



SKIN DEEP

By Sherman Ripley

GRANT, the rookie, had passed a sleepless night in the Haitian jungle. Hour after hour his thoughts had revolved around one ugly picture: What Toyou's band had left of Aviation-Lieutenant Miller and his mechanic.

This discovery the previous day had put the entire patrol of Marines on the alert. Yesterday, one squad had started back along the home trail with their tragic burden. Grant, and others, had been left to the dangerous pursuit of the Cacos, native bandits, who had risen under the leadership

of the mysterious Toyou.

Now, like the feverish eye of an angry god, the morning sun glared down upon the patrol, and Grant shivered nervously, but not from the heat of it.

"It's going to be hot as sin," he declared to Hale, another buck private. They were watering the two shaggy burros.

"Be glad when we get this Toyou guy," Hale rejoined. "This corner of Haiti ain't no safe place for Marines."

"What the Cacos left of Miller was a mess,"

Grant shuddered.

Soon after, came the Vigilante guide, for whom Sergeant Daly had been waiting. A strange little man he was, slender and shifty-eyed and clad in a ragged shirt, a pair of trousers that had once been white, and a big straw hat. Grant noticed the machete in his belt. One just like it, no doubt, had been used on Lieutenant Miller!

But the Vigilante's good-natured grin was reassuring, showing a flash of white teeth.

"Yes, sar. I Vigilante," he said. "Very good friend, m'sieu. I take to Toyou."

"Then get going," Daly ordered. "Grant and I will lead; Taylor cover us; Hale and Sweeney come along with the burros; and Bennett, you bring up the rear with the automatic. Jump lively if you see anything move in the bushes."

The path taken by Anton was narrow, and overhung with vegetation. Overhead, tropical birds darted about with raucous cries. They made Grant's head ache. Now and then he could hear a rustle in the brush along the trail. It might be the wind—or natives stealthily following a parallel course through the jungle. Boy! He wished his hands weren't so unsteady. Taylor hiked behind Grant. He was a hatchet-faced Hillbilly from somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon. Further back came Hale and Sweeney, a husky pair from New York City. Rear guard was "Pop" Bennett, a grizzled old campaigner from Connecticut, rhythmically chewing his plug tobacco.

"I take to bandit, m'sieu," Anton repeated, and confidently took the lead.

"You know Toyou?" Daly asked.

"*Oui*, m'sieu. He kill aviation officer."

"How d'you know so much about this gang?" Grant asked abruptly.

Anton hesitated, his face settling into grim lines. "He keel my fader. My fader, he bandit too, in same gang. Toyou quarrel, m'sieu, and he keel my fader—split heez head with machete. Then I join Vigilante."

Grant distrusted all of 'em. He'd give a future commission to be out of the damn place. As he plodded along, the dust began to feel hot, even through his heavy shoes. He decided to have a drink. Perhaps water might help.

As he rounded a bend in the trail, he paused and unslung his canteen. Accidentally, it dropped to the ground. His sudden stoop to recover it,

saved his life. A rifle exploded at close range, and the charge whistled over Grant's head. Instinctively, Daly dropped, drew his revolver, and blazed away at the bushes, aiming at the smoke. Grant shivered. So it was beginning already?

Then came the frenzied Cacos, with machetes and antique rifles. They burst from cover and charged at Grant and Daly. Evidently they thought the two were alone, and could easily be cut off. Daly stood his ground, like the veteran he was, squatting on one knee, his revolver spitting fire. One of the bandits rolled into the trail, still gripping his machete, a blue spot on his temple. With a shout in the native dialect, Anton met another halfway, and their machetes gritted together. Grant crouched uncertainly. This was no place for a rookie. If he could only get away—But Taylor was shouting!

"Yank! Git a-goin'!" He rushed by him, the others following at a run. Suddenly Grant was stricken with a numbness at his knees. Starting half-heartedly forward, he stumbled and lay still.

The wild yelling of the Southerner, and the purring of the Browning automatic in the competent hands of "Pop" Bennett, sighting comfortably over a fallen log, quickly decided the issue. The blacks vanished into the brush, merely stopping to fire their cumbersome, antique rifles by putting the stock on the ground and stepping on them. The result filled the air with screaming missiles, but did slight damage.

