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Toussaint-Louverture and the Haitian Revolution

In what is considered to be the best book on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins* by C.L.R. James, the following capsule history of that revolution is given :

« In 1789, the French West Indian colony of San Domingo supplied two-thirds of the overseas trade of France and was the greatest individual market for the European slave-trade. It was an integral part of the economic life of the age, the greatest colony in the world, the pride of France, and the envy of every other imperialist nation. The whole structure rested on the labour of half-a-million slaves.

» In August 1791, after two years of the French Revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted. The struggle lasted for 12 years. The slaves defeated in turn the local Whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte's brother-in-law. The defeat of Bonaparte's expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of the Negro State of Haiti which has lasted to this day.

» The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement ».

Toussaint-Louverture, the slave who freed Haiti, also helped, indirectly, to free a large part of what is now the United States from French colonial rule. He rose to power during the age of revolution and successfully led one of the great slave revolts in history. The success of this revolt, and the drain on the French treasury caused by their attempt to suppress it, was the underlying reason why Napoleon had to sell the Louisiana Territory. The aftermath of this revolt rendered more certain the final prohibition of the slave-trade in the United States.

Rumours of the successful slave revolt in Haiti reached the United States and inspired some of the major slave revolts during the early part of the 19th. century. It also prompted white Americans to enact more stringent laws against slaves meeting to discuss their plight.

The following information on the effects of the Haitian Revolution on the struggle for freedom of the slaves in the United States is extracted from the *Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problem* held at Atlanta University, May 26, 1903 :

« The effect of the revolution on the religious life of the slaves was quickly felt. In 1800, South Carolina declared : 'It shall not be lawful for any number of slaves, free Negroes, mulattoes or mestizoes, even in company with white persons, to meet together and assemble for the purpose of mental instruction or religious worship, either before the rising of the sun or after the going down of the same. And all magistrates, sheriffs, militia officers, etc., etc., are hereby vested with power, etc., for dispersing such assemblies'.

» By 1822 the rigor of the South Carolina laws in regard to Negro meetings had abated, especially in a city like Charleston, and one of the results was the Denmark Vesey plot.

» The plot was well-laid, but the conspirators were betrayed. Less than ten years after this plot was discovered and Vesey and his associates hanged, there broke out the Nat Turner insurrection in Virginia. Turner was himself a preacher.

» The Turner insurrection is so connected with the economic revolution which enthroned cotton that it marks an epoch in the history of the slave. A wave of legislation passed over the South prohibiting the slaves from learning to read and write, forbidding Negroes to preach, and in-

terfering with Negro religious meetings. Virginia declared, in 1831, that neither slaves nor free Negroes might preach, nor could they attend religious services at night without permission. In North Carolina, slaves and free Negroes were forbidden to preach, exhort or teach 'in any prayer-meeting or other association for worship where slaves of different families are collected together' on penalty of not more than thirty-nine lashes. Maryland and Georgia had similar laws. The Mississippi law of 1831 said : 'It is unlawful for any slave, free Negro, or mulatto to preach the gospel' upon pain of receiving thirty-nine lashes upon the naked back of the presumptuous preacher. If a Negro received written permission from his master he might preach to the Negroes in his immediate neighborhood, providing six respectable white men, owners of slaves, were present. In Alabama, the law of 1832 prohibited the assembling of more than five male slaves at any place off the plantation to which they belonged, but nothing in the act was to be considered as forbidding attendance at places of public worship held by white persons. No slave or free person of color was permitted to 'preach, exhort, or harrangue any slave or slaves, or free persons of color, except in the presence of five respectable slaveholders or unless the person preaching was licensed by some regular body of professing Christians in the neighborhood, to whose society or church the Negroes addressed properly belonged'.

» In the District of Columbia, the free Negroes began to leave white churches in 1831 and to assemble in their own ».

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* * *

The Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint-Louverture helped to set in motion the early Black Revolt against slavery in the United States. In order to understand this we must just understand his story and how the idea of revolt developed within him.

Toussaint-Louverture, the hero of this story, came of a royal line. His grandfather was Gaou Ginou, King of the Arradas, a powerful tribe on the West Coast of Africa. The son was captured by a hostile tribe and sold into slavery in one of the West Indian Islands, Santo Domingo. Here, his son, Pierre Dominic

Toussaint, better known as Toussaint-Louverture, was born in 1743, a slave but the grandson of a king !

