement of his subordinate tore it in pieces. It was his commission in the army, just such a paper as Fidel had desired for many years.

"Fidel, I am through," he roared. "I will stand this wanton murder no longer. Do as you like about those orders, for you are in command. I leave for Pignon tonight to join Benoit, the Caco chief."

"But, *Capitaine*," remonstrated Fidel, "you must not do such a thing. La Falais will send all his regiments to seek you out. He will camp in Hinche for ten years or capture you."

"I defy La Falais and his murderers! Let him camp in Hinche for ten years. I will stay in the deep mountains of Baie Terrible for ten years. With Benoit I will fight to the death."

With these words Vilnord strode to the door, Krag-Jorgensen in hand, and mounted his waiting horse.

Fidel followed him out, and as he was adjusting his saddle

bags, inquired, "Would La Falais promote me if I failed to carry out those orders? Would he not stand me up before a firing squad?"

"You may pursue the same course which I have chosen, the only honorable course," answered Vilnord.

"But I am due for promotion."

Vilnord tore the captain's insignia from his collar and hurled them into the dust.

"You will never be a captain. *Au revoir*," he cried back to Fidel as he fled toward the bald mountains of Pignon.

A BLAZING SUN beat down upon the grief-stricken village of Hinche. There was bustle and commotion outside the prison. Fidel was preparing to execute the orders of his superior. There in the dusty road was forming as sorry and pitiable a cavalcade as ever formed under the skies of Africa in the darkest days of slavery.

Men and women filed out the door between two rows of sentinels whose bayonets flashed and sparkled in the sunlight. There were curses and heavy blows as some reeling prisoner staggered toward his place in line. The prisoners formed in two lines facing each other. Handcuffs were brought out and fastened above the elbows, for their hands and wrists were so bony that the cuffs would slip over. Two prisoners were

thus bound together with each set, one link above the elbow of each. A long rope, extending the full length of the line, was securely lashed to each pair of handcuffs so that no two prisoners could escape without dragging the whole line. Many were so weak with hunger and disease that they could not stand without great difficulty. None of them had shoes, and they must walk over many miles of sharp stones and thorns before arriving at Port au Prince. The trip would require many days, and no food was taken except that which was carried in the pouches of the sentries who were to act as guards.

Suddenly there arose a hoarse and mournful cry from assembled relatives, as two soldiers emerged from the barracks, each with a pick and shovel. Fidel knew that most of the prisoners would never see the gates of Port au Prince, and he had made provision.

"Corporal," he said as he passed down the line inspecting each handcuff, "you will bury them where they fall. If they tire out, do not leave them by the roadside."

Weeping friends and relatives surged up to the points of the bayonets begging that they might be allowed to give bread and bananas to the prisoners, for they well knew there was no food between Hinche and the

capital except a few sparse fields of wild sugarcane.

"Back, vermin! Forward, march!" commanded the corporal.

His voice could scarcely be heard for the screams and moans of the relatives as they shrieked:

"Good-bye, papal Good-bye, brother!"

Down the yellow banks of the Guyamouc wound the cavalcade, into the clear waters many of them would never see again.

Hinche mourned that day, and when the shades of night descended upon the plains there was nought to be heard save the measured beat of the tom-tom and the eery bray of the burros.

SLEEK, WELL-FED Fidel sat calmly smoking with his feet propped up on the very desk vacated by his chief the day before and mused upon the prospect of his captaincy, which he felt confident would be forthcoming. He had carried out the orders of La Falais and he knew that crafty general would not be slow to reward him when news of the desertion of Vilnord reached the capital. He muttered half aloud: "A captain within a month. Not so bad for a man of thirty."

But his face twisted with a frown as he recalled the solemn, almost prophetic words

of Vilnord: "You will never be a captain."

There came a voice from the darkness outside.

"May I enter, *Capitaine?*"

He liked the title, "Captain." It sounded so appropriate.

"Come in," he commanded.

It was the aged and withered old magistrate of Hinche, who had seen his people maltreated for years and who, no doubt, would have joined the Cacos long before had his age permitted.

"I have come to make a request of you in the name of the citizens," he said, and there was a strange light in his eyes.

"In the name of the citizens!" Fidel repeated sneeringly, and added: "Anything you ask in that august name, no man could refuse. What is it?"

"We beg that you release the remaining prisoners, those who are unable to walk because of hunger and disease, and allow them to return to their homes where they can be cared for. They are dying like hogs in that pesthouse. Will you let them out?"

"Never," was the firm reply. "I will bury every festering Caco-breeder back of the prison with the rest of his kind."

The magistrate folded his arms and with shrill but steady voice cried out: "La Falais, and you too, Fidel, shall render an account before history for this foul action, this heartless tor-

ture, this wanton murder of your own people. We, who are left, have arms, and we shall oppose you to the last drop. This very night has settled upon the fresh graves of our best people. Along the trail to Ennery and Maissade they have died, and over the graves your vicious troopers have put up forked sticks and placed on them a skirt, a shoe, or a hat in derision of the dead. To what purpose did the immortal Dessalines and Petion fight and wrest our liberty from the foreigner when it is snatched from us by our own bloody government?"

"Be careful of your words, old man," replied Fidel. "I have but to command and my soldiers will shoot down every living thing and lay this Caco nest in ashes."

"I have been very busy today, *mon capitaine*. Your soldiers at this very moment have scattered among the bereaved families of those who lie dead by your hand. You have no troops — they have become the troops of Haiti."

With a curse Fidel snatched his pistol from the holster. But before he could use it, a half dozen burly blacks leapt from the darkness outside where they had been waiting, and bore him to the floor. His hands were bound behind his back, and two of his own soldiers stood over him with drawn revolvers.

