

One Of God's Orphans

By George B. Bringmann

He was black, a shiny black like patent leather dancing pumps. And he was right, even though there was a hole in his leg large enough for a fist-size wad of gauze that said he was wrong.

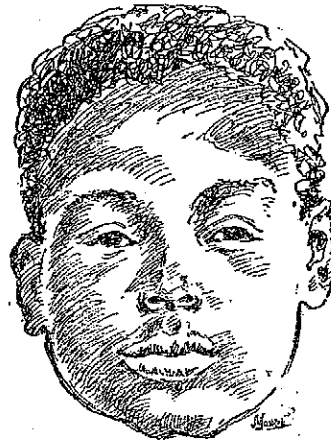
I first saw him on a Sunday morning that was pierced by the shrieks of the women burro drivers with him. But that's getting ahead of the tale.

Haiti is a grand place. Nature is kind. A man can lean out his bedroom window and pluck his breakfast from a tree; if he has a bedroom, a window and a tree. But at fifteen or twenty cents a day for manual labor, those accommodations are forever out of reach of the native who toils nearest the large end of the cornucopia. And so the man who was black like patent leather pumps had a hole in his leg because. . . .

He and his fathers had used the great forest near Hatte Lathan as the source of their charcoal. For generations their kilns had sent thin yellow curls of smoke up into the leafy coolness of the mighty trees. Since early slave days the family had pursued the trade and kept off relief rolls. Not that there were relief rolls in Haiti with nature so bounteous and all that. In the spring of '20 or '21, however, the powers that be, and be all over, decreed that the forest of Hatte Lathan be a national preserve, for reasons of conservation. There were greater and finer forests in the interior but here, less than ten miles from Port-au-Prince, the authority of government was more likely to be recognized. Setting aside this forest in what was perhaps the most thickly populated section of all Haiti had one result: unemployment and hardships for those compelled to give up their livelihoods. The unsettled conditions of the interior with its incipient banditry prevented an exodus of the unemployed to more fertile fields, and so this black man poached.

Haitian gendarmes couldn't catch him, or wouldn't. Pack burros loaded with charcoal kept a sporadic supply of the commodity feeding the cook fires of the lowly. It was a national disgrace.

The great power of the beneficent Colossus of the North was sought to combat the problem. The marines



were called in. Not especially. They occupied the country anyway.

A sergeant and four men were detailed to stop the poaching. For two weeks they patrolled the trails of the new preserve. They hid behind and in trees, near kilns ripe and ready to be opened. Charcoal still came from the forest. Burros loaded with the combustible uncannily appeared on the roads leading to Port-au-Prince. The situation was not well in hand.

Orders now took on the tenor of demands. Poaching must be stopped or else. . . . The detail was split, the quarry not being vicious. At ten one Sunday morning there was a shot followed by the shrieks of women, and the man as black as patent leather pumps had that hole in his leg.

And so the powers that be rested well until the man with the hole in his leg was tried, and the man who had put the hole in his leg was cleared of unnecessary brutality.

It is said (by lawyers) that he who represents himself has a fool for counsel. And that may be, for

the man who was black and had that hole in his leg large enough to be fitted by a fist-size pad of gauze asked insistently during the proceedings: "Why cannot I use the forest when no one else uses it? Must I starve?"

They answered him with legal words, and they let him go. Maybe because they thought he couldn't fell a tree and kiln charcoal with that hole in his leg or because Haiti is the sort of a place where a man can lean from his window and pluck his breakfast from the fruitful bosom of nature.

Perhaps it isn't in the province of the sergeant in charge of the detail which saved the Haitian powers that were from losing face and thus put an end to the horrible lawlessness of poaching, but he observes that the man with the hole in his leg never knew the word "free"; he just lived and practiced it.

For the man who was black returned to build his kilns in the forest of Hatte Lathan, though by now he may have another hole in his leg—or skull.