Bedtime Biography: Black Spartacus

Introduction

Throughout history, there have been many, many slave rebellions. From the earliest human societies, enslaved people have risen up against their conditions in a fight for their freedom. A lot of these rebellions got close to victory, but no slave revolts – at least none that we know of – have actually succeeded in keeping their brief, but hard-won freedom. Despite the efforts of the enslaved people, the ruling regimes always prevailed. Except in one case. In this bedtime biography, we'll explore the life and times of Toussaint Louverture. A man born into slavery, who rose up and helped lead the first ever successful revolt of enslaved people. So, settle in and turn your attention to the story of Toussaint Louverture, the Black Spartacus.

Chapter 1

Historians are still unsure about Toussaint Louverture's exact date of birth. In fact, many details of his life remain shrouded in mystery. According to his descendants, he was born in May of 1740. But other sources suggest he was born as early as 1736 or as late as 1746. We just don't know. What we do know is that Toussaint was born into slavery in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, now known as Haiti. But, while Toussaint may have begun his life in bondage, he was destined to take a different path. Toussaint began his life on a sugar plantation owned by a French marine officer named Count Pantaléon de Bréda. The estate was one of many large sugar-producing farms set up by the French colonizers. The land was worked by more than 150 enslaved people, including Toussaint's parents. Conditions on these plantations were dire. Only one in every three children born lived to see adulthood. The young Toussaint was particularly at risk. As a child, he was so weak and sickly that he received the nickname "Fatras-Bâton," which in the local creole dialect meant "skinny stick." However, Toussaint didn't remain Fatras-

Bâton for long. Through sheer determination, the fragile boy grew into a strong young man. By his teen years, he was known to be the fastest runner, strongest swimmer, and most agile climber on the plantation. He even developed a knack for taming wild horses, a skill which earned him a role as one of the estate's animal keepers. Even as a young man, Toussaint had a bold personality and a deep sense of confidence in his abilities and worth. On Saint-Domingue, enslaved people were often subject to harsh and inhumane treatment by their captors. Any resistance or disobedience could be met with severe physical punishment or even death. Even so, Toussaint refused to be disrespected by his French overlords. On one occasion, a teenage Toussaint brawled with a young Frenchman who'd called him a "dog-eater." Toussaint won the fight and somehow escaped any retaliation. Toussaint's resolute personality was partially forged by his strong Catholic faith. Some scholars suggest that the young man even began training to be a priest in the Jesuit order. Alongside this Catholic influence was Toussaint's connection to his African heritage. For example, the young Toussaint developed an interest in the vodou religion which drew on beliefs and rituals brought over from Africa. He especially loved learning about herbalism and traditional natural medicines. We know very little about Toussaint's early adulthood. But a few fragments of his life have survived. We know that in the early 1760s, he was briefly married to a woman named Cécile. They had three children before the partnership dissolved. Later on, in the early 1780s, Toussaint married again. This time, his wife was Suzanne, the niece of his godfather and mentor Pierre-Baptiste. We also know that, during this time, Toussaint also forged a strong working relationship with Antoine-François Bayon de Libertat. Bayon was a French "colon," or officer in the local military. Toussaint served as his right-hand man. He helped the colon with everything from driving his coach to accompanying him on business trips throughout the colony. This was a prestigious role for a slave, and it helped Toussaint acquire a bit of wealth and respect. In fact, Bayon was so impressed with Toussaint's work that, in 1776, he helped free him. Toussaint became one of the few free Black men on Saint-Domingue. This status was surely an improvement, yet, he remained tethered to the Bréda plantation. Even as a freeman, there were few opportunities for him on the island and all of his extended family remained enslaved on the estate. So, Tousaint stayed at Bréda. He worked in a managerial role and helped place his loved ones in relatively desired roles as cooks, housekeepers, and seamstresses. Still, although Toussaint had himself escaped the bonds of slavery, he abhored it as an institution. He always

remembered the indignity of his former position and saw the injustice in the continued enslavement of his friends and family. He wasn't alone either. With revolutions raging in France and the American colonies, the Enlightenment idea of liberation was also taking root on Saint-Domingue.

Chapter 2

By the early 1790s, Toussaint was about fifty and still living on the Bréda sugar plantation. But huge change was on the horizon. In Europe, the French revolution was in full swing. Spurred on by the concepts of "liberty, equality, and fraternity," the underclass of France had overthrown the ruling Bourbon dynasty. In 1789 the revolutionaries signed the Declaration of the Rights of Man, granting popular sovereignty and civil rights to men. Back on Saint-Domingue, there was heated debate on whether the Declaration would include rights for the island's mixed-race and Black population. There were even suggestions that the revolution should end slavery completely. The French colonizers argued in the streets and in local government assemblies throughout the island. In the end, a more conservative faction of white landowners won out. Any talk of granting rights to non-whites or freeing enslaved people was banned. But, the idea of liberty could not be suppressed. Many literate Black people around Saint-Domingue read the same revolutionary pamphlets as their French counterparts. They knew that they, too, deserved freedom and the right to participate in government. In August of 1791, tensions on Saint-Domingue finally boiled over. A militia of thousands of Black and mixed-race residents stormed plantations in the north of the island. As they burned each estate to the ground, they recruited the enslaved workers to join their forces. In this way, the insurrection grew and grew. By November, more than 80,000 people had been freed from more than 100 plantations. The revolution grew in power, but French forces fought back. Beginning in October 1792, the tide began to turn in favor of the French. That winter, a bevvy of reinforcements from Europe launched a heavy counter-offense that forced the rebels back on their heels. So, in the first months of 1793, the rebel leadership turned to the Spanish for help. Toussaint – who'd now become a leading figure in the rebellion – was dispatched to the neighboring colony of Santo Domingo to negotiate an agreement. He returned triumphant. The Spanish agreed to provide military aid to the rebellion. Additionally, the Spanish promised to emancipate the