"I'll have the last man of you

court-martialed and shot!" he stormed. "Release me immediately."

"Small fear of that," answered the soldier. "We go to join Benoit, the Caco chief, when we have finished with you."

The magistrate walked to the door and spoke a few whispered words to one of the blacks, who hurried away into the darkness.

EVERY SHACK SENT forth its avenger. Torches flared up, and soon the house was surrounded by a writhing, howling mob, eager for the blood of the man who had sent their loved ones to die on the blistering plains of Maissade, and all because he wanted to be a captain. The soldiers had cast away their uniforms, but their glittering bayonets could be seen flashing in the red torchlight. Wild screams rent the night as the brutishness of the mob-will gained ascendancy.

"Let us skin him alive and cover our tom-toms with his hide!" shrieked an old hag as she squirmed through the crowd.

"Let us burn him or bury him alive!" yelled another.

By what magic the old magistrate gained control of that wild multitude, who may say? Standing in the doorway facing the mob, he lifted his withered hand and began: "Countrymen, for ten years I have meted out justice among you. Have I not

always done the proper thing?"

"Always," they answered with one voice.

"Then," he continued, "will you not trust me in this hour when the future of Hinche hangs in the balance?"

"Leave it to the magistrat!" someone yelled, and the whole mass took up the cry.

"Norde, do you and Pilar bring along the prisoner. Follow me."

The two designated seized Fidel roughly, lifted him to his feet and preceded by the magistrate, hurried him across the road toward the prison. The mob followed, and the pale light of the torches shone on horrible faces, twisting with anger and deep hatred.

What could the magistrate have in mind?

The procession moved up to the prison door, and as the odors struck Fidel in the face, he drew back with a shudder, his eyes wild and rolling with terror. One torch was thrust inside the door, and its red light threw fantastic shadows over the yellow walls. All the prisoners had been removed, and there was nothing in sight save a mass of rags in a corner at the far end.

"Yonder," said the magistrate, "is Mamon. He died last night. But before we leave you, you must see the face of your bed-fellow." As the mob grasped the intent of the speaker, loud

cheers filled the night: "Leave it to the magistrate! He will do the right thing."

Fidel shivered with fear, not so much the fear of the dead as of the terrible malady which had burned out the life.

Norde pushed the shaking Fidel through the door, and the mob, forgetting the dread disease in their desire to see him suffer, followed him up to the pile of rags.

"Now," said the magistrate, when Fidel's hands were loosed, "uncover the face of your victim."

With trembling fingers Fidel lifted a filthy rag from the face of the corpse. Did human ever look on sight so horrible? The eyes were gone, sunken back into their sockets, leaving but dark and ghastly holes. The tongue was lolling out, black and parched, furrowed as if it had been hacked. Out of the corners of the gaping mouth there oozed a thick and greenish fluid.

The skin was drawn tightly over the cheeks, and the bones had cut through. There was a sparse and needlelike growth of beard standing up straight on the pointed and bony chin.

Fidel dropped the rag and screamed with terror. Norde picked it up, and, with the aid of Pilar, smothered his screams by wrapping it around his head. He hushed presently and when, at length, the rag was removed,

the magistrate commanded: "Uncover that!" and he pointed to the stomach of the corpse. Fidel obeyed.

The stomach was black and flabby like a tire, and the skin had pulled loose from the supporting ribs.

"Here, *mon capitaine*," said the magistrate, "you will live with this dead man until the black dysentery has claimed you."

With a wild shriek Fidel fell fainting across the festering body of Mamon.

The magistrate barked out his commands quickly and sharply.

"Norde, bind him fast where he lies!"

In a moment Fidel was lashed to the fast decomposing body, his hair tied to that of the corpse; and cheek to cheek they left him with the dead.

IT WAS HIGH NOON when a strange cavalcade headed toward Pignon, the lair of the Cacos. The old magistrate was leading. Men, women and children carried their few belongings on their heads. Hinoche was deserted.

At the same time there entered Hinoche by another trail two horsemen, who, after stopping at the office of Fidel, moved on to the prison. They were Vilmord and Benoit, the Caco chief. The prison door was ajar.

They entered, and what they saw was this — *the dead, cheek to cheek*, slowly sinking into each other.

Outside, Vilmord whispered

to his companion as they mounted their horses, "I told him he would never be a captain"; and they rode away toward the bald mountains of Pignon.

In Re: Clark Ashton Smith

Imaginative fiction and poetry is the poorer for the death, a year or so back, of Clark Ashton Smith, whose stories and poems first began to appear in the magazines around 1930. It is to be hoped that Arkham House, which is re-issuing the long out-of-print volume of H. P. Lovecraft's tales "The Outsider", will also re-issue their first two collections of Smith, "Out Of Space And Time", and "Lost Worlds". (The third, "Genius Loci", is still available, we believe.)

The poetry has been less well preserved, a limited edition published in the 30's now being a collector's item. However, Mr. Roy Squires, and Mrs. Clark Aston Smith, are working on what she describes as "the long-projected 'Hill of Dionysus' — love lyrics written by CAS, and selected by him, to form a cycle, hand set, beautifully, by Squires, and now at bindery." There will be a self-portrait in pencil, photostated to slip in more expensive copies — i.e. the "Ltd. Edition" — plus, if it can be managed, a poem, autographed by CAS, for the collector.

The plan is to issue the "Hill Of Dionysus" in various formats which will range from a \$3.75 edition to a very limited \$25.00 edition for collectors. The de luxe edition will include the self portrait, photo, and an original mss., autographed.
