

Jamaica

By Pete Claisse

The first William had heard was from one of the crewmen and he had heard it from the first mate. Because they had thirty indentured servants still alive when they docked; they would pay no port charges. The estates were desperate; too many slaves, and not enough British to keep control. It seemed that bringing down a running doe from his lordship's herd with a single shot would be seen more as a qualification than a criminal offence. And now, just a week later, William was fighting for his life, shooting at dark shapes moving in the darkness, his brother wounded beside him. And the men by him, tending to his brother, fighting with him, were slaves.

He saw flames from the mill. First just a few flickers and then a roar as the pile of cane stacked against it went up throwing sparks high over the roof. The burst of light showed three of them, suddenly silhouetted, running for cover, holding their muskets. He fired and the sound of every gun in the bunkhouse going off in a ragged volley followed. Through the smoke he saw all three fall and the slaves were cheering. The bar was lifted from the door and some ran out carrying long spears. One ran into the mill, through the smoke, and moments later there was a rush of water. A torrent from the aqueduct that drove the overshot wheel was pouring out and dousing the flames.

William ran to his brother. The slaves had laid him on the big table in the middle of the room and were cleaning the blood from his leg and binding it with rags. Two wounded slaves lay beside him.

One of the attackers was dragged into the lamplight, bleeding badly onto the dusty boards but still alive. William looked up and the first thing that occurred to him was that the man did not look like a slave.

"They killed the Tainos who were here when your ships first arrived, generations back, killed them and took their women, so they're not like us the maroons. They take our women too, and our food." Luke was the biggest of the slaves, hard-working, loyal, and so strong that nobody would cross him.

The colonel had come over from the big house when he heard they had a live prisoner. "Why did you attack my estate?" He asked.

The man looked blank until Luke repeated the question in the creole patois they all spoke.

The man still said nothing. The colonel stamped on his hand, they all heard the breaking bones. The man still said nothing and then he suddenly shouted back.

"He says he fights for freedom." Luke translated.

"There are hundreds of free blacks on this island." The colonel replied calmly. "And they earned their freedom with hard work, not murder." He raised his boot and stamped hard on the man's chest, right where the bullet had hit him. The man gasped and fell silent.

Late into the night William sat with his brother. At dawn the doctor arrived and opened up the wound to clean it. There was no bullet, it was an old nail that had been bent tight to fit in the gun and spread to tear the flesh when it hit. It was a day later by the time his brother could even speak to him.

"You must get revenge for this". His brother said, as the tropical sun rose on the following day.

“Revenge on who?”

“On the Maroons, they shot me.”

“But they fight for freedom. It’s only taken me a week to see how cruel the slavery is.”

“But the slaves fought with us.”

“Only a few. They dream of being given their freedom for it. Very few will get it and they all help defend the system. The system is the problem, not the people who oppose it.”

They sat in silence, neither wanting to discuss what the doctor had said about possible amputation.

The colonel came out into the fields in person to ask William to join the militia; visible from a distance as his grey mare picked its way through the rows of cane; the slaves not daring to turn and look. They were going into the cockpit country to attack the Maroons where they lived. William accepted immediately.

The march soon took them from the flat lands of the plantations up into the hills. Following a river valley they had steep slopes to either side, covered with thick fragrant vegetation, always dripping wet from the last storm. They were two hundred men with as many slaves to carry the supplies but as the slopes got steeper they could see that just a dozen men could ambush them and leave them helpless.

“The cockpit opens up a mile further on.” The guide had said. “The entrance is so narrow that only one man can walk at a time.”

“We shall camp here.” The colonel said. “If they don’t come out they will starve.” The guide started to reply but, seeing the colonel’s anger, he stopped and went back to join the slaves.

One of the militia captains was soon asking the colonel for permission to take a party up onto the ridge above them.

“What good will that do?” The colonel asked. “The sides of the cockpit are far too steep to get down and anyway they have snipers to cover them. And how will you get there?”

It took a week. They had to go right back to the plantations to cut a new path that followed the ridge right up. They collected more slaves to cut the path with long machetes, carry their supplies over the rough ground, and set up the camp. William was sent ahead to scout and soon saw the Maroons in the rocks to either side of the entrance. He settled behind a broad tree trunk to watch. Below him he could see the militia. As he watched carefully he saw that a slave had been tied to a tree and the colonel was watching as the man was being whipped, tearing into the skin on his back. Luke was whipping him.

William loaded his gun. The sight horrified him. He thought of the past few terrible weeks and of his brother lying in agony in the oppressive heat.

A shot rang out and then another. One hit the tree beside him. The militia in the valley had seen the flash and the smoke and poured shot into the hillside where it had come from.

But the whipping continued. The colonel took no notice of the shooting. The slave had slumped down now. William was sure he would soon die. He could see the bones of his back through the torn flesh.

The smoke cleared and he saw the Maroons on the far side of the valley were still there. The shots from the below had been a hopeless gesture. He was the only one who could kill them. William aimed with practiced efficiency and, like the doe, the man fell dead.

