

THEN

On the night that rebellion caught like a flame in Haiti, the slave named Toussaint swung down from his horse. It was a good horse – it had been a gift to him from his master, Bayou de Libertas, and despite its age it still served him well. It was, Toussaint reflected, a fitting horse for him to ride. He, like his horse, was old and had served his master well.

Soon, though, there would be no more masters, and no more slaves. Or so Boukman hoped.

As always, one or two people flinched when they saw Toussaint. He suffered the misfortune of having been born hideous, with a face so ugly that even his wife had called him the Ogre. His nose was both flattened and swollen, an unusual combination, whilst his eyes were small and deep-set. He carried this face around with him everywhere; it was like a calling card, a badge. He was known by it.

But, he reasoned, perhaps it was better to be known than not. Then no one could say that you had never existed; no one could turn you into a ghost. Since an early age, Toussaint

had held the conviction that one day he would achieve something great, that one day everyone would know his name. Yet, until now, he had done nothing but heal the occasional sick person and tend his master's horses (which, for the most part, lived in conditions markedly superior to those of the sick people). He did not even know how to read and write, and it struck him as he stood in that marshy place, with the torchlight flickering through the trees, that it was too late. He was too old.

Toussaint looked over at Boukman. The man was nearly as aged as Toussaint himself – in his late forties, at least. His face was a criss-cross of incisions. His pride and his tribal belonging had been cut into his skin when he was a child, and now he was on the other side of the world, and was allowed no pride and no belongings.

The ground underfoot was spongy and wet. This was marshland, the Bois Caiman, and Toussaint could see in the darkness to the west, silently slithering, the alligators that had given the wooded depression its name. He shivered, although the air was warm and humid.

What are we doing? he thought. *This is madness.*

Toussaint had always felt out of place – he was too clever for his confrères, but too black to truly socialize with his master. His twin sister, born one minute after him, had died of diphtheria before she could walk, and he could only remember her now as an indiscriminately visaged ghost, a blur on little chubby limbs, giggling. He had never had friends. He had never considered himself as belonging to a society of

slaves, only as an individual – and this ceremony was no different. He couldn't totally give himself up to this hysteria, but nor could he repudiate it. Africa was in his blood, even if he wasn't of the Dahomey race that had been primarily responsible for bringing vodou to Haiti.

He slowly made his way over to the assembly and Boukman greeted him warmly. They had first met many years ago, for Boukman was a close friend of Pierre-Baptiste, Toussaint's godfather, who had taught Boukman his smattering of Latin and theology. After Pierre-Baptiste had died, Boukman had continued to come to Toussaint's home, had drunk with him, played cards with him, talked with him. He was a great friend and confidant, even if his zeal was sometimes excessive.

— You should learn to read, Boukman always said, as I have. Then there'd be nothing to separate you from these whites. You are just as swift of mind.

— There's nothing to separate me from them anyway, Toussaint replied. And I have no use for reading.

He was Master of Horse, and was allowed the freedom to live in his own cottage in comfort; he had shared it with his wife until her death from consumption. Before that he had been a shepherd, and he had been granted the liberty to wander the hills unsupervised with the sheep. *Why should I read? What happiness could it bring me?*

Still, he had to admit that it would be pleasant to read the French books Boukman had told him about – Rousseau and Raynal and so on. Raynal, according to Boukman, said:

— Liberty is everyone's property.

Raynal, too, predicted the coming of a negro king, a man who would liberate the slaves and submit the fertile lands of the new world to his furious vengeance. Boukman thought himself that king, Toussaint could tell. *A dangerous idea*, he thought, but he kept his tongue. Boukman could be fierce when aroused to anger, as when he'd first seen the silver cross around Toussaint's neck.

— Why do you wear the Christ martyr on your person? he had asked. You, who have need only of the lwa of your people to protect you?

Toussaint had shrugged. His father had taught him to worship Christ and the one god, although he had told him that the lwa were real, too; Toussaint's father was Arrada, from the lands where many of the vodou lwa had been born, yet he had learned the Bible from his master. Toussaint knew that many of the slaves carried with them icons of Mary to stand in for the lwa Erzili Danto. It allowed them to worship her; at the same time it let them conceal their true beliefs and pretend, in the eyes of the master, to practice a species of ignorant Christianity. In this way were not the two faiths coming together?

Toussaint hadn't said any of this to Boukman, though. He had just shrugged and said that Christ was the one god, which he knew would irritate Boukman and put an end to the conversation.