remaining enslaved French people and take them on as free and equal Spanish subjects. Armed with this additional support, Toussaint was able to recapture much of the land lost in the previous months. Slowly, he was emerging as the most important figure of the rebellion. It was looking more and more likely that the revolution would succeed. And as this dream started to look possible, Toussaint became increasing fixated with ending slavery for good. After years of fighting, he was no longer willing to settle for anything less than complete emancipation for all enslaved people on the island. Yet, his newfound commitment to universal freedom caused friction. His colleagues, Jean-François and Georges Biassou, were wavering on the issue of emancipation. Moreover, the more conservative-leaning factions of the Spanish forces were reluctant to follow through on their pledge to take in Black people as citizens. By the end of 1793, the conflict in the colonies had descended into a mess of fighting. Toussaint was openly feuding with the other leaders. Spanish troops, inflamed with racial hatred, had begun battling the rebel forces who they previously supported. Militias of French landowners continued to fight back. And, finally, as if all this wasn't enough, Britain entered the fray, in a vain attempt to capture the colony for its own purposes. Faced with this disarray, Toussaint made a bold decision. He contacted Étienne Maynaud de Laveaux, the new French governor of Saint-Domingue. Laveaux was a strange figure, a resolute French aristocrat who believed in the principles of the French Revolution. Laveaux assured Toussaint that the political tides were changing in France. The French republicans were now, more than ever, ready to emancipate slaves in the colonies. So, in May 1794, Toussaint cut ties with the Spanish and joined forces with his former enemies, the French. Following his deal with the French, Toussaint truly came into his own as a military commander and political leader. At the beginning of 1795, Laveaux and his French republicans weren't in a particularly strong position. They only controlled small enclaves around the cities of Cap and Port-de-Paix. And, worse still, they had few supplies. If they were to win the conflict, they would somehow have to overcome these obstacles to defeat the Spanish, the British, and the remaining pro-slavery French forces. Yet, Toussaint rose to the challenge. In the next few years, he completely dedicated himself to the war effort. Leading small forces of just a few thousand men, he masterfully outmatched his enemies again and again. Key to his success was the brilliant mix of tactics he employed on the battlefield. Toussaint knew the geography of the island like the back of his hand and was able to coordinate quick, strategic strikes that caught his opponents off guard. In one notable

campaign, he directed a small contingent of troops to attack the British at Port-au-Prince, then retreat as if in defeat. When the British gave chase, they were ambushed by a much larger force laying in wait outside the city. Perhaps more important than strategic prowess was Toussaint's personal charisma. The commander constantly reminded his beleaguered soldiers that they were fighting for liberty. He was known to deliver moving, powerful speeches on the necessity of the fight, before personally leading his troops into battle. Here, his bravery became legendary. He had dozens of horses shot out from under him and was severely injured more than 17 times. He even lost most of his front teeth to a cannonball strike. His ability simply to survive was so impressive that rumors spread that the general was protected by powerful vodou spirits. By late 1798, Toussaint's heroic efforts had paid off. As the commander-in-chief of Saint-Domingue's army, he had successfully defeated both the Spanish and the British. As a new century dawned, the area was back in French republican control and Toussaint stood as one of the most powerful figures on the island. However, another fight was just around the corner.

Chapter 3

After years of rebellion and war, Saint-Domingue was in crisis. The colony's infrastructure was in terrible shape. The plantations, which were at the heart of the island's economy, were heavily damaged and unproductive. And, there were lingering political tensions as well. While Toussaint was popular with much of the local population, he was increasingly at odds with political agents sent over by France. In fact, in October of 1798, he had even personally expelled the republic's main representative on the island. In order to rebuild the island, and protect his own power, Toussaint began forging diplomatic ties with a new emerging power: The United States. In 1799, the commander began negotiations with the American president, John Adams. Initially, the president was reluctant to cosy up to Toussaint, as the US feared the prospect of their own slaves revolting. Yet, by February, the two came to an agreement and began a healthy trading relationship – the US agreed to buy much of the colony's sugar, coffee, and other commodities. The economic partnership was a boon for Saint-Domingue and a much-needed win for Toussaint as a statesman. By 1800, even after a full decade of perpetual conflict, Toussaint was showing no signs of slowing down. According to contemporary reports, he would work for 16 hours

each day, only pausing briefly for one small meal. His packed schedule was filled with meetings, appointments, and briefings with both military officials and members of the colony's civilian administration. Additionally, always a man of the people, he kept time open to meet and speak with everyday citizens such as merchants and laborers. He was so intimately involved with every aspect of the colony's life that he employed a full fleet of horsemen just to handle his mail. On an average day, he could dispatch up to 200 letters. His tact and dedication