

A HAITIAN PICNIC—AND AFTERWARDS

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LYING off the coast of Haiti, about twenty-five miles north of the capital Port-au-Prince, is the famous little island called *Ile à Cabrits*. It is notable for its wealth of Indian remains. Examples of such Indian remains as have been found in Haiti are displayed in the carefully classified and beautifully arranged Ethnographical Museum of Port-au-Prince. These have been, generally speaking, the reward of much search and much digging, but the *Ile à Cabrits*, evidently an early centre for fishing and probably also for religious ceremonials, has, lying near the surface, numerous shards and other evidences of Indian civilization. A little scraping of the soil nearly always rewards the seeker. So it seemed to us well worth while to make the somewhat arduous excursion to this island. It involved twenty-five miles of highway, then country road, then the trip in a fisherman's boat from the mainland to the island, a trip lasting from half an hour to half a day—depending on the breeze.

My learned archaeologist Haitian friends planned the expedition which, in the end, proved to be personal rather than scientific in its interest. Our picnic began at the usual early Haitian hour. When the car came to the hotel and I stepped into it, I was only the sixth passenger, making a very restrained number for this island. I greeted with pleasure two Haitian friends, the brother of one and the husband of the other, and a small son sitting on the front seat between his father and the driver just where a little boy would like to be. We talked happily about the riches of the *Ile à Cabrits* now abandoned to the goats and frankly named for them. But though the remains might be easy of access, the same was not true of the island. So we started out for a long pleasant excursion, and I for one was thankful on that hot day that the car was not being crowded to capacity and beyond. We drove down into the town. We stopped at the intersection where our street joined the highway to the country. Then the first blow fell: a large handsome Haitian adolescent opened the front door and threw himself across the father and the small boy, leaving the father to close the door. He then took out a comb, and after he had thoroughly combed back his long black glossy locks, turned around and told the ladies that he had decided to come on the

excursion. There was some twittering and mild consternation on the part of the ladies, who proved to be his aunts and doubtless had extended hospitality to him before; they realized that he was a heavy consumer. Now they had the commissariat in mind. Then, by some miracle, purely Haitian, of mind over matter, we all settled down peacefully in the crowded car, and enjoyed the heavenly clear sky and brilliant air of this incomparable island.

Before we left the town, we were in a mingled surge of insistent street-cries from the vendors. Their cries were reiterated always with the same cadence, a high nasal clarion call that carried for blocks and vied with the insistent sounding of the "klaxon" horns which fills the air by night and by day. As we drove on, the inexhaustible stream of Haitian humanity flowed through the road. Countless women striding along with great baskets on their heads or loads of pottery, men in this current carrying wooden chairs to the market or heavy baskets, some with so many in their load that they looked like vaudeville performers! Philosophical little donkeys (*bourriques*) kept pace with their mistresses, some carrying simply paniers of produce, others loaded with faggots. Then a drove of them would pass by, carrying their charcoal for household fuel to regular customers. An occasional little donkey carried a nonchalant equestrienne always riding in a seemly way side-saddle fashion. Often the donkey must have been loaded by a skilful stevedore, for the well balanced load consisted of paniers, a mother, baby, two children and a few odd baskets, and the mistress of one such agglomeration smoked a pipe serenely, perhaps triumphantly. In the town, cocks crowed incessantly with a full-throated note inconsistent with their slender bodies. Women called their wares, boys shouted their newspapers:—Port-au-Prince alone boasts more than forty daily sheets. To add to this noise and crowd, the ubiquitous shoe-cleaners beat on their boxes with a stick to announce their presence.

Then we came to a road leading in from the right. At a word from the young Haitian husband, the car stopped; he stepped out and bowed to a gnome-like creature. She looked very fresh and clean, was clear-skinned and clear-eyed, with thick well brushed hair of a warm russet colour. She wore well cut blue and white shorts and shirt; but unfortunately she had to use a crutch under one arm and to help herself with a cane in the left hand. Never was there a human figure more bandaged
decorated with adhesive tape at every angle.

Without any pause or to-do, she sprang nimbly into the car beside the retreating Haitian ladies and me.

We drove on into the country. The vivid poinsettias brightened the road to our right, the sea lay on our left, and everywhere before us rose green mountains. The brother who had invited the newcomer gave me due introduction: she was his professor of graphology. There was a silence in the car which I felt must be broken. So she and I talked about the points of interest in Haiti, but first she was eager to tell of the dramatic mishap that had befallen her. Her lodgings had been broken into a few days before, and all her papers had been stolen. I asked her about graphology, a science new to me. By it, she told me, the skilled graphologist can look at your writing, judge your character, determine your past and foretell your future. She had been practising in Berlin, but she felt that Nazi Germany was no place for her, so she had fled from Germany. I asked if she had been allowed to bring out any money; she said she had not, but she had a rich uncle in France. Immediately upon arriving in Paris, she had put her advertisement in *L'Echo de Paris*, and had given the address of an apartment she had taken in the Rue Bonaparte. From that moment her time had been filled profitably, her services had been requisitioned even by the Government in the case of a notorious woman swindler. Then she began to feel that the Nazis were still pursuing her, so she escaped by way of Southern France, the Pyrenees, Lisbon, and arrived in Haiti where she hoped to finish her book before proceeding to the United States. She thought it very fortunate that two ladies should have met, both with a common interest in Haiti and its places to be visited.

