

ROPE'S END

By REX BEACH

World-Famed Author of Successful Fiction
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A ROUND moon flooded the thickets with gold and ink shadows. The night was hot, poisonous with the scent of blossoms and of rotting tropic vegetation. It was that breathless, overpowering period between the seasons when the trades were still, before the rains had come. From the Caribbean rose the whisper of a dry, slow, and fainter than the respirations of a sick man; in the north the bearded, wrinkled Haytian hills lifted their scowling faces.

There beneath a thatched roof set upon four posts was a table, spread with food, and on it a candle burned steadily. Under a similar thatched shed, a short distance away, a group of soldiers were busy around a smoldering cook-fire. There were other huts inside the jungle clearing, through the dilapidated walls of which issued rays of light and men's voices.

Petthomme Laguerre, colonel of tirailleurs, in the army of the Republic, wiped the fat of a roasted pig from his lips with the back of his hand. Using his thumb-nail as a knife-blade, he loosened a splinter from the edge of the rickety wooden table, fashioned it into a toothpick, then laid himself back in a grass hammock. He had expected to find rum in the house of Julien Rameau, but either there had been none or his brave soldiers had happened upon it; at any rate, supper had been a dry meal—only one of several disappointments of the day.

Recalling at ease, he allowed himself to admire his uniform, a splendid creation of blue and gold which had put him to much pains and expense. It had arrived from Port au Prince barely in time to be of service in the campaign.

Once Hayti was called the "Jewel of the Antilles" and boasted its "Little Paris of the West," but when the black men rose to power it became a place of evil reputation, a land behind a veil, where all things are possible, and most things come to pass. In place of monastery bells there sounds the midnight mutter of voodoo drums; the priest has been succeeded by the "papouli," the worship of the Virgin has changed to the worship of the serpent. Instead of the sacramental bread and wine men drink the blood of the white cock, and, so it is whispered, eat the flesh of "the goat without horns."

As he picked his teeth, Colonel Petthomme Laguerre turned his eyes to the right, peering idly into the shadows of a tamarind-tree, the branches of which overtopped the hut. Suspended from one of these was an inert shape, mottled with brown patches, the moonlight beamed filtered through the leaves, it stirred, away, turned slowly, resolving itself into the figure of an old man. He was hanging by the wrists to a rawhide rope; his toes were as dead as the branches.

"So! Now that Monsieur Rameau has had time to think, perhaps he will speak," said the colonel.

A sigh, it was scarcely a groan, answered.

"That you are!" impatiently exclaimed the colonel. "Your money can do you no good now. Is it not better to part with it easily than to rot in a government prison?"

"There is no money," faintly came the voice of the prisoner. "My neighbors will tell you that I am poor."

Both men spoke in the creole patois of the island.

"The club was heavier than I thought," answered Congo.

"He brought it upon himself. Well, the prison at Jacmel is full of colored people; this will leave room for one more."

Maximilien's words suddenly failed him. His thoughts were abruptly halted, for he found that in some unaccountable manner young Rameau's hands had become free and that the machete at his own side was slipping from his sheath. It is doubtful if the troops fully realized what had befallen or that any danger threatened, for his mind was sluggish, and under Rameau's swift hands his soul had begun to tug at his body before his astonishment had disappeared. The blade rasped out of its scabbard, whistled through its course, and Maximilien lurched forward to his knees.

The sound of the blow, like that of an ax sunk into a rotten tree-trunk, surprised Congo. A shout burst from him; he raised the stout cudgel above his head, for Floreal was upon him like the blurred image out of a nightmare. The troops were half-breed, captain of a schooner bound on hazardous business, and inasmuch as his wages were promised, he shipped. Followed adventures of many sorts, during which Innocencio became a mate, but made no friends.

One night when the moon was full and the schooner lay becalmed there was drinking and gambling in the little cabin. It was the change of the seasons, before the rains had come; the air was close; the ship reeked with odors. Innocencio played like a demon, for his heart was fierce, and the cards befriended him. All night he and the Portuguese half-breed shuffled and dealt, drank rum, and cursed each other. When daylight came the schooner had changed hands.

Colon sits on the southern shore of the Caribbean, and through it drifts a current of traffic from many seas. It was at the time of the French flag, when the name was powerful, and when Colon was the wickedest, sickest city of the Western Hemisphere.

Into the harbor came Innocencio's schooner, and there the Haytian stayed, for in Colon he found work that suited him. There he heard the echo of tremendous undertakings; there he learned new rascalties; and met men from other lands who were honest, like himself; there he tasted of the white man's wickedness, and beheld forms of corruption that were strange to him.

But he was solitary in his habits; the festering town, with its green-tinged alleys and its filthy streets, did not appeal to him, so he took up his abode on the shore of a little bay close behind, where a grove of palm-trees overhung a sandy beach. Just across a mangrove swamp at his back was the city; before him lay his schooner, her bowsprit pointing seaward. Day and night it pointed toward Hayti and—Pierine.

In time the mulatto acquired a reputation and gathered a crew of ruffians over whom he tyrannized. There were women in his camp, too, Bajans, Bent, Lucians, and wenches from the other isles, but neither they nor their powdered sisters along the back streets of Colon appealed to Innocencio very long, for, sooner or later there always came to him the memory of a yellow girl, and thoughts of her brought pictures of a blue-and-gold negro colonel and an old man hanging by the wrists.

Sometimes he called away and was gone for weeks. When he returned his crew told stories of aimless visits to the Haytian coast in which there appeared to be neither reason nor profit, since they neither took nor fetched a cargo.

