

Madison Smartt Bell

**POINT SAMANA:
AN EXCERPT FROM
THE STONE THAT THE BUILDER REFUSED**

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On the thirty-first day of their voyage, the troopship *Jean-Jacques* drew within a range of *La Sirène* and lowered a boat which labored slowly toward them over the deep swells. The passenger in the bow was an ensign who carried a letter addressed to Placide and his brother. Admiral Latouche-Treville presented his compliments and desired the sons of Toussaint Louverture to transfer themselves and their efforts to the *Jean-Jacques*.

Within half an hour they had loaded their belongings onto the same boat that had brought the message. Isaac's face looked pale to Placide, who sat facing him, opposite the oarsmen, but this was from excitement now, not nausea. He had got over the last of his seasickness weeks ago. Today was a clear morning, with the wind freshening in the east. The boat tossed like a chip among the billows. The troughs were deep enough that at the moments they could not see either ship. Monsieur Coisson crouched, clutching the gunwales, but Placide felt light-hearted, and Isaac went so far as to drop an arm and trail his fingers through the sea-green water. Coisson shook his head tightly and mouthed the word *shark*. Isaac, grinning cheerfully, raised his dripping hand and kissed his salty fingers toward the tutor.

Arrived, the boys climbed a swinging ladder to the deck of *Jean-Jacques*. While Coisson went immediately below to claim space for themselves and their trunks, the boys remained topside, flush with the excitement of the change and activity. For some reason the two ships held a tight parallel course, and the boat shoved off again toward *La Sirène*.

Placide looked toward the western horizon, nudged Isaac when he saw the black curve of a dorsal fin break water.

For twenty minutes the porpoises swam and leapt around the Jean Jacques and *La Sirène*, circling the ships with their flat tails flogging the water, jumping so high sometimes that their whole bodies left the waves to be outlined against the sky. M. Coisson, looking much more confident now that the broad deck of the larger ship was under his feet, reappeared to tell them how Dionysus, Greek god of wine, had turned the pirates who would kidnap him into dolphins. It was a bright moment for the three of them, but a few minutes after the porpoises dove without resurfacing, Placide noticed the boat returning from *La Sirène*, loaded down this time with Guizot, Cyprien, Paltre, and Daspir.

His heart regained its weary weight. Till this moment he had not realized how much it had relieved him to think they were quit of the four Army officers. For the last couple of weeks it had seemed they had got up some conspiracy or scheme among themselves. They were forever whispering and sneaking sly glances at Isaac and Placide, or still worse sometimes looks of pity.

Now Placide would not meet Isaac's eyes. One after another the four officers came grunting and clambering over the railing.... Though they'd said nothing to one another, Placide and Isaac had both hoped this transfer meant they would now speed ahead of the rest of the fleet on this new vessel, as the First Consul had assured them, to bring word of this expedition to their father. But in the event it was *La Sirène* that put on sail and left them behind, hastening to Guadeloupe, as they were told, with orders of the government.

One day after another slipped down behind the stern of the *Jean-Jacques*. Since putting out from Brest, the fleet had been scattered by some bouts of heavy weather. It was after the last of these storms that Isaac had made his complete recovery from *mal de mer*. But also the last storm had blown several of the squadrons out of touch with one another. Placide did not know if they were ahead or behind the main body of the fleet but he was aware that he was no longer anxious for the voyage to end.

There was no special accommodation for them on the *Jean-Jacques*; the officers quarters and cabins of choice having already been claimed by others. Placide and Isaac swung in hammocks with the ordinary seamen, and slept the better for it. The food was

file, but no worse than aboard *La Sirène*. The Army officers grew edgier by the day, however, as Daspir's private stock of brandy dwindled down toward nothing.

One pearlescent dawn Placide happened to be standing by when a sailor fishing of the leeward side of the ship snagged a waterlogged branch, from whose crotch there flowed a trailing orchid, waxen yellow bulbs sealed and pickled in the salt. The Army officers appeared and passed the flower from hand to hand, admiring it, noising it for scent, which it had none. But afterward, as the sun broke water to the east, Daspir remained standing near Placide at the rail, tilting his face to the warmth and flaring his nostrils in the western breeze.

"I have heard that the rum of Saint Domingue is very wonderful," he said.