Daly bled from a slight wound on the shoulder, and Anton was ostentatiously wiping his machete on a clump of banana leaves. All the others were unhurt—except Grant.

"See what ails Granty," Daly ordered. "Mebbe they got him."

But Grant was staggering to his feet, his face like chalk. "My ankle, that's all," he explained. "I turned it, and took a hard fall."

Daly and Bennett exchanged glances as the march was resumed. Grant stepped gingerly aside to avoid three of the blacks that were left on the trail. He moved up closer to Daly and the Vigilante. Anton pointed to one of the fallen.

"I know," he volunteered. "Name's Leo, related to Cassius Belgardi, voodoo priest."

"What's this voodoo stuff?" Grant demanded.

If he could get Anton to talking, maybe he could collect his own thoughts. Why had he avoided the skirmish? What the devil was the matter with him, anyhow?

"Cassius Belgardi big voodoo priest," Anton was saying. "Got voodoo man, owns pharmacy Port au Prince. Got poison an' drugs. Man don't give cattle to Belgardi, he die."

"The old divvil!" Daly exclaimed.

"I know girl, her fader give to Belgardi for wife. Belgardi, he give fader nice present—many cattle. Bimeby fader die quick. Then Belgardi take back cattle. Hold voodoo meetings, they sing, m'sieu; and sometimes a sheep, sometime a child they keel. Pass blood round!"

He paused to stare at Grant curiously.

"I think," he continued, "Belgardi bad man." Suddenly he signaled a halt. They were approaching a clearing. The Vigilante pointed to a native hut; several chickens pecked about the door.

"Toyoun!" he warned. "He here today, I know. Now we take; you give order!"

"Surround the place, then," Daly ordered. "Anton and me'll root the scoundrel out. Grant, you stay here and hang onto the burros."

Grant's heart was thumping wildly, yet, his present duty seemed safe enough. But why had Daly assigned him to it?

They scattered, and Daly crept up to the back of the hut. At once a giant negro strode from the door and gazed calmly about. He was unarmed. With a yell, Anton sprang at the man, brandishing his machete. Toyoun tried to duck into the hut, but Daly blocked his way. Then he ran, with Anton pursuing. Daly was itching to wing Toyoun, for it looked as though he might escape, but Anton kept in the way of a shot.

In his excitement, Grant clutched the bridles of the burros. The fiery little Vigilante, evidently bent on vengeance, could outrun the bigger man. Now he began to hack at him with the machete. Strange that he should use the broad side of the blade! By the time Bennett and Hale had intercepted him, Anton had beaten Toyoun to his knees. Blood was streaming down his back.

"He keel my fader! He keel my fader!" Anton cried.

Now Grant saw a half-naked negro woman spring from the hut and make for the woods.

"Stop her!" Daly cried. "She'll tell the others; then the whole gang'll be on us!" But she was already within the shelter of the jungle.

Daly hurried his men along the back trail, taking charge of the prisoner himself. Still leading the burros, Grant plodded doggedly behind. "Now that woman'll stir up the whole countryside," he pondered. "Bet Anton knows the fix we're in."

Then Grant eyed Daly and Bennett. Their heads were close together. Talking about him, all right. They hadn't been fooled by his fake fall; knew it was fear, and not a twisted foot. Had him down as a quitter. Well, what of it? If he were only out of this mess. No place to put a rookie. How those machetes could cut!

Was he a—coward? God forbid!

Now his mind flashed back to his boyhood on a Vermont farm: the rambling farmhouse, sheds and barns all adjoining. In midwinter he had often gone from one end of the buildings to the other, to gather an armful of firewood, or to take care of the stock. He could see the billows of snow that swept up to cover the woodshed, almost to the top of the window-line.

In this woodshed he had once had a quarrel with another lad, a cousin. He had been insulted and taunted by the other, but still had refused to fight. He had almost forgotten the incident, but it returned to mock him. Now he remembered it vividly, as if it happened but yesterday. He remembered other similar incidents. A coward! He dragged harder on the bridles of the burros.