Nothing very much is known of his boyhood days, except that he was very intelligent and loyal. Because of his faithfulness he rose rapidly from the occupation of shepherd to coachman and thence to the position of foreman on the large plantation where he lived.

He was always fond of reading and managed, remarkably enough, to become acquainted with one or two foreign languages ; certainly he knew Latin. His tastes were various but chiefly he read the writings of Epictetus, himself once a slave in Greece, who later became a philosopher. Isn't that a fine picture — this boy on the tropical plantation reading the works of one whose early life had been as his own and who, later on, rose to fame ? Besides Epictetus, Toussaint read Plutarch's *Lives* and several very technical, informative works on warfare and the conduct of battles.

But chiefly he liked the Frenchman Diderot's *History of the East and West Indies* in which Diderot, writing under the name of the *Abbé Raynal*, said :

« Nations of Europe, your slaves need neither your generosity nor your advice to break the sacrilegious yoke which oppresses them. They only need a chief sufficiently courageous to lead them to vengeance and slaughter. Where can this great man be found ? Where is this new Spartacus ? He will appear, we cannot doubt it ; he will show himself to raise the sacred standard of Liberty and gather round him his companions in misfortune ! More impetuous than the mountain torrents, they will leave behind them on all sides the ineffaceable signs of their great resentment ! »

Self-confidence is a part of greatness. Modesty is a good thing, a fine thing, but one does not get very far on that quality alone, no matter how deserving. Toussaint, poring over these words from his youth up, feeling more and more keenly the horror of his condition, finally became convinced that these words applied to him and that he was that promised leader. Yet 50 years elapsed before he acted on this. When he was 54, he tells us : *« Since the Blacks are free they need a chief, and it is I who must be that leader predicted by the Abbé Raynal ».*

The island of Haiti and Santo Domingo — these two pro-

vinces form the same island, you must remember — was in a terrible plight in those days. Fighting, misgovernment, slavery and disaster ruled on all sides. Three powerful nations of Europe — England, France and Spain — were warring with each other because of their interests, and rebellions on the part of the slaves were constantly breaking out against their various masters. French slavery flourished most in Haiti, where conditions were unspeakable for over a century. Finally, after the outbreak of the French Revolution, the Haitians sent two delegates to Paris. One of them, Oge, on his return, started a small rebellion which led to much bloodshed.

Now, many black Haitians had in various ways achieved their actual freedom, but did not have the rights of freedom. In order to offset the consequences of Oge's rebellion, France granted to these free Blacks all civil privileges, making them free in deed as well as in name. Immediately, a new confusion arose, for the free Blacks took up arms against the white owners of slave plantations and 452,000 slaves rose up to take sides with them.

This was in August, 1791. Toussaint, still a foreman on his master's plantation, felt his time had come. He first helped Bayou de Libertat, the general overseer of the plantation, who had been very kind to him, to escape with his wife and family. Then he enlisted in the cause of other Blacks. He was a surgeon at first, but in the general confusion he realized that a good drillmaster would be of more service and so he began to train and direct. His early reading doubtless helped him out here, but he was a natural leader, and generalship came as easily to him as breathing.

He seems to have been fitted in every way for the position which was finally his. His tastes and needs were extraordinarily simple. As a rule, his meals consisted of a few oatmeal cakes, two or three bananas and water. He never touched wine. Nothing was too strenuous or fatiguing for him; he did not know the meaning of fear. He could do without sleep and frequently went with no more than two hours of sleep a night, and he was a magnificent horseman. Then, too, he had « good luck ». In seven years of campaigning, he was wounded 19 times and never once seriously. He had great personal magnetism and impressiveness and an abundance of self-confidence.

At first, Toussaint allied himself with the Spanish who were fighting the French. Under his leadership, the black troops advanced from victory to victory. It was at this time that Toussaint took on the extra name of Louverture because he

believed that he was « the opening », or door, to brighter things for his fellow-men. In spite of his many triumphs and his steady advance he never stooped to base actions, never inflicted unnecessary cruelty or imposed punishments purely for revenge. And it was proverbial among the French, Spanish and English that he never broke his word.

Now although Toussaint had taken up arms against France, his heart was really with the French. Theirs were the traditions, customs and training that he really admired and with which he would have preferred to ally himself. When, therefore, the French, hard-pressed by the British and his own troops alike, finally proclaimed the abolition of slavery in Haiti, Toussaint immediately left the Spanish and united with the French. From this stand nothing could move him. General Maitland, head of the English forces, offered the supreme control of Haiti to Toussaint. He refused. He wanted slavery abolished, but he wanted to be free under France.



