

The First Days of the Slave Insurrection

The insurrection that was ultimately to lead to the destruction of slavery in Saint-Domingue and the creation of the independent Republic of Haiti began on the night of 22–23 August 1791. The anonymous author of this account, entitled “La Révolution de Saint-Domingue, contenant tout ce qui s’est passé dans la colonie française depuis le commencement de la Révolution jusqu’au départ de l’auteur pour la France, le 8 septembre 1792” (The revolution of Saint-Domingue, containing everything that occurred in the French colony from the start of the revolution until the author’s departure for France on 8 September 1792), was one of the first whites to experience the uprising’s effects. *Procureur* (director) of the Clément plantation in the parish of Acul outside Cap Français, he was taken prisoner on the first night of the uprising and owed his life to the intervention of Boukman, the first leader of the movement. Although the author gives a vivid first-person account of this incident, much of his manuscript is a compilation of information from other sources.... In addition to the record it provides of the insurrection’s earliest moments and its depiction of Boukman, this account stands out because of its sober recording, not only of the violence committed against whites, but also of the reprisals by whites against the other racial groups in the colony.... The author was asleep on the night of 22 August when a shot rang out.

At the sound of the gunshot, my dog who was lying in the gallery near my bedroom started to bark loud enough to wake me. Wrongly irritated by this continual barking, I got up to quiet him down, and then went back to sleep. Fifteen minutes later, the poor dog started up again even more insistently. But, alas, it was too late to wonder what was happening, the blacks had already taken over all the paths around the *grand’case* [the plantation owner’s house]. Hearing the noise they were making, I jumped out of my bed and shouted: “Who goes there?” A voice like thunder answered me: “It is death!” At the same time, I heard a considerable number of gunshots and the voice of a horde of blacks who filled the house with these terrible words: “Kill, kill.” Seeing what was happening, and having no way to escape, I ran to get my pistols. Luckily for me, they were not loaded; I say luckily because if they had been, I would have defended myself, I would have killed some of these assailants and would not have been able to escape succumbing to their blows.

In the blink of an eye the shutters and curtains of my windows, which were of a man’s height, were broken through. To escape the shots fired at me, I bounded into the space behind my bed, and there I waited, trembling, to be discovered. Several blacks who had come into my room and thought they had killed me in my bed began pillaging, while others who wanted my blood and my belongings banged against the door to force it open. Judge, dear reader, if my situation was alarming! The shots that I heard being fired in my relatives’ apartment, which was at the other end of the building, told me that they were no longer alive. Given the fury and the determination of these wretches, if I had been found, I would surely have suffered the same fate.

An hour went by in this cruel dilemma, during which I heard them listing the victims. The blacks, finding nothing more to steal, opened the door that had remained closed. A crowd of new assailants entered, uttering horrible cries, and poking the bed to make sure I was dead, but when they didn’t find me, they yelled like madmen: “He got away, he got away.” They all suddenly ran out of the house to look for me in the brush, which revived me a little and gave me some hope of surviving. I thought that they wouldn’t come back into my room, but I was wrong. The black who had answered me when I had cried “Who goes there?” realized that I could not have escaped; he entered my room, and others soon followed. While they poked under the bed with their sabers, another one investigated the space behind it. Ah, no matter how I tried to make myself small . . . the black who kept sticking his hand in there touched

my shoulder. . . . What a shock! My heart nearly stopped, a deathly fear seized me, the black jumped back with a start and cried like a madman: "He's still there." I gave up trying to hide: I approached these blacks and said to them: "Take everything I've got, but leave me my life." They answered me in a mocking tone: "What does he want us to take, there's nothing left in his closet" [que ça l'y vlé nou prend, ni a poin a rien encore dans buffet a li]; as they spoke, they went out and closed the door behind themselves. Then the whole band, like a pack of wolves about to tear into a lamb, entered the house. Cries of "load your guns" from all sides made it clear to me that the climax of the tragedy was approaching. I tore my hair, I bit my fists, I bashed myself against the walls, in a word my anger boiled over. I tried to flee through the window, but it was no use. Seeing that death was inevitable, I just wanted it to come from a bullet, so that, with the thread of my days snapped all at once, I wouldn't have to suffer the cruel torment that the ferocity of these barbarians was bound to imagine.