His helpers retailed other gossip also, rumors of a coming revolution in the Republic, tales of the great general, Petthomme Laguerre, who had aimed upon the Presidency. Innocencio's ears were open, and what he heard stirred his rage, but he was not a brilliant man, and his brain, unused to strategy, refused to counsel him. For five years he had studied the matter incessantly, nursing his hate and searching for a means to satisfy it. Then, as if born of the lightning, he saw his way.

He consulted a French clerk in the Canal office, and between them they contrived a letter which ran as follows:

To His Excellency, General Petthomme Laguerre, Commandant of the Arrondissement of the South, Jacmel, Republic of Hayti.

General—The bearer, Innocencio Ruiz, of Cartagena, master of the schooner Stella, will consult you upon a matter of extreme delicacy which concerns the sale of two hundred rifles. These arms, of latest model, were consigned to this port, but under the existing relations of amity between the French and Colombian governments they cannot be used. Knowing your patriotism and the seal with which you safeguard the welfare of your country, the writer makes bold to offer these arms to you, as agent of the Haytian government, at a low figure. Captain Ruiz, a man of discretion, is empowered to discuss the matter with you at greater length.

In full appreciation of your superior qualities as a soldier and statesman, it is with admiration that I salute you.

Respectfully,
Antoine Leblanc.

Jacmel lay white in the blazing sun as the Stella dropped anchor. The trades were falling, and the schooner drifted slightly under a full spread of canvas. Near where she came to rest lay a Haytian gunboat, ill-painted, ill-manned, ill-equipped, and Innocencio regarded her with some concern, for her presence was a thing he did not count upon. It argued either that Laguerre had won the support of her commander or that she had

been sent by the government as a check upon his activities. In either event she was a menace.

A hand was playing in the square, and there were many soldiers. Innocencio did not go ashore. Instead he sent the letter by a member of his crew, a giant Bajan whom he trusted, and with it he sent word that he hoped to meet his Excellency, General Laguerre, that evening at a certain drinking-place near the water-front.

The sailor returned at dusk with news that set his captain's eyes aglow. Jacmel was alive with troops; there had been a review that very afternoon and the populace had hailed the commandant as President. On all sides there was talk of revolution; the whole south country had enrolled beneath the banner of revolt. The gunboat was Laguerre's; all Hayti craved a change; the old familiar race cry had been raised and the mulattoes were in terror of another massacre. But the regular troops were badly armed and the perusal of Innocencio's letter had filled the general with joy.

Captain Ruiz was early at the meeting-place, but he waited patiently, drinking rum and listening to the chatter of the street. His Spanish accent, his identity as the master of the schooner in the offing, and above all, his threatening eyes, won him a tolerance which the wretched blacks did not accord to Haytians of his color; therefore he was not molested.

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"Your Excellency!" Innocencio rose and saluted. The sea was smoldering, but his lips were cold, for he felt the dread of recognition. Time, it seemed, had dulled the sharp outlines of Laguerre's memory as it had changed the younger man's features, for he continued, unrecognizingly:

"You are the agent of Monsieur Leblanc, I believe."

"The same."

"Good! Now these rifles—you have them nearby?"

"Within gunshot, Excellency. They are in the harbor at this moment."

Laguerre's face lighted. "Hal! A man of business, this Leblanc. You will fix the price, as I understand it."

There followed a certain amount of bickering, during which the general allowed himself to be worsted. He agreed weakly to Innocencio's terms, having already decided to appropriate the God-sent cargo without payment. The latter had counted upon this, and, moreover, he had rightfully construed the light in those bloodshot eyes.

"Monsieur le General, must see these rifles for himself, to appreciate them, and he must count them, too, else how can he know that I am not deceiving him? We must observe caution, for there may be spies—Innocencio spoke craftily.

"Fah! Spies? In Jacmel?"

"Nevertheless, there is a gunboat in the harbor and she flies the flag of the Republic. My skiff is waiting; we will slip out and back again—in an hour the inspection will be completed. You must see those rifles with your own eyes, Excellency. They are wonderful—the equal of any in the world; no troops can stand before them. They are magnificent."

"Come!" said Laguerre, rising. "But alone!" Innocencio displayed a worthy circumspection. "This hazardous business. That war-ship with the flag of the Republic—my employer is a man of reputation."

"Very well," Laguerre dismissed an aide who had remained at a distance during the interview, and together the two set out.

Yonder block." He slid back the hatch and descended leisurely into the cabin.

Laguerre was sitting in a chair with his arms and legs securely bound.

Innocencio seated himself, and the two men stared at each other across the bare table.

Laguerre spoke first, his tongue thick, his voice hoarse from yelling. Innocencio listened with fixed, unwavering gaze.

"You tricked me neatly," the former raved. "You are a government spy, I presume. The government feared me. Well, then, it was bold work, but you will listen to what I say now. We will settle this matter quickly. You had a share of money. You can name your price."

"All Hayti could not buy your life, Laguerre!"

Some tone of voice, some haunting familiarity of feature, set the prisoner's memory to groping blindly. At last he inquired, "Who are you?"

"I am Floreal."

The name meant nothing. Laguerre's life was black; many Floreal had figured in it.

"Perhaps the will remember another—a woman. She was a scoundrel, just here." The speaker laid a tobacco-stained finger upon his left cheek-bone, and Laguerre noticed for the first time that the wrist beneath it was marked as from a burn. "She was young and round and her body was soft—"

The mulatto's lean face was suddenly distorted in a horrible grimace which he intended for a smile. "She was a scoundrel, just here. She was young and round and her body was soft—"

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"Speak the Truth!" He Commanded, Roughly, "Otherwise You Shall See Your Father Dance a Bamboula While My Soldiers Drum on His Ribs with the Cocomaque."