His enlistment had been an impulse, a chance to travel and see the world. The strenuous training at Parris Island, no doubt, had been aimed at one result—success in battle. But real fighting, and so soon—he'd never dreamed it would be like this. And now—

Of course Daly was wise. The little sergeant was shrewd. That's why he had ordered him to take care of the burros. Keep him out of danger. Later, if they were attacked, could he hope to conceal his uncontrollable fear? The party was so small; too much depended on each man. He *would* make good, yet! Suddenly a wild yell and a spatter of rifle fire shattered his determination. Anton appeared, running back at full speed.

"To left," he yelled. "All in front! Trail is one ambush!"

So they dived into the jungle at the left, just

as the Cacos burst onto the trail from the front. Anton took the lead, with Daly driving Toyou forward. Grant followed as best he could while Anton pushed through the thick foliage at a dead run. Grant had abandoned the burros—the only thing that could be done under the circumstances—but Hale had had the wit to snatch two extra belts of ammunition from one burro, and Sweeney had grabbed a canteen of water from the other.

Bennett covered the rear with the Browning rifle, but calmly held his fire, for the Cacos weren't yet fully visible through the trees.

"Anton says there's a ruined fort near here," Daly called back. "We can make a stand there."

The Cacos were getting uncomfortably close. Occasionally one showed himself, and Bennett was taking frequent pot shots. Grant couldn't decide whether to fire or not, so kept on running. It was evident that they would be overtaken before they could reach the fort. Grant wondered what would happen when they were surrounded. Like Lieutenant Miller, of course. Anton seemed confident, but could this be a trap?

"Cut into the brush to the left and hold 'em," Daly ordered. "They can get us runnin', but not fightin'."

The sudden maneuver surprised the yelling Cacos. Grant found himself firing with the others, but his rifle sights seemed blurred. Two of the Cacos dropped. Others came on the run, not realizing the situation. After several more had been hit, they drew off. Now the pursuit became like that of Indian warfare, with variations.

Realizing that this could only end by their being surrounded, Daly ordered his men to make a dash for the fort. The excited Cacos burst out into the clearing in close pursuit, but were quickly driven to cover by the Browning automatic in the able hands of "Pop" Bennett, shooting through a hole in the parapet.

THE fort was a ruin, affording scant shelter; one of several that had been built by John Dessalines, the negro liberator who had once driven all the whites from Haiti. The fort had one good feature: it could be approached only from the front. The rear backed on a sheer cliff that Grant estimated to be a drop of almost two hundred feet. On the other hand, there appeared to

be no way of escape—and not a drop of water.

Hale had been slightly wounded in the knee, and Sweeney was cursing a bullet that had perforated the extra canteen, and nicked the skin from his ribs. Grant opened the first aid kit, and helped apply iodine and a small compress. Suddenly he became acutely aware that he hadn't eaten since early morning. He felt faint, and wondered if Sweeney noticed his unsteady hands.

Sergeant Daly had posted his men on the ruined walls. Right then, it was, that Grant missed Anton. Daly suggested that he had either been shot or captured. Grant wondered. His throat felt parched and constricted.

The Cacos weren't taking any chances in the open; they could afford to wait. After sunset they could rush the fort, or hold the Marines inside until thirst rendered them desperate. Toyou was a prisoner. That might offer some hope when the final reckoning came. Grant clung desperately to the idea. Toyou alone could control these savages.

And now, Grant had been assigned to another post of dishonor; he had been put in charge of the prisoner. With hands securely bound and ankles hobbled, Toyou clumped against an angle of the masonry. He wasn't badly wounded, in spite of the welts on his back. What a giant he was! Yet he seemed to be either stupid or easily cowed. Grant wondered if the negro was aware of his nervousness. Maybe he ought to examine the knots; the bonds had been put on hastily.

But Toyou suddenly demanded a drink of water. *Demanded* it, too. Grant poured it. He asked for more, but Grant refused. There would be trouble in getting water later. Maybe that was Toyou's purpose; so Grant lighted a cigarette to steady his nerves. In response to the unspoken appeal in his prisoner's eyes, he lighted another and put it between the thick lips.

"No water here," Toyou volunteered. "Soon my men take you fellows into hills. Fort no good; no water, no food. Sun hot! We drive you here, fort. See? You don't get down cliff, you don't get away. You get kill!" He paused to note the effect of his prediction on Grant.