In truth, he had inherited from his father a complicated attitude toward religion. He considered his father's view – that all

gods should be given their due, as being representative of the qualities people wished to nurture in themselves – to be largely correct.

It was also his father who had taught him the use of simples, which many Christians considered tantamount to witchcraft, and how to draw them from the growing things all around: sarsaparilla to cleanse the blood, catnip to calm babies, quassia to stimulate the nerves and to expel worms. Toussaint had healed his master more than once, and his children, and he had been repaid kindly.

All of this meant that Toussaint was both a Christian and a believer in the old ways. He might not want to utterly reject the gods of his ancestors, but, by the same token, why should he reject the Catholic faith his master had taught him, so beautiful and mystical in its dedication to the notion of a single divinity, and of which Pierre-Baptiste had spoken so eloquently?

This ceremony then, tonight, in the boggy land of Bois Caiman, was all Boukman's doing. It was vodou superstition and Toussaint didn't believe in it, but he came despite his battle with the contradiction. He had been lucky, he knew. He had seen the whip-scars on the backs of his fellow slaves, had seen children plucked from their mother's breast and their necks broken. He had seen men killed for falling asleep on their feet. He himself was free, after a fashion, but he could see that his brethren were not. He believed in Boukman's cause, even if he didn't believe in the blessing Boukman insisted on applying to it.

— Tonight, Boukman shouted to the crowd that had gathered, we rise up! It is time for rebellion against the whites. The mulats demanded their freedom and the slavers repaid them with blood.

Two months earlier, the mulats had revolted against the whites. These mulats were the half-breeds; that is, the sons and daughters of white men and black women – for the opposite configuration was unthinkable. Mulats had more freedom than the blacks, but of a very limited kind. They weren't chattel, but they weren't citizens, either. They had tried to overthrow the whites, only to be brutally repressed. Their insurrection had been a crushing failure, but it had one lasting repercussion.

It had inspired the blacks.

— Now, shouted Boukman, the slavers will come to learn the real meaning of fear.

A general and wordless acclamation greeted this, people roaring and cheering.

— France declares the mulats, the bastard sons of slaver and slave, free! Yet what does France say of the negro slaves – mothers to those men of color – who grow her sugar, who prepare the indigo for her fine clothes? Nothing!

— Nothing!

Boukman gestured to the blind houngan beside him.

— Before we fight, we must join the spirits to our cause. We must be sure that the old gods are on our side, and the ancestors who, in turn, have become gods.

He gestured to the ground at his feet, and Toussaint looked

down to see that there was a patch of earth darker than that surrounding it, an oblong patch about the length of a man.

Boukman picked up a spade that had been lying on the ground. Toussaint wondered why he hadn't noticed it before, and was beginning to have a bad feeling.

— Two nights ago, said the houngan, one of our number bravely volunteered to be made a zombi.

Toussaint clenched his fists. He had heard about this practice; it was deep, dark vodou. A person would be given certain plants, the extract of a certain fish, and these would conspire to slow his heartbeat, his breathing, so that on cursory inspection he would appear dead. Toussaint could imagine what would happen when these ingredients were combined. Following this, the zombi would be buried and later exhumed to see the world anew. Toussaint had always thought the process a punishment. Why had the man – Toussaint shivered to acknowledge the possibility that there was a man buried under this dark patch of ground – chosen to be treated like this?

— The man under our feet is the first soldier in our war, said Boukman. He has died, and he will be reborn tonight. He has traveled to the land under the sea, where the dead live. He has been guided by Baron Samedi, the lwa of the cemetery, into death and he has caroused with our ancestors under the waves. He alone knows the disposition of the dead!

Ah, thought Toussaint. So the man is a kind of ambassador to the spirits of the ancestors, to the lwa. What a ridiculous farce, and how unpleasant, too.

Boukman bit down into the earth with the spade. It only took one scoop before he struck a wooden box. Quickly, he cleared the earth from it, then someone else stepped down to help him prise off the lid. Inside was a man who looked to be dead, only his skin didn't have the pallor, nor his lips the blue tinge, that Toussaint had learned to associate with the truly departed.

Boukman guided the houngan's blind fingers to find the man's face. On doing so, he took a vial from his coat, unstoppered it, and, pulling open the mouth, poured a liquid down the throat of the apparent corpse.

With a great shudder, the man sat up in the box, coughing.