"We must see them together" she said.

She proposed that we go the next day to Léogâne. I said that unfortunately it was an all-day trip, and that I could not go. She tried various days in the week, and I finally told her that I was not free any morning, that I was translating an old French History of Haiti, and that a secretary worked with me every morning. I must confess that I feared her interest in pursuing my acquaintance lay in a wish to get me to act as sponsor for her entrance into the United States. There was nothing that made this unknown creature seem anything but a stranger. Her fresh mask-like face was simply aggressive and acquisitive. It bore no trace of human feeling, nothing to remind one of the suffering

hers in the past. She had charged into our little group as if she were on a *blitzkrieg*; she next set out to invade me. One felt that she would make her way in the future as in the past. There was nothing that wakened any sympathetic response or warmed the heart, as in the case of the many refugees I had seen and known in Haiti. Here was self-sufficiency. I felt no impulse to "underwrite" her in the United States.

Then we reverted to the question of her robbery. She was grief-stricken over the fact that the thieves had taken every paper belonging to her, nothing was left behind, there was her whole book on graphology gone! I could truly sympathize with her, for I lost once one page of manuscript; it was doubtless of no interest to anyone except myself, but I feel that I never again can recapture its first fine careless rapture, that something is irrevocably lost. So what about the loss of all the makings of a book on graphology? A book of such value not only to the writer but to the world. Think of the characters left undisclosed, the pasts left unrevealed, the doors left closed on the future, and the remunerative sales of the book that would never come to birth! I mourned with her.

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About noon, after having ground painfully through a sandy road running past marshes and barren land, we arrived at the gray little village consisting of some four fishermen's houses, nestled under big logwood trees. We were expected, the sail-boats were there, so was the *Ile à Cabrits*. Our boat was anchored off shore in shallow water, and we had to be carried to it. Certainly no row of Hollywood stars would have cared to share our ordeal, and have their weight publicly appraised and compared. The fisherman made no secret of where I stood by leaving me to the last. With Haitian readiness to see the comic in the whites, they found the whole thing as funny as we did. I urged that a bonus for excess weight should be added to my fare by boat.

Never have I seen sturdier boats, nor sadder looking. They were made of timbers silvered by time and weather; they were sloop rigged, if you could call them rigged at all. The sails were made of a little of everything, and an occasional sugar bag played its part. The few frayed cords were attached here and there to the sails.

They pushed us out into deep water, let down the centre

headway; then we slowly made our course to the island. We ran up into a little cove where we could jump to the bank from the boat, and I was spared the humiliation of being chosen last for portage ashore.

The mound-like little island was covered with scrub. The goats, after which it had been named, had left innumerable trails which did not avoid ledges. I suppose the goats had enjoyed jumping up their paths; for us it made the way very arduous. We followed the trail to the summit of the island, being lured there by a clump of trees underneath which we thought we would have luncheon. When we arrived there, we found that by some trick of optics they gave no shade at all.

Our refugee friend was marvellously spry and nimble, keeping up with the best of us. Surely she had found "strength through joy" in her girlhood. We did not learn much about her wounds, but she reverted to the loss of her papers, and complained that the Haitian Police had been very lethargic and uninterested. However, she had got new lodgings in the rear of a good strong house in Pétionville; there was nothing but a paved courtyard behind her rooms and high stone walls. Moreover, she had secured two strong dogs to act as watch-dogs in the courtyard, so she felt safe. But she wanted the Police to find and bring back her papers, because the thieves had taken not only her notes on graphology but all her private correspondence as well;—such a thing she had never expected in Haiti.

The men of our party announced that they would go swimming. Our vigorous German cripple decided that she would find a cove of her own. The rest of us scraped the soil near us, and actually found some nice shards. The contents of the pot of which they once had been a part could have easily boiled in the sun just there. Then we crept back to the lunch centre, feeling that where trees are, there shade ought to be also. After a while, the men all came back from their swim. Freshest and nimblest of all, untouched by heat, came the refugee cripple. We all lunched delightfully from baskets of beautiful fruits, well chosen food and a bottle of good wine. By the time that we got along with the wine, the refugee was deploring the motor collision of which she had been a victim; the shattered glass, however, fortunately had cut her only on the legs and arms, very little on the face.

Then we compared finds. The cripple had been highly successful in her excavations.

We drove home in the cooler hours of the late afternoon; a quieter company, as so often happens on the return trip from a picnic, than the one that had set forth.

The lady graphologist and I have never met since.

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One of my Haitian friends was visiting me in New York six or seven months later and giving me the family news. Then she said to me suddenly:

Do you remember that woman graphologist who went to the Ile à Cabrits with us? I said "Indeed I do. I remember her vividly. Wasn't she a queer little gnome?"

And my friend said: "Well, she was a man! The F.B.I. agents met his boat at the dock in New York, and they have him in prison now."