"It has been so long," Placide said, somewhat coldly. "I don't remember." In fact he had been forbidden to drink rum by his father, though once he had made himself drunk and ill on *tafia* stolen by older boys. At the recollection, he felt again the sick dizziness and the prickling numbness of his face.

Daspir did not seem to be put off. He rolled his soft shoulders forward and back under his military coat, pressed up on the rail to stretch his spine. "There's a change in the air," he said. "Do you not think--" He broke off and raised his arm to a point. "Look, look there."

Placide squinted but there was nothing to see on the western horizon but a low bank of cloud.

"Birds," Daspir, breathed out, as if in rapture. Then Placide saw something swirling up from the cloud bank, a smoke-like current of vaguely moving specks. Someone else had shouted indistinctly from the bow.

"Land birds, they are," Daspir said, and turned on Placide a growing smile. "I am certain of it-- and the land cannot be far."

In the early afternoon Major Maillart, riding in the midst of a squad of Toussaint's honor guard, reached the crossing of the roads to Ouaniminthe and Fort Liberté. Here an ancient woman sat beneath a rickety shelter made of crooked sticks and broad flat leaves, with rows of green coconuts and bananas spread on the ground before her. These comestibles must have been carried some distance, since an almost treeless plain

expanded all around the crossroads as far as the eye could see, to the ocean in one direction and the mountains in the other.

Coachy, who led the squad, called a halt and purchased six green coconuts. With short chopping blows of his saber he opened each one and handed it around. The men shared the thin sweet liquor before breaking the shells apart for the white meat.

Maillart bought a stalk of *bananas Ti-Malice* and immediately broke off four of them for the two small boys who were crawling around the old woman's low stool. The children sat up and stared at him, too shy to peel their fruit. Maillart ate a couple of the bananas himself-- each about the size of his thumb-- and offered them to the other men, but still two thirds of the stalk was left for him to tie at his saddlebow before remounting.

The rode in the direction of Ouaniminthe, maintaining a gentle trot. Toussaint had outfitted the two thousand men of his personal guard with the best horses on the island; they ate up the ground relentlessly. The road was pinkish dust and the plain surrounding it almost featureless except for a few longhorned cattle grazing over the pasture. *Boeuf marron*, Coachy muttered, whenever he saw one of these, *wild beef*. His eyes lit up with appetite.

Maillart was adrift in his own relentless humor. He carried a note from Tocquet to Toussaint, announcing the arrival of the muskets, but this was a matter of no great urgency-- boatloads of guns hove into the Le Cap harbor almost everyday, it seemed. The truth was, he'd wanted to get out of town. The arrival of Isabelle's children had disrupted his *amours*, though of course it was only natural for her to dote upon them after such a terribly long separation. The children, who might have half-forgotten her during their long absence, were rather cool to her at first. She won back Héloïse, the younger, easily enough, but Robert remained aloof. It was absurd to be jealous of a twelve-year-old boy! ...and yet Maillart had felt that sting.

The worst was that Isabelle wasn't doing it to torment him, as in her sometime dalliances with other swains she had been, at least in part. No, this time she was not thinking about Maillart at all. Possibly there'd be no coals to discover under the ashes this time around, supposing her attention ever returned. After all, Isabelle was far from her youth, Maillart reflected, and there was always the modestly inconvenient matter of her husband. He might have sought the affections of another... however it was surprising how many attractive white women of the town were receptive to the addresses of the

black officers, the most enterprising of whom were advancing in wealth as well as in power, as Toussaint put the plantations back to work.

Therefore Maillart had tried to distract himself in a thirty-six hour fling with a colored courtesan of his acquaintance. This woman, though beautiful and exquisitely skilled in her profession, had finally left him a feeling of shame. And it was generally uneasy around the town, with the constant rumors of an expedition coming from France. A turn in the countryside, Maillart had thought, might do him some good.

For the last hour the grade of plain had been gradually mounting, and the afternoon light reddened on their backs. A final twist of the road spilled them onto the main street of Ouaniminthe. All of a sudden they had an escort of barking dogs and scattering goats and small children running alongside the horses shouting “Toussaint! Toussaint! Papa Toussaint!” They’d recognized the fine horses and tall riders, the plumes and silver helmets each with the motto “*Qui pourra en venire à bout?*” But Toussaint was wont to send detachments of his guard hither and yon, to distract inquiring eyes from his own actual whereabouts.