Pure drama, pure theater, Toussaint thought.

But at that moment a cloud parted and the moon shone down, and he found himself trembling like any superstitious pagan.

Control yourself, he thought.

— Tell us, Boukman said to the reanimated zombi. Tell us what you have seen, you who have been reborn this night.

Do the others know about the drugs? Toussaint wondered. *I think not.* He thought they probably believed, really believed, that this man had died and had been reawakened by magic. He himself only knew the trick because his father had spoken of it, had warned of the power of the fish in question, warned him never to touch his store of its powder. No wonder the other spectators were staring, hanging on Boukman's every word.

The man looked right through Boukman, right through the swamp, too, and his lips twitched.

— I saw Baron Samedi, he said, all bones with a suit over them. He took me under the waves, and I saw the swimming creatures and the ocean floor. And oh! I saw la Sirene. She was so beautiful with her fish's tail, and she took me into her husband Agwe's house, and in that house that is a country I saw all our dead departed.

— You saw our ancestors, asked Boukman, the ancestors of the slaves?

— Yes, even unto those whose bodies were left in Africa.

A hush had descended; people were craning closer to see. The script – for Toussaint assumed there must be a script and he further presumed that Boukman had written it – was melodramatic, but it was having its desired effect.

— And what did the ancestors say to you? asked the houngan.

— They said they would help us. They promised they would lend us their strength.

Boukman smiled. He clapped the man on the back, and a fresh bout of coughing began. Toussaint guessed the zombi must have got some earth in his throat when he was buried.

— We have the support of our ancestors, the gede lwa, the men who became gods when they died! said Boukman. We have the support of Baron Samedi, who is lord and gate-keeper of death. We have the support of la Sirene, who owns the sea that surrounds us and the house of the dead.

He paused.

— But there is one whose support we still require.

Another hush.

— Who?

And:

— Who?

And:

— Who?

The questions echoed in the clearing.

Boukman grinned.

He owns them more completely than if he had seized their balls in his hands, Toussaint realized.

— We must call down Ogou Badagry, the lwa of war, said Boukman, and ask him into our met tet, into the seat of our souls. We must be possessed by war itself!

He looked around him, silent.

— YES!

Not an echo this time, but the whole crowd all together. Before he could stop himself, and to his shame, Toussaint answered, too.

— But Ogou will not possess us all! The man he chooses will be the one sent to free us.

More shouting from the assembly:

— You!

— We choose you!

— Lead us, Boukman! Command us to victory!

Boukman graciously waved their words away.

— No. The lwa will choose.

Toussaint sighed. Their cause was just. Hadn't Rousseau

himself said that man is born free, but everywhere is in chains? So Boukman had told him, anyway. The philosophers agreed that liberty was a right which could not be taken away, except as punishment for criminal acts. So could they not simply rise up, with justice in their hearts, and take their freedom by force? Was it necessary that they cement their alliance with this superstitious ceremony?

Toussaint glanced around at the gleaming, avid faces of his companions.

Yes, apparently it was.

Boukman raised a stone to his lips and kissed it. It was his *pwen*. In it was one of the gods the Dahomey had brought with them to this new world, a god of war called *Ogou Ferro*. Or so Boukman believed. After kissing the stone, he slipped it back into his pocket. Boukman believed the stone would protect him from those who wished to hurt him and would help him in times of need. Toussaint thought it was just a stone.

The ancient *houngan* stepped forward and, taking a stick, drew a symbol in the mud. Toussaint flinched at the man's eyeless sockets. His master had ordered them to be put out when the *houngan* – who was called Louis, even though that wasn't his true name – had dared to look upon his daughter in her underclothes. That the daughter had gone to the *houngan* to seduce him meant nothing to the master.

The old man's blindness hardly diminished his skill at drawing the *veve* in the mud. The image was complicated: a pair of swords; several symmetrical curlicues; a shepherd's crook.

Satisfied, the *houngan* raised the *ason*, a rattle filled with

the tail bones of snakes, and began to shake it. Then, slow on his rickety old legs, he danced the Rada dance, foot to the side, left then right, to a one-two-three-rest count, his shoulders rolling back and forth. He was wildly waving a machete in his other hand.