By 1800, Haitian affairs had begun to calm down. The Spanish and English forces withdraw and the French, although unwillingly, also left the island also with Toussaint as Commander-in-Chief of Forces. He showed himself as able a ruler in peace as in war. He drew up a constitution under which Haiti was independent. He was to be Governor or President for life and had the power to name his successor. There was to be religious freedom throughout the province and the ports of the island were to be thrown open to the world.

He sent a draft of this constitution to France for official confirmation : but Napoleon, alas, had never forgiven the Haitian warrior for his successful resistance to France. Instead, therefore, of honoring his suggestion, the French ruler sent an immense army of 60,000 men to the island to call on him to surrender. When Toussaint saw the fleet coming into the harbor he knew resistance was useless and rushed to Cape François to tell his people not to take part in an opposition which could avail them nothing. But he arrived there too late. His general, Christophe, had refused to let the white troops land and the fighting was already on. Toussaint felt that he must, for loyalty's sake, join in, but the odds were too heavy and he was forced to retreat.

As it happened, both Toussaint's own son, Isaac, and his

stepson, Placide, had been sent to France to complete their education. These Napoleon had sent back with the fleet to Haiti, and they were now brought to their father by the French General Leclerc to urge him to surrender to France. Toussaint, who was both proud and just, told the boys to choose between him and their foster country — he would love them none the less, no matter what their decision.

Strangely enough, Isaac, his own son, said : « *You see in me a faithful servant of France, who could never agree to take up arms against her* ». But Placide, who was bound to him by no tie of blood but who owed all his position and training to him, exclaimed : « *I am yours, Father ! I fear the future ; I fear slavery. I am ready to fight to oppose it. I know France no more !* »

Isaac returned to Leclerc to tell him his father's and brother's decision, but Placide stayed and fought at the head of a black battalion.

It is sad to admit that Toussaint finally had to yield. He retreated to his home at Gonaives and even then he might have lived out a peaceful and comparatively happy existence. But, summoned by a message, he visited, unarmed and alone, the house of a treacherous general called Brunet, where he was seized, put in irons, placed on board the French man-of-war *Heros* and taken with his wife and children to Brest. They never saw Haiti again.

He never lost his superb courage. He said to his captors, « *In overthrowing me, you have only cut down the trunk of the tree of Negro Liberty. Its roots will sprout again, for they are many in number and deeply planted !* »

At the harbor of Brest in France, he bade a final goodbye to his family and was removed to Fort Joux on the edge of the Jura Mountains. Here he was placed in a deep dungeon which in itself was fatal to a man used, as he was, to tropical light and sunshine. He was very closely confined here, every indignity heaped upon him, his faithful servant, Maro Plaisir, was taken from him and, finally, lest he should commit suicide, his watch and razor were removed.

But this sort of insult meant nothing to that unvanquished spirit. « *I have been much misjudged* », he said scornfully, « *if I am thought to be lacking in courage to support my sorrow* ».

For 18 months he lingered on. Then one day the Governor of the prison took a holiday, leaving things in charge of Lieutenant Colonier, and hinting to him that if the vulnerable Haitian were dead on his return, there would be no inquiries

made. It is pleasant to know that Colonier, far from responding to such a dastardly hint, took advantage of the Governor's absence to give Toussaint coffee and other comforts which he had so long desired. The Governor, finding on his return that his trick had not worked, took, not long after, another holiday. This time he took the keys with him and left no-one in charge, saying that everything had been attended to.

He stayed away four days. When he came back, Toussaint lay in his cell, dead from starvation. He died in 1803.

But does it greatly matter? If he had been asked, which do you think he would have preferred — life and ease or the implanting and fostering of the idea of liberty in the Blacks of Haiti? No need to guess. His name lives on beyond his fondest dreams. Lamartine, the French poet, dramatized him; Auguste Comte, the great philosopher, counts him among the 50 finest types of manhood in the world; our own Wendell Phillips, in the oration which all of you know, calls him « *soldier, statesman and martyr* ».

But best of all, his influence lives on. Wordsworth truly wrote to him :

*« Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee ; air, earth, and skies ;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee ; thou hast great allies
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind ».*

Toussaint-Louverture did not die in vain and his country was not destroyed after his death. The people of Haiti did not forget him and he is their national hero to this day.

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