

BY ALEJO CARPENTIER

The Kingdom of This World

The Lost Steps

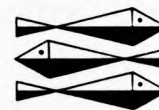
Explosion in a Cathedral

The Chase

The Kingdom of This World

ALEJO CARPENTIER

Translated by Harriet de Onís



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*Yenvaló moin Papa!
Moin pas mangé q'm bambo
Yenvaló, Papa, yenvaló moin!
Ou vlai moin lavé chaudier,
Yenvaló moin?*

"Will I have to go on washing the vats? Will I have to go on eating bamboos?" As though wrenched from their vitals, the questions trod one on the other, taking on, in chorus, the rending despair of peoples carried into captivity to build pyramids, towers, or endless walls. "Oh, father, my father, how long is the road! Oh, father, my father, how long the suffering!" With so much lamentation, Ti Noël had forgotten that the whites, too, have ears. For that reason, in the patio of the Dufrené big house at that very moment balls were being rammed into all the muskets, blunderbusses, and pistols that had been lifted down from their places on the wall. And, to provide for all contingencies, a supply of knives, rapiers, and clubs was left in the keeping of the women, who were already saying prayers and making rogations for the capture of the Mandingue.

 VIII
The Great Flight

One Monday in January, shortly before day-break, the slaves of the plantations of the Plaine du Nord began to enter the city of the Cap. Shepherded by their masters and overseers on horseback, escorted by heavily armed guards, the slaves began to darken the city square while the military drums sounded a solemn beat. Several soldiers were piling faggots of wood at the foot of a *quebracho* post; others were adding fuel to a brazier. In the atrium of the principal church, alongside the Governor, the judges, and the Crown officials, the ecclesiastic hierarchy sat in tall red armchairs in the shade of a funeral canopy stretched upon rods and braces. Bright parasols moved in the balconies, like the gay nodding of flowers in a windowbox. As though talking from loge to loge in a huge theater, the women, fans in their mittened hands, chattered loudly, their voices delightfully excited. Those whose win-

dows gave upon the square had prepared refreshments of lemonade and orgeat for their guests. Below, more tightly packed and sweaty every minute, the Negroes awaited the performance that had been prepared for them, a gala function for Negroes on whose splendor no expense had been spared. For this time the lesson was to be driven home with fire, not blood, and certain illuminations, lighted to be remembered, were very costly.

At a given moment all the fans snapped shut. There was a great silence behind the military drums. Macandal, his waist girded by striped pants, bound with ropes and knots, his skin gleaming with recent wounds, was moving toward the center of the square. The masters' eyes questioned the faces of the slaves. But the Negroes showed spiteful indifference. What did the whites know of Negro matters? In his cycle of metamorphoses, Macandal had often entered the mysterious world of the insects, making up for the lack of his human arm with the possession of several feet, four wings, or long antennæ. He had been fly, centipede, moth, ant, tarantula, ladybug, even a glow-worm with phosphorescent green lights. When the moment came, the bonds

of the Mandingue, no longer possessing a body to bind, would trace the shape of a man in the air for a second before they slipped down the post. And Macandal, transformed into a buzzing mosquito, would light on the very tricorne of the commander of the troops to laugh at the dismay of the whites. This was what their masters did not know; for that reason they had squandered so much money putting on this useless show, which would prove how completely helpless they were against a man chrismed by the great Loas.

Macandal was now lashed to the post. The executioner had picked up an ember with the tongs. With a gesture rehearsed the evening before in front of a mirror, the Governor unsheathed his dress sword and gave the order for the sentence to be carried out. The fire began to rise toward the Mandingue, licking his legs. At that moment Macandal moved the stump of his arm, which they had been unable to tie up, in a threatening gesture which was none the less terrible for being partial, howling unknown spells and violently thrusting his torso forward. The bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the

black waves of the sea of slaves. A single cry filled the square:

"Macandal saved!"

Pandemonium followed. The guards fell with rifle butts on the howling blacks, who now seemed to overflow the streets, climbing toward the windows. And the noise and screaming and uproar were such that very few saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrust head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his burning hair had drowned his last cry. When the slaves were restored to order, the fire was burning normally like any fire of good wood, and the breeze blowing from the sea was lifting the smoke toward the windows where more than one lady who had fainted had recovered consciousness. There was no longer anything more to see.

That afternoon the slaves returned to their plantations laughing all the way. Macandal had kept his word, remaining in the Kingdom of This World. Once more the whites had been outwitted by the Mighty Powers of the Other Shore. And while M. Lenormand de Mézy in his nightcap commented with his devout wife on the Negroes' lack of feelings at the torture of one of their own—drawing therefrom a number of philosophical

considerations on the inequality of the human races which he planned to develop in a speech larded with Latin quotations—Ti Noël got one of the kitchen wenches with twins, taking her three times in a manger of the stables.