Toussaint also held a machete, although it didn't sit so easy in his hand. He hoped he would not have to use it. He had advised his master to quit the country when the mulats fell, as he had sensed – from Boukman, but also from the sullenness in the faces of all the slaves – that the negro uprising would swiftly follow. Yet Bayou had stayed, insisting that the commissioners would protect him, that even if the blacks obtained their freedom – which he believed, with certain caveats, that they one day should – the issue would be decided civilly, with no bloodshed. Toussaint believed the opposite. He believed that the slaves would have their freedom, but they would need soak the land in the blood of the slavers to achieve it, and this was a prospect that filled Toussaint with sadness.

The houngan sang. He sang so that Legba of the crossroad might open the gate, and the lwa might flow down into him when he needed them:

— Attibon Legba, ouvri bayè pou moin!

Ago!

Ou wè, Attibon Legba, ouvri bayè pou moin, ouvri bayè!

M'apè rentrè quand ma tournè,

Ma salut lwa yo.

Boukman came to stand next to Toussaint.

— You doubt the necessity of this, he whispered.

— I doubt the wisdom of it, said Toussaint, not bothering to keep his voice down. The whites believe us to be superstitious and unschooled. We're proving them right.

Boukman waved his hand dismissively.

— We're proving ourselves African. If we take the whites' religion and their education, then we'll only ever be free on their terms.

Toussaint nodded slowly. He didn't agree, but he could appreciate Boukman's reasoning.

He was becoming distracted as the dancing of the houngan grew wilder. Toussaint told himself he was imagining it, but it seemed that the very trees were dancing, their broad leaves waving back and forth in a breeze that had just arisen, as if the land had awoken and were breathing. Shadows licked across the sluggish waters like dark flames.

— He's calling Ogou now, said Boukman. Do you feel it?

Toussaint shook his head. But he wasn't convinced he did not. Did it seem that the low long shapes of the alligators had drifted closer, that the trees were hemming them in? All of a sudden the moon seemed close over the water, fat and sickly pale, and there was a smell all around him of organic richness, of the dark soil where dead things rot, of freshly uprooted plants, of crawling things squirming in their roots.

— Ogou is the father of war, said Boukman. In the country

of our fathers they say, deye morne ga morne; deye feu ga feu. *Behind the mountain is another mountain; behind the fire is another fire.* Ogou is the mountain. Ogou is the fire. Do you understand?

— No, said Toussaint.

Boukman studied him a moment.

— You will.

The houngan, still dancing, scuffed out the veve of Legba, the lwa who opened the doors to the spirit world, and began to draw a new shape. This one showed a mountain, a fire, a sword.

He danced quicker and quicker, wailing:

— Papa Ogou qui gagn yun cheval!

Toute mounne pas montè'!

Papa Ogou qui gagn yun cheval!

Toute mounne pas montè'!

Toussaint, who had previously been present only at Rada rites, and never the fierce, secret Petwa ceremonies for the war gods, listened to the words of the houngan's new song. *Papa Ogou rides a horse. It's not just anyone who can ride him.* He knew that the vodou worshippers believed the lwa could take over a man's body by crossing from the land under the waters and possessing the man's master spirit, his met tet. He had seen a female slave become Papa Gede, the father of death. Her voice had deepened and she had drunk a bottle of moonshine, then breathed out fire.

It had been impressive, but was no less a pantomime for it. Toussaint glanced at Boukman. *Does he truly believe in this?* he wondered. *Or does he merely intend to claim possession by Ogou himself, and so cement his leadership?*

He was still wondering this when something plucked his spine at both ends and pulled it taut as a piano string, causing his head to snap back and his teeth to clack together on his tongue. His mouth flooded with blood, but he couldn't taste it and there was no pain.

He was dimly aware of darkness rushing in, and of blood and spittle spraying from his lips.

As if through water, he heard the houngan singing more urgently now:

— Ogou Badagry, c'est neg politique, yo!
A la li la, oh, corde coupe corde, oh!
Ou maît allè, ou maît tourney
Ogou Badagry c'est la li ye!

Ogou is here, Toussaint understood. *The master is returned.* *Where?* he wondered. *Where is Ogou?*

Toussaint felt something hot on his arm. It could have been a match, or it could have been a burning tree, but he seemed to have a sense neither of the shape of things, nor of the extent of his own body anymore. His head was in the heavens and his feet were in the sea under the world. At the same time, he was the size of a cockroach, looking up at the world through refracted lenses, a creature in

miniature surrounded by giants. He tried to turn, but could only roll his eyes to the side.

Boukman was grinning at him, grinning and grinning, and Toussaint could see the skull under his skin.

Then something snapped, and he . . .