Fate decided otherwise: the commander of this bloody horde, named Boukman, whom I had always treated well, arrived at this point and, seeing me in my room, whose door was half broken, all bloody and desperate, had pity on me. He addressed his men and told them firmly: "Don't kill him, he's a good white and knows more than the others around here." The reason he said this is that, when I had surveyed the plantation, I had chosen him as an assistant because he was the most intelligent of them (he had been astonished to see that I could determine the distance from one point to another without pacing it off, leading him to think that I was smarter than other whites). I was quite surprised to hear such words because I would not have thought him susceptible, in these circumstances, of so much humanity. In the moment of indescribable joy that took the place of my horrible fear, I do not know if it was by my own movement or that of some blacks (I don't know exactly where I was at that moment), but, having opened the door in front of which a crowd of these unfortunates were drawn up, and having thrown myself, all trembling, into the midst of them, I was nearly sacrificed just when I thought I had been saved and when I was already saying to them: "What did I do to make you want to kill me?" Several blacks, their sabers raised and their pistols pointed, were about to kill me if Boukman had not quickly gotten me out of their sight by wrapping his arms around me. Only with difficulty did this chief, along with two others who by then had taken an interest in me, succeed in calming the anger of the thugs who had found me. He had to employ all the authority of a despot and punish the most determined ones to stop their fury....

The noise having gradually dissipated, Boukman put me under the guard of one of his blacks, who took me, in my nightshirt, away from the house but into new dangers. Surrounded now by a crowd of these brigands who had not witnessed what had happened, I had to endure the most atrocious insults that mouths can utter; a hundred times they were ready to kill me in spite of the efforts of my guards. In the new situation in which I found myself, I cried out for Boukman to come reassure me, but the brigands ordered me sternly to be quiet, and I had to drive out of my heart the idea that I had had of recovering my freedom. However, after I had been left quite a while unsure of whether I was going to live or die, Boukman appeared. I expressed my fears to him and begged him, since he had wanted to save my life, not to abandon me this way and also to have clothes brought for me so that I wouldn't suffer from the cold air. Several blacks told me I was wearing enough, and that in any event my time was over. Nevertheless, Boukman got me a vest and some canvas trousers, along with an old pair of shoes. One of them (Jean-Jacques from the Noé plantation) was good enough to cover my head with a battered white hat.

Only then did I notice two whites that the brigands had seized...; this sight calmed me somewhat, and I congratulated myself inwardly on having companions in my misfortune, but I kept silent as the circumstances demanded; the slightest appearance [of resistance] could have been mortal for us. We quietly followed the brigands who were looking for recruits in

the blacks' huts, as much by force as by goodwill. The blacks already seemed remorseful for the crimes they had committed: they didn't want to go any further. But Boukman, who no doubt had more at stake than the others in making sure that things didn't stop there, planted himself behind them and struck them with his rifle butt: "March, Negro dogs, march or I'll shoot you down!" Truly, the apathy and the reluctance of these animals was such that if only ten whites had arrived at that moment, they would have broken up this savage horde with no resistance.

To get rid of us, some of these brigands suggested locking us up in the dungeon of the plantation. But this didn't suit the leaders, luckily for us, because we would probably never have gotten out. They settled for giving us two Negroes as guards, one of whom I chose, and sending us to the *grand'case* [main house] of the Noé plantation, which we found stained with the blood of the unlucky whites who had already been sacrificed there.

After our transfer to the Noé plantation, the two Alquier daughters arrived, all in tears, and told us of the cruel fashion in which their father had been sacrificed. An old Negro from the Clément plantation, whom I had always considered a good fellow, came to tell me what had become of Mme Clément and her daughter during the night: they were holding M Clément's hand when a pistol shot fired through the window curtain tore him from them by killing him. The unfortunate women, not knowing what to do, put themselves in the hands of a Negro woman whose loyalty proved constant. This Negro woman took advantage of a moment when the rebels were busy to hide them safely.

The brigands who were already at this moment numerous on the plain ran all over, which made me very uneasy and almost completely robbed me of the hope I had had of recovering my freedom. The black guards assured me it was so, and the clouds in every direction seemed to confirm to me that the city of Le Cap was already reduced to ashes. Oh God! I cried, is this the day you have fixed for the end of our existence and that of one of the most beautiful countries in the world? The cruel notions that came to my mind kept me awake.

