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Hurricane

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

The Convict

HE came through the rain-buffeted darkness, slipping silently along a wall, avoiding the triangular patches of light. His stealth was second nature because he had lived with stealth so long. And who knew but what death walked with him into the leaden gusts which swept through the streets of Fort-de-France, Martinique?

He was big, heavy boned, and he had once weighed more than he did. His eyes were silver gray, almost luminous in the night like a wolf's. His black hair was plastered down on his forehead, his shirt was dark, soggy with the tempest, and at his waist there gleamed a giant brass buckle. Capless and gaunt, feeling his way through the sullen city, he heard voices issuing from behind a door.

He stopped and then, indecisively, studied the entrance. Finally he rapped. A moment later a dark, fat face appeared in the lighted crack.

“Qu'est-ce que c'est?”

“I want food. Food and perhaps information.”

“The police have forbidden us to open so late. Do you wish to cause my arrest?”

“I have money.”

The doors opened wider. The mestizo closed and bolted

the double door. A half a dozen men looked up, curiously, and then returned to their rum punch.

“Your name is Henri,” said the tall one, standing in a puddle of water which oozed out away from his shoes.

Henri raised his brows and rubbed his hands, looking up and down the tall one’s height. “You know my name? And I know you. You are the one they call Captain Spar.”

“Yes, that’s it. Then you got the letter?”

“Yes, I received the letter. I do not often associate with . . . convicts.”

Captain Spar made no move. “I have money.”

“How much?”

“One hundred dollars.”

Henri waved his fat hands. “It is not enough. There are police!”

“I have one hundred dollars, that’s all.”

“I expose no risk for a hundred dollars. Am I a fool? Go quickly before I call the *gendarmes*.”

“I’ll attend to getting out of here by myself. I want only food, perhaps some clothes.”

Henri subsided. “But how did you come here?”

“Stowaway. The captain found me, allowed me to get ashore here, would carry me no further. Our friend wrote you in case that happened.”

“He did not say that you would only have a hundred dollars. Let me tell you, young fellow, an American is conspicuous here on a black island. I run no risks for a paltry hundred dollars. If you are caught, you will be sent back and I will be

sent with you. I disclaim any interest in you or knowledge of you. If you want food, I will serve it to you as a customer. That is all.”

Henri waddled away, his neck sticking like a stump out of his collarless white-and-blue striped, sweat-stained shirt. Henri was greasy to a fault, thought Captain Spar. Slippery, in fact.

Presently Henri came back, bringing the makings of a rum punch—syrup, *rhum vieux*, limes and a bowl of cracked ice. Captain Spar made his own drink and as he sipped it, he said, “Would you know of a man here who calls himself the Saint?”

Henri shook his head. “Who is that? Can it be that you actually came back into French territory, risking your neck, to find a man?”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps for some of that hundred—”

“If your information is right, you get paid.”

“Tell me what you know of this man, first. Tell me why you want him.”

Captain Spar looked over the glass rim and then nodded. “All right. You know my name. That’s my right name, strangely enough. One time, not five years ago, it was a very respected thing, but now . . .

“Five years ago I was in Paramaribo, temporarily out of a job. I was approached by a ship’s broker who said that a man who called himself the Saint was in need of a captain. I had not heard of the Saint, but it was said that his headquarters were Martinique.

“The job was simple enough. I was to sail for New York in command of a two-thousand-ton tub of rust. The loading had already been done, so they said. All I had to do was get aboard and shove off.

“Just as I was about to sail, men swarmed down upon the ship, boarded us, announced that they were police, and began to search. In a few minutes they had dragged a dozen men from the hold. They turned all of us over to the French authorities who immediately sent us down to French Guiana.

“I was accused of trying to aid penal colony convicts to escape, and with a somewhat rare humor, they determined that I should join the men they thought my comrades at their labor in the swamps.

“That was five years ago. Two weeks ago I made my way to the sea, found this friend of mine, recovered the money he had been keeping for me, stowed on a freighter, and here I am in Martinique. I want the Saint.”

Henri nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, there is a Saint here.”

Captain Spar sat forward, his sunken eyes lighting up with a swift ferocity. “Here? Where?”

“I can tell you all about it,” said Henri, “but I do not want money for my efforts. Oh, no, *m’sieu*. You can do me a small favor, and then perhaps I shall tell you all about the Saint, where he can be found, how you can kill him.”

“Name the favor,” said Spar.

“Two blocks down, on the left of the governor’s house, you will find a small café. Go there tonight, now. Wait there in a room at the back. Soon there will be men asking for you. Give them a package I have made ready. That is all.”

“Sounds easy,” said Spar, thinking of nothing but the Saint. “Where is the package?”

Henri went out and returned presently with a small, light box. Spar put it in his shirt, eased through the door and went down the shining wet streets, keeping close to the walls.

His thoughts were not very nice. For five years he had cherished them, nursed them, lived with them, until now he was living for only one thing. He wanted to get the man who had sent him there. Wanted the pleasure of feeling that man die between his hands.

It was not a nice thought. But in the penal camps of French Guiana, neither are things nice. The fever, the labor, the privation, all leave a bitter stamp. Swollen jungle rivers, back-and-heart-breaking labor. Sun and storm. And fever. And guards. And the association of damned men to drive one who has been civilized to the verge of insanity.

Once Spar had been a merchant captain of steady reputation, but all that had faded from him now. He stalked like a black panther through the rain, merging with the shadows, on the lookout for the shine of a badge, dreading recapture only because it would mean forswearing the vengeance he hoped to wreak on the Saint.

He found the small tavern without any difficulty. It stood drearily in the blackness, flush with the street, overshadowed by a balcony. Standing beside the open gutter which ran torrents, Spar regarded the structure, wondering whether or not he was walking into a trap. But trap or no, if it led to one who called himself the Saint, Spar was ready for it.