Maillart was saddle-weary by now, and thirsty too, his throat caked with dust. But they did not stop in Ouaniminthe. Coachy led them straight to the Massacre River, where they forded, the horses going down to their withers, the setting sun blood-red on the calm water as it curved away to the west. They rode up a gulley on the other side and entered the Spanish town of Dajabón.

Toussaint was not here either, it turned out, but they found meager accommodations for themselves at an inn. The men stacked, triple and quadruple and some sleeping on the floor. Thanks to his status as Toussaint’s *aide de camp*, Maillart had to share his room with only Coachy. A barrel of rum was quickly discovered, some chickens commandeered for their supper. Maillart turned in and slept without dreams. At dawn they were riding again through a low pass eastward toward the Saint Yago river.

By midmorning they had reached the river valley and were riding eastward along the low bank. The mountains rose towering on either side, dark verdant peaks thrusting into the clouds. There were few signs of cultivation or even of inhabitation, except every so often a thread of smoke from a charcoal fire hidden on a jungled slope. Once when they rounded a bend of the river onto a wide flat shoal of gravel, they came upon a dozen black women washing clothes. The laundresses must have come out from some maroon

settlement nearby-- there had been some movement over the border, since Toussaint had claimed the Spanish side of the island for France. The women straightened from their work and stared after the riders, in a grave silence, without a smile or a wave. They and their families would be fugitives, Maillart thought, from Toussaint's labor laws.

In the late afternoon their party was startled by a runaway horse rushing down the river toward them, on the opposite bank. The shoreline was too high and rocky to cross in this place, so there was nothing they could do but pull up and watch the spectacle. It was a splendid animal, however wild, a magnificent blue roan. The horse came down the far bank full tilt, punctuating its gallop with episodes of explosive bucking. Through it all the rider was fixed in the saddle, as tight as a barnacle-- no daylight to find between his rump and the leather. He was in shirtsleeves, a white shirt open to the breastbone. When he came nearer, Maillart saw the yellow madras headcloth.

"My Christ," he said, with a glance at Coachy. "It's the Governor-General."

Toussaint and his furious mount shot passed them by a hundred yards or more. Then at last the run petered out and the exhausted roan collapsed into a walk. No choice now but to accept the rider. Toussaint turned the roan and brought it back up the bank on a fairly short rein. Now Riau and Guiaou had appeared on their horses, riding toward Toussaint at an easy canter. Riau held a braided lariat coiled in his right hand, but Toussaint waved it away-- no need.

Coachy called across the river to Guiaou, who beckoned them to follow. They went at a walk, since Toussaint's horse was blown. The roan had run something more than a mile downriver, Maillart realized. It was at least that far when they reached a ford, and above it on the farther shore was a long oval corral which penned about thirty more as-yet-unbroken horses.

Maillart had heard from Tocquet and others that Toussaint maintained a *hatte* like this somewhere across the Spanish border. Apparently Tocquet had once been charged to herd a string of these horses down across the Central Plateau to Gonaives. Maillart splashed across the ford, raised his hand to salute the others. Riau returned the smartly. Toussaint, smiling more openly than was usual for him, was buttoning his shirt with his free hand. Soaked with sweat, the white cloth clung transparently to the ribbed muscle of his torso. Only a tuft of grizzled hair at the throat betrayed his age.

"*Mon général,*" Maillart said. "When you risk yourself so, you risk the colony."

Toussaint wiped away his smile with a hand and looked at Maillart closely. In the truth it had been a heart-stopping moment for the major. As in the case of many French officers in a similar position, Maillart felt an almost strictly personal loyalty to Toussaint: the prospect of any of his black subordinates succeeding him was enough to give him one uneasy pause.

“Oh,” said Toussaint, “if I make a brief return to the work of my youth, it is only for a moment’s refreshment.” The smile flashed again, then disappeared. By then they had come to the edge of the corral. Toussaint dismounted, stroked the neck of his gentled horse, clucked his tongue reprovingly when the roan tossed its head with his touch. He passed the reins to a bare-chested groom. Who’d appeared, smiling, beside him, nodded to Maillart and the others, and walked up the slope towards the cluster of low buildings above the corral.