Finally, I started a conversation with the two black guards, Jean-Jacques, who belonged to the comte de Noé, and Vincent, who belonged to my cousin. I asked them who could be the instigators of such a vast event and what their purpose was in committing so many crimes. They answered that it was the high-ranking whites of France, that their goal was to punish us for having dethroned the king, and because we no longer had either faith, or law, or religion, and because we had burned the royal decree that gave the blacks three free days a week at Port-au-Prince. The two blacks said that if they had not received orders from these important whites to revolt in order to contribute to the restoration of the king to his throne, the question that concerned them would not have driven them to such extremes, seeing that in any event they were not intelligent enough and lacked the facilities to conceive of such a vast project, which consisted of nothing less than the destruction of all the whites except some who didn't own property, some priests, some surgeons, and some women, and of setting fire to all the plantations and making themselves masters of the country.

I showed them how astonished I was at everything they told me, but I didn't make any response to it. I simply asked them why they were sparing the priests, the surgeons, and the women. They replied that they were keeping the priests so that religious services could be held, the surgeons to heal their maladies, and the women to take for their own and get pregnant, as well as a few whites to organize them, in view of their lack of industriousness and abilities. Striking me on the wrists, they told me: "Don't worry about anything, we know what we're going to do with you." My curiosity having stopped there, I don't know what their intentions with regard to me were. I learned only some time later, from a mulatto woman who had been Boukman's prisoner, that that chief, when he saved my life and gave

me a guard of two Negroes, only meant to let me go to Le Cap, where he said that I would be totally safe.

Around noon, our guards, who had already been drinking wine all morning, told us they were going to have dinner at the Clément plantation and said we did not need to worry since they would soon return. We made every effort to keep them from abandoning us, but in vain.

Perhaps people will ask me why we didn't let them go off so that we could escape. It is easy to answer this question: remember that the roads were full of brigands and that we were almost certain that Le Cap had been burned. You will agree with me that it was much more prudent to stay where we were since our captors had protected our lives and we were firmly persuaded that those whom we might encounter would not be so humane to us.

While our guards went off to eat, we were very uneasy; we sometimes saw lots of brigands going by on the main roads, and we feared that they would come find us despite the protection we had been promised and would put us to death. We relaxed only when our guards came back. I didn't hide our anxieties from them and even suggested a plan that the fear of other brigands had made me think up, which was to hide us in the wood near the house. They told me that was unnecessary, that even if other Negroes came by, it would be sufficient for them to talk to them and persuade them that justice had already been meted out on this plantation in order to make sure that they wouldn't do anything bad to us.

At three in the afternoon two Negroes arrived who had been wounded by the troops that had come out from Le Cap on hearing the news of the insurrection. There had been a terrible struggle near the Cagnet plantation on the seashore, four leagues from Le Cap: the whites had been routed and chased all the way to the water. The surgeon went to work on them. We helped bind up their wounds.

We were lamenting the sad fate that life was preparing for us when we saw a detachment of dragoons at the gate of the plantation who were heading toward us. I signaled them immediately to hurry up and abandoned myself to the joy that the view of our fellows was bound to inspire. Our guards didn't know what to think: I addressed them in the tone of a master and said: "Stay, you protected us, nothing will happen to you." At the same time, I ran toward the detachment, which wasted no time in coming up to the *grand'case*. What a moment of happiness was that in which we recovered our freedom, what unspeakable pleasure I felt, along with all our companions, at the approach of our deliverers! Our intertwined arms hid the tears of joy that we all shed to show them how grateful we were!!! After we had told them the sad things that had happened, they wept with us at the loss of so many good citizens who had been pitilessly massacred and whose still-steaming corpses seemed to demand that we take revenge for them. Our black guards were taken back to Le Cap on Monday night, but, having been denounced as accomplices in the killing of M. Dumené, the *procureur* of the Noé plantation, they were shot a few days later.

After having recounted his own experiences during the opening day of the insurrection, the anonymous author recorded the events going on in Cap Français as the whites began to organize to defend themselves. His account is unusual because of its frankness about the atrocities committed against blacks and people of color during the first days of the uprising, mentions of which are interspersed with a chronicle of military engagements and political measures taken to deal with the emergency.