He went in, cautiously. A big man in a white apron seemed

to be expecting him. Without a word, Spar was led over the rough boards back through the taproom and into a small, isolated cubbyhole beyond.

The place had the unfinished appearance of a piano box. Only one chair was there, and the back of that was toward the door.

Spar turned it around and sat with his back to the wall. One could never be too sure.

He did not sit at ease. He twisted about nervously, his fever-yellowed face forever turning from one to the other of the two doors. He started at small sounds. In the outer room, a mechanical piano was banging away with all its brass-gutted abandon. It was the first semblance of music Spar had heard in five years.

He became more jumpy as the time went on. And then he was suddenly calm. The presence of danger acted like a bromide upon him. The door had moved an eighth of an inch. No more. A gust of heavily odorous air whispered through the crack, making a low moaning sound.

An instant later the other door moved. No one came in sight. The wind moaned more loudly, dismally. The mechanical piano was still. The wash of the rain across the sheet-iron roof was heavy and dull at times, and then again would resemble the scampering of a thousand rat feet.

The tension became stiff. Slowly, Spar climbed to his feet and stood, leaning a little forward, waiting. He knew as well as though a voice had shouted that he was about to be killed.

Perhaps the Saint had already learned of his presence. Perhaps the Saint was striking first. Little by little the left-hand

door swung back. All was darkness beyond it. The only light came from a feeble bulb in the ceiling of the unfinished room. Water roared down the eaves and the wind moaned again.

In that heavy, oppressive mustiness, Spar heard a shoe creak. In the same instant he dived for the left-hand door.

A revolver shot flaming sparks into the room. The bullet snapped through the timber over Spar's head, showering him with sparks and dust.

He slammed the door wide open. A heavy body was in his hands. He gripped the wrists. The revolver lashed up and down as though anxious to be free. His assailant was striving to smash out Spar's brains.

Spar hung on, rocking back and forth in the darkness. He heard running feet at his back, crossing the narrow room. He lashed out with his left fist, sent the man he held rocketing away from him. His right caught and held the revolver.

A shot barked behind him. Spar whirled to meet this new danger.

Henri!

Henri stopped and tried to take a careful aim, but his face blanched and his hand was shaking when he saw that he did not have the opportunity to shoot Spar in the back. Having missed the first time, Henri did not intend to miss the second.

They stood for a full second, facing each other across ten feet of space. Then Spar ducked to one side and brought up the recovered gun.

Henri's shot went wild. Spar fired with a chopping motion.

Henri melted back, wilting. The gun drooped and slid

out of stiffening fingers. But before he fell, Spar was conscious of a movement at his side.

His first antagonist, taking advantage of Spar's distraction, was holding a chair on high, ready to smash down on Spar's skull.

Spar rolled swiftly to one side and fired. The chair clattered harmlessly to the rough boards. The man stumbled and sprawled between the upturned legs, hands stretched out as though reaching for his escaping life.

But even then, Spar had no time to breathe. Footfalls came from the taproom and the door was opened by a tall, thick, black man who stood in the opening with a lordly air.

Spar was about to fire when the man raised his hand.

"No, let this be as it is. The dogs deserved it for their bungling. I am your friend."

The black man came in. He hauled the body away from the chair and sprawled it out beside Henri's crumpled form. Then he slapped his hands together after the fashion of Eastern monarchs and a moment later four men entered, bearing another body among them.

But this man was not dead. He was either drugged or drunk. The four threw him on the floor and stood back.

The big man flicked an imaginary speck from his starched white coat and looked at Spar. "*I* am Chacktar. Your identity does not concern me in the least. Henri said you were a convict, escaped from the colony. So much the better. I have a use for you. If you fail to carry out my orders, I shall turn you over to the French police here and you will go back. You do not want that, I know. Here, you men, bring this young fellow to."



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The four began to work on the drugged man and Spar studied the fellow. He was young, obviously an American. Blond hair streamed down over his face. His well-cut clothes were torn. But for all that, the face bore marks of long standing. The stamp of dissipation was there, the jaw was weak, the eyes heavily shadowed.

After a few minutes the young fellow came to, sitting up weakly, holding his head between his hands and staring through his knees at the floor.

“Now, *Monsieur Perry*,” said Chacktar, “what have you to say for yourself?”

Perry shook his head as though to rid it of a fog. “Wha-What happened?”

Chacktar sent a meaning look at Spar. “You, *Monsieur Perry*, in your drunkenness killed these two poor, defenseless men. You know what that means. You’ll hang!”

Perry crawled to his feet and stood weaving back and forth. “Me? I . . . I what?”

“You killed these men. A good thing it sobered you up. A drunken beast you are. What will your father say? And Miss Mannering. Ah, but we must get out of here. The police have heard your shots. They will be coming, instantly.”

“I . . . I killed those . . . two?” stammered Perry.

“God take me!” bawled Chacktar. “Don’t you know?”

“No, I don’t . . . remember. Why did I do it?”

“Some quarrel. I happened in just as the last one struck you over the head with that chair.”

Spar was about to intervene when he felt a gentle hand

take the revolver out of his fingers. One of the men had come up to his back. A round muzzle was pressing against his spine.

“This sailor,” said Chacktar, “saw it all. Didn’t you?”

Perry looked pleadingly at Spar. The pressure of the gun at Spar’s back grew heavier. Spar thought about the penal camps. After all, he owed this youth nothing. And any present statement was worthless.

“Yes,” said Spar.

Chacktar nodded. “Then we must go. Leave these two bodies here for the police. We must get young Perry back up to his house.”

Urged along by the gun, Spar followed the black man and the boy, much perplexed.