"Tonight we come through wall. One-two-three hundred men. What you can do then?" He grinned.

As he spoke a bullet snarled through a hole in the wall and spattered against the stones close to

Grant, who flinched and shuddered. Toyou did not move a muscle. "My men," he observed coolly, "can shoot. But with machete—! We cut you, chop you!"

Grant recalled Miller once more, and how he had been betrayed into the hands of this man. There was a coppery taste in his mouth. He was getting downright sick.

Toyou was speaking again, softly, insinuatingly. "You untie rope? Then I go quick. See? I know a way out of fort. Then I call off men. You be safe." He spat out the cigarette butt.

"No—no!" Grant murmured weakly. There was a chorus of yells outside, followed by the purr of the machine gun.

"Yes, m'sieu," Toyou urged, steadily rubbing his bonds against a rusty expansion bolt in the masonry. "You like die same as Miller? We make you die slow, slow. You untie rope, I send them home. I make friend, not enemy. See?"

Blindly Grant pondered as he walked up and down. Why wouldn't Toyou make a genuine offer? And why not accept it? No use for the patrol to die, when he could so easily save them. He leaned against the masonry and laid his aching head on his arm. Toyou's offer—

Another bullet spat close to him. Evidently some sharpshooter was getting his range. Just around the corner of the wall was a spot, out of the line of fire. He started toward it—and hesitated. If he sheltered himself, he couldn't watch his prisoner. Toyou would be just out of reach, on the other side of the parapet. And Daly had ordered him to watch Toyou every minute. He was their best bet. Maybe their last hope. No, mustn't take any chances with the slippery devil. But another bullet might come, whistling—white hot! Next time it mightn't miss! How would it feel to be hit?

He wouldn't let Toyou get away. Not yet, anyhow. But why not take shelter to think it over? Now he was leaning against the wall, in safety; but he hadn't the slightest recollection of coming to the place. How long had he been crouching there?

Suddenly he heard a metallic clang, then a crash!

Peering around the wall, he stared again, and rubbed his eyes. Toyou had vanished! The ruined chimney against which he had been leaning, was

bare. Close behind it the wall ran sheer down the cliff. Grant hurried around the masonry, but Toyou had gone as a shadow vanishes!

Now came remorse. He realized that his wavering had been born of temporary panic and not concern for his buddies.

The white-clad native who had been shooting so closely to Grant, again raised his rifle and fired. This time the bullet found its mark. A tongue of fire seemed to run up Grant's left arm.

Dully Grant lifted his left hand; the second finger showed a bloody stump. He tried to bandage it, but could only partially check the bleeding.

As he glared at the bleeding bandage, he damned all Cacos in general, and the sharpshooter in particular. He drew his revolver, examined its action, gritted his teeth at the pain in his hand, and started for a breach in the wall. He was going to have a shot at the first Caco that showed his head.

Then he thought of Daly and his orders to watch the prisoner. "Stay right here and don't take your eyes off him a minute," he had said. But what right had Daly to keep him out of the fight? Put him down for a cowardly rookie! To hell with Daly and his orders!

The prisoner! In a crazy moment he had let the bandit escape, and it was up to Grant to capture him again. Grimly he turned back, for surely Toyou couldn't have left the fort. He must be lurking somewhere. He'd bring him back if he had to knock him down and drag him. His left hand throbbled steadily.

Toyou had been leaning against a battered chimney near the face of the cliff. Following this direction, Grant stumbled over a hearthstone that projected drunkenly above the level of the floor. It gave a hollow sound; he tapped it with his revolver butt to make sure. Could there be a passage under the slab? Excitedly, he lifted at the stone. It moved a trifle. Once more he lifted and the stone slid aside, revealing a gaping hole like the mouth of a well.

He could discern the rungs of an iron ladder. So here was Toyou's secret passage! The rungs of the ladder were better preserved than he had expected. The shaft seemed endless, since he was obliged to use his left hand only. This increased the possibility of a fall—and his rage at Toyou.

The bottom of the ladder ended in what

seemed to be a roomy cave, cut in so near the face of the cliff that there was plenty of light. He had come down the entire height of the cliff. From here, he could easily scramble out of the cave, down a steep grade, and into the forest. Then he heard a noise on the ledge to his right!