On the 24th, from the crack of dawn, two detachments made up of residents of the Acul quarter went to hunt down the rebels. M. Dubuisson, commanding one of the detachments, went to the Clément plantation, where he killed six blacks who were chained up in the hospital and two Negroesses who were completely blameless.

This morning was terrible because of the awful effects of the rage that had seized some of the inhabitants of Le Cap. Since appearances seemed to indicate that the men of color were their enemies, they wanted nothing less than to destroy all of them. Fourteen or fifteen of these poor people, residents of the town, were the innocent victims of this first desire for vengeance; they were killed in the street while they were seeking a refuge to save themselves from the fury of their pursuers. The general committee subsequently published an order forbidding anyone, on pain of death, from mistreating the people of color, against whom no complaints could be made; the disorder was reduced.... Since the Negroes of the town seemed dangerous, guard posts were set up at all the entry points; the citizens spent the night in front of their gates to prevent any fires and only went out armed. Some individuals, to control their Negroes, had them shut up at night in the cathedral or put them on board ships in the harbor. Others had them taken to the jail or the dry dock of Grammont, a small island half a league off the coast. Then there were those who kept only the women and children as servants. The adult black men could go out of the houses only with passports from their masters.

The atrocities continued on the third day of the insurrection, 25 August, and beyond.

Twenty-eight Negroes and Negresses taken prisoner by our troops at the Petite Anse, brought to the town to be judged by the provost's court, were hacked to death on the Champ-de-Mars [on 25 August] by citizens burning to assuage their thirst for vengeance. In the afternoon, fifty Negroes were shot in trenches prepared in the town cemetery, and a Negro who had led a band was broken on the wheel at the Place d'Armes, where the scaffold and the gallows had been set up, all according to the judgments of the provost's court.

On the 28th of August, a *griffe* [a man of three-quarters African ancestry] arrested in Le Cap the day before was hanged; twenty black brigands who had been captured were put on a boat and drowned in the sea, in accordance with the sentence of the provost's court.... On the 1st of September, some Negroes and Negresses were shot at the parish house.

A black man and a black woman were hanged at the Place d'Armes. They came from the town. He had said that the blacks would soon put the whites in their place, and she had said that she would soon have the pleasure of making white women serve her.

Like many other whites, this chronicler was suspicious of the clergy's behavior.

Alas, it was not only the aristocracy that we should have blamed for our disasters; the clergy caused the woes of France, and contributed to ours. You can judge by the conduct of one minister of religion. Father Cachetan ..., who should, like all the plantation owners of his quarter, have withdrawn to Le Cap at the start of the insurrection, preferred to stay in the midst of the Negro insurgents to preach the Evangel of the law to them, and encourage them to persist in an insurrection that was holy and legitimate in his eyes. He solemnly crowned the Negro Jean-François and the Negress Charlotte king and queen of the Africans, and leaders of the revolt.

So when the army overran the camp, seeing that he would soon be punished for his crimes, he didn't want to leave his presbytery. He had the nerve to say that he was fine in the midst of his parishioners (the blacks) and that if anything had been damaged at his place, it was only by the whites. This unworthy minister of religion, according to the testimony of the white women and the sailors who were rescued, was imprisoned the day after his arrival in Le Cap, and in order not to scandalize the public and above all the blacks, he was done away with a

few days later in an ugly manner, and the rumor was spread in town that he had been sent back to France.

The narrator participated in the fighting against the insurgents and claims to have been part of the white unit that killed Boukman, the leader of the movement during its first months. This victory led the whites to hope that the insurrection would soon be over.

The brigands were greatly affected by the loss of their general, Boukman. After the death of this truly redoubtable leader, they ran this way and that across the plain, making the air resound with this cry: "Boukman tué, que ça nou vau! Boukman tué, que ça nou vau!" [Boukman is killed, what will become of us!]. The same blacks who were in command at Dondon, having learned of his death a few days later, ordered a solemn service.

We made our entry into the town that evening, with the cannon taken from the enemy and the head of Boukman on a pike that was exposed afterward in the Place d'Armes. The satisfaction was general; we thought that the death of one of the most famous chiefs would drive the brigands to sue for peace.