

THE THIRD PRISONER

By James S. Dorr

He was the third prisoner scheduled for execution that day. But he, he was clever. He knew the system. Even incarcerated, he knew how to arrange for necessities to be smuggled to him.

These included the dusky powder he surreptitiously sprinkled behind him into the wind on his march across the prison compound. He had been from Haiti, which meant he was nominally a Catholic. Using this fact, he was able to insist he be taken to the chapel to have the priest's blessing before he was hanged. He knew they would do this, the ones who had captured him. They would do this so the world would see they respected the niceties of prisoner treatment -- and never mind the Geneva Convention.

But he himself, he had no interest in these people's politics. Only now in revenge. Still fettered, still guarded on either side, he allowed himself to be shoved to his knees before the chapel altar. But he did not listen to the priest's prayers. Instead he mumbled words of his own, taught him years before by his *Vodoun* masters when he had been young in the slums of Port-au-Prince.

He still mumbled silently as he was led back out, past rows of bleached stones, to the waiting scaffold, its newly emptied noose swinging slowly. His hands now tied behind him, he walked the last steps past the freshly dead bodies of his fellow captives, the last of his powder spilled, then up the staircase to the wooden platform. He felt the noose being tightened around his neck.

The *Comandante* himself read the charges. Spying, smuggling, fomenting discontent among the poor, it did not matter. If he was guilty it was just of living, of doing the things a man

must do to keep him and his family fed. His family who had been gunned down before his eyes the night the *Federales* took him.

Then, one more nicety, the *Comandante* asked him to say any last words. He nodded, *sí*. But he spoke them in French, in the patois of a Haitian *bokor*, twisting around to see, once more, the dusty corpses below the gibbet. The burial ground beyond with its small church.

He finished his curse as the trap door snapped open, giving him only one final brief glimpse at the day's first two prisoners beginning to stir. The sounds in the distance of shifting earth, and the ripping of coffins in shallow graves.

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