Before he could move, a heavy body struck him, and strong arms hurled him to the ground. He had found Toyou! Grant was a clean, husky youth in the best of condition, but the big negro was the better man. Fortunately Toyou was without weapons, but his arms were as powerful as a gorilla's. Grant was hampered by his injured hand; and he couldn't reach his revolver.

They rolled furiously down the steep slope, Toyou trying for the throat while Grant worked toward his holster. A moment's respite in the tight grip about his arms gave him a chance to dash his fist into Toyou's face—without any result. Suddenly he shifted, and Grant felt powerful thumbs groping for his eyeballs. He kicked viciously; and the grip relaxed, only to find his throat and tighten there. In the meantime, Grant had been able to draw his revolver. With a frenzied lunge, he swung the butt on Toyou's skull.

He had read stories about the thickness of a negro's head, and these flashed back to him as he felt the huge body crumple up and relax. Toyou was both down and out—for the time being. Staggering like a drunken man and panting for breath, Grant stripped his prisoner of his belt and tied him securely. For good measure he gagged him and lashed him to a log. He didn't propose to lose him again.

The thought of the necessary climb back to the fort dismayed him, but grimly he fought his way to the top. Once back in the fort, he saw it was almost dusk. The sun hung in a maze of dun and gold, ready for its sudden plunge beneath the horizon. Already the shadows were long, purple blots along the parapets.

There was still a spitting of rifle fire, and occasional savage yells. Wondering how he ever could have felt fear of them before, Grant sought the parapet. And there, revolver in hand, he found Daly.

"Sergeant, I found a way to get out of here," he announced.

Daly's eyes opened. Grant's uniform was

torn and bloody, and his face was dirty. One sleeve was ripped completely out of his shirt, and the stump of his finger still bled. But he grinned.

With a word of caution to Bennett, Daly merely said, "Lead me to it."

At the mouth of the shaft Grant explained. "I was just looking about here, and stumbled onto it."

After a brief consideration, Daly got his men together and outlined the plan of retreat. They were to remain until dark, kindle several fires to mislead the enemy, then slip down the shaft and away in the darkness. With good luck they could be half a night's march away before the ruse was discovered. In spite of Anton's queer disappearance, Daly was certain he could lead them back to a safe trail.

When the time came to leave, they hurried one by one down the shaft; Daly, Bennett and Grant the last to leave.

Grant slunk down the shaft, followed by the others. He vaguely felt that there was some misunderstanding, but the necessity for silence and haste prevented further talk. Moreover, the pain in his hand was getting to the pit of his stomach. The others were waiting inside the cave, impatient to be on the move.

Just as they were starting away, Grant whispered to Daly to wait. Then he led him to the log where Toyou lay swathed in bonds. And standing over him was the mysterious and long-lost Anton. Now Toyou began talking furiously.

"Untie," he snarled. "First you beat me on back. Now you let Marine take me to Port au Prince. You traitor. Me, your lieutenant, I get too strong, eh? You say you fool Marine. I make ambush, you beat my men off. You lied to me, then say you set me free bimeby. Yah! Why you not set me free now? I know. You plan cut down all Marines 'cept one. You let one take me for execute. Now I speak! I tell Marine, too. I tell 'em me not Toyou! You—you, Toyou! You not Anton! You, Toyou!"

Quickly Anton, the real Toyou, moved. But Grant was quicker. His revolver flashed out. "Hands up, you Anton-Toyou crook!" he commanded.

"Some haul," Daly grunted. "Toyou and his lieutenant, both of 'em. Anton really Toyou! Good work."

"You see," Grant apologized when they had

joined the others and started “down the dim trail, “after the big boy got away, I got sort of mad, and followed him. We had something of a scrap, what I mean, all the way down the hill. I—I sort of felt to blame for letting him get away. I was sore, I guess, when this little guy shot off my finger. I

came down and got him. But, before that—Hell, I hope it’ll never get me again!”

Daly slapped him across the shoulders. “Yes, kid, I was watching. I knew, for I had been there myself in my young days. Cheer up, lad, that stuff’s only skin deep.”