A couple of hours of daylight remained, and Maillart spent them watching the horse-breaking. He was offered a try at the game himself, but declined it. He might have ridden one of these animals to submission in an enclosure, but that mad dash downriver was not for him. The method certainly did work, however, and no one seemed to get killed in the process, though one man was thrown to the grassy verge, and some time spent recapturing the horse with the lariat. Riau, who’d worked under Toussaint long ago as a slave on Bréda plantation, took a horse out and brought it back tamed. Guiaou was offered the same opportunity, but only ducked his head, teeth tight in a grin, and slid down the fence rail closer to Maillart.

They dined rather splendidly that evening, though in the open air. Chairs and tables were set out on the grass, and platters brought from the kitchen fires. In that cool altitude there were no insects to annoy them and they had fine view of the evening settling on the mountains across the river. Wild pig had been roasted on the *boucan*, garnished with baked fruit and supplemented by rice and brown beans and a rich *callaloo*. Maillart fell on the food with enthusiasm, ravenous after the long day’s ride. All thought of Le Cap and the people who lived there was now far from his mind. Toussaint, he noticed, ate less sparingly than usual, taking a fair portion of meat and a bowlful of *callaloo*, along with his usual bread and whole fruits. He must have one of the old women he trusted to cook for him tucked away nearby. But when the rum went around he let it pass, drinking only cool water drawn from a spring above the *hatte*.

At the end of the meal, Maillart presented Tocquet's note, and as Toussaint cut the seal with his thumbnail, he went to fetch the musket from the shipment he'd brought along to show. The demonstration struck him as a little excessive (add the extra weight had been irksome), but Tocquet must be feeling some immediate need to remind Toussaint of his usefulness.... Nodding, Toussaint slipped the letter into his coat and stood up to receive the musket. Taking a step away from the table, he turned the weapon this way and that in the fading light, then pulled back the hammer to test the spring.

"It is not new," he said. "French-- the M-seventeen-sixty-three. But condition is good." He whistled sharply at one of the barefoot men who had served the tables, and when he raised his head, Toussaint tossed him in the musket. Maillart's eyes tracked its flight. The barefoot man caught the musket in both hands.

"*Ki jan ou relé?*" Toussaint said. *What is your name?*

"*Guerrier, parrain,*" said the barefoot man with a broad smile. "*Guerrier, sé mwen-mêm.*" Maillart realized he was, most likely, witnessing a promotion from worker to soldier-- all the more enviable just now when for the first time in ten years they were not actually at war. He noticed too how naturally the man had addressed Toussaint as *godfather*.

"*Lè ou wé envahissè, ki sa w'ap fè?*" Toussaint inquired. *What will you do when you see the invader?*

"*Tiré, tuyé.*" Guerrier had brought the musket to his shoulder with an air of sufficient competence, and was sighting down at the shoals of the river. *Shoot to kill.*

"*Byen, kenbe'l,*" Toussaint said. *Good, keep at it.* Then, almost as an after thought, he told Guerrier to report Riau for an assignment and a horse.

Next morning Guerrier rode out among Toussaint's guard, well-mounted though without the silver helmet. He wore a ragged pair of Revolutionary trousers with the horizontal stripes, which was his only sign of a uniform. But he was a horseman, Maillart took note, his carriage in the saddle as presentable as anyone's. Toussaint rode third in their single file, with Coachy and Guiaou in the lead. As usual in the field he wore a simple blue uniform coat without epaulettes, and today he had put aside his general's bicorne for a round hat, a plume fixed to it with the tricolor Revolutionary rosette. The

change of headgear altered his appearance considerably, though of course Bel Argent was almost as recognizable, nowadays, as his rider.

By the end of that day they'd reached the town of Santiago, occupied by the mulatto general Clervaux and garrisoned by about half of the four thousand black troops who were posted this side of the border-- the rest were in the hands of Toussaint's brother Paul, in Santo Domingo City to the south. At Santiago there was no feast to mark their arrival-- Maillart and the guardsmen were left to forage, which they accomplished with a fair success. Toussaint was closeted with Clervaux for a long time, their candles burning deep into the night, with no one else invited to their council, white or black. Next morning they were off at dawn, riding eastward along the River Cayman into the wide expanses of the Consilanza Valley. The area was sparsely populated with Spanish cattleman and their few black retainers, who were nothing so numerous as on the French side of the island. The Spanish herdsmen stood in their doorways or turned in their saddles to stare at the passage of Toussaint's guard, with never hail or a greeting. Black rule was not popular in these parts, though it hardly seemed to have much effect on those who lived here. Maillart had never been so deep into Spanish Santo Domingo, and the vast plain struck him as desolate, though the grass was lush and green, seedheads flowing knee-high on men well-mounted as they were.

They sought no civilized shelter that night, but camped out in the open, beating down the grass to spread their bed rolls and hobbling the horses, that they would not founder on the usually rich pasture here. To Coachy's great delight he was given leave to fell and butcher one of the half wild grazing steers; there was *boeuf marron* that night to everyone's content. Toussaint scrupulously sent a gold portugaise to the nearest *hatte*, in payment for this meat they'd requisitioned. Next morning they rode out as the first mist was rising from the dew-bowed grass, swinging down toward the pass through the mountains which would bring them through to Santo Domingo City on the south coast. But before they had begun the ascent, a rider bore down on them from one of the north coast observation posts. He was breathless, with his horse in a lather, and before he was well within earshot he began to shout that many, many ships were gathering at the mouth of Samana Bay.

It was then that Maillart had it confirmed that how much more a horse could count than its rider. Not that he would belittle Toussaint's abilities in the saddle. But at

his urging, Bel Argent swung out into a gait so swift and smooth that the white horse seemed a different order of being from the other horses expected to follow him. Maillart was proud enough of his own horsemanship and also thought well of his mount, a strong bay gelding he'd named Éclair as much for its speed as for the lightning blaze in the center of its forehead. But the best he could manage was to hold his pace a length or two behind Riau's mount-- that same blue roan that Toussaint had broken just three days before.

Toussaint and the white warhorse had been out of sight for half an hour by the time Maillart and Riau rode onto the peninsula above Samana Bay. His round hat with its plume and cockade lay on the ground, and Bel Argent stood by him, reins slipped under stirrup, huffing and flanks heaving with the strain. Riau slipped down and went at once to Bel Argent and began to walk the big horse in a long looping circuit to cool him down. It was utterly unlike Toussaint to leave an overheated horse standing. Maillart began to walk Éclair, with Riau's mount on the other side, which was awkward since the blue roan kept trying to reach across his chest to bite the bay. Meanwhile, the rest of the honor guard gradually grew from dots in the middle distance; at last they came trotting out onto the point. The men dismounted, muttering to each other and their horses. No one dared to approach Toussaint, who stood at the cliff's edge, observing the mouth of Samana Bay with a folding brass spyglass. Every so often he lowered the instrument and polished the lenses on the tail of his coat, then raised it to his eye again with a disbelieving shrug.

Maillart passed Éclair reins to Guiaou, and led the blue roan toward Riau, who stood still holding Bel Argent, a respectful ten paces in back of Toussaint. The white stallion snorted, shook off a fly. Its breathing had calmed considerably. Toussaint turned his back to the sea.

"Get ready to die," he said. His face was grey. "All France has come against me." He passed one hand across his mouth and added, in a steadier voice, "They have come back to enslave the blacks."

Maillart lifted the glass from Toussaint's slack finger and pulled the telescoping joints to their full extension. The messenger had not been quite accurate in what he said, for the ships had not actually entered the bay, but stood at a good distance off the point. At that distance it was hard to ascertain their number, Maillart kept losing count, but he thought there must be between thirty and forty.

He folded the spyglass and held it toward Toussaint, but the black general seemed blind to the offer. He had taken his sheathed sword from his belt and stood leaning on it as if it were a cane. His face remained bloodless; he seemed to shrink inside his clothes. For the first time Maillart saw the man's age visible upon him.

Finally Toussaint did reach for the spyglass. Unconsciously he dropped it into a coat pocket, then walked haltingly to a boulder at the cliff's edge and sat down, balancing the sheathed sword across his knees. At a little distance, Guiaou and Coachy and the others of the guard stood by their horses, staring at the fleet with an impassivity they could barely maintain. It was not the number of the ships that frightened them, Maillart realized, but that their commander had been so obviously shaken.

But how could Toussaint have known the magnitude of France? The black general had made himself so absolutely master of the island that Maillart had forgotten that he had never been anywhere else-- that he was born in Santo Domingo and had never left its shores. As for himself, he had been twelve years in the colony, and France, the motherland, might just as well have been a fancy, or a dream.

A smaller frigate had detached from the fleet and was sailing northeast around the peninsula. They would be landing a small party, Maillart supposed, to get the news and maybe look for pilots. Toussaint seemed indifferent to the movement, if he had noticed it at all, and presently the ship had disappeared around the headland. Maillart remembered what he'd said two nights before, when he'd tossed the musket to Guerrier. But why must this advent be taken for invasion, why not the simple arrival of a friendly force? After all, Toussaint had always professed his loyalty to France and almost always seemed to act on it. Could not this point be put forward? Maillart took a step and cleared his throat, but Toussaint had already spoken.

"Riau." Now the voice was crisp and clear, though not too loud. "*Vin'pal'ou.*" That radical compression in the creole phrase, *Come her to me so I can talk to you.* Riau lowered his head to Toussaint's lips, then dashed to Bel Argent's saddlebags, took out a folding writing desk and returned to sit cross-legged below the boulder where Toussaint was stationed.

Maillart remained where he was. He felt-- no, he knew himself to be held at exactly this distance, just a few paces from Toussaint and his scribe, but, with the noise of the waves slamming into the rocks below, completely out of earshot. Toussaint was on

his feet now, pacing, gesticulating, while Riau bent over the desktop on his knees, pen point grooving the parchment. Now and then Toussaint paused, weighing one phrase against another, and once he even glanced at Maillart, but did not ask his opinion. He had not yet recovered his fallen hat and the yellow madras seemed to throb with the heat of his concentration.

Maillart wondered if someone might have turned a spyglass on him from the fleet, an admiral, perhaps Bonaparte's brother-in-law Leclerc, who was rumored to command the military force. What would it matter if they were watching? he thought. They won't know what they're looking at.

Riau was melting wax in a small flame; Toussaint ground his ring down on the seals.

"Guiaou, Coachy," he called sharply. Then, after a pause, "Guerrier." The three men jogged to him.

"Take these messages," Toussaint said. He had two letters in his hand. "Go to my brother, the General Paul, at Santo Domingo City...." He lowered his voice and turned his back so that Maillart could no longer hear him, but he saw that while Coachy had put one of the letters into his outer coat pocket, he'd shoved the other down inside his waistband, and was adjusting the tuck of his shirt to conceal it.

"Maillart!" The major trotted over and threw up a sharp salute. The party for Santo Domingo was already swinging into the saddle, moving out. Toussaint extended a single letter. Maillart grazed the seal with this thumb, warm and still a little malleable.

"Go with Riau," Toussaint said. "Take the rest of these men and bring my messages to the General Dessalines-- he should be at Port au Prince, but wherever he is you must reach him."

For a moment Maillart's eyes locked with Riau's. Well, he thought, have I got the real dispatch or the decoy? He had already dropped the letter into an inside pocket. He had been in a number of battles with Riau, and trusted him as much as any man of any color.

"But yourself, sir?" Maillart said. Toussaint had left himself no escort with these orders, not even a pair of heralds.

Toussaint had picked up his round hat and jammed it back on his head. He folded his arms across his chest, took one deep breath, and exhaled through his nostrils so

forcefully that Maillart expected to see dust stir on the ground between his feet. He strode to Bel Argent, dropped the folded desk into one of the saddlebags, and from the other pulled out a fat feather pillow sheathed in rose-colored silk. Because of his short legs, his head barely reached the horse's shoulder, but a one-handed vault put him into the saddle. He stood high in the stirrups, adjusting the pillow beneath him, then settled down upon it.

Maillart caught himself breathing through an open mouth. He had seen Toussaint take out the feather pillow only once or twice before; in rides of normal duration he didn't bother with the cushion. What it implied was that he meant to remain in the saddle for several days straight.

"*N'alé!*" he said. A short sharp bark: *Let's go*. And now, with a twirl of his left hand, and squeeze of his heels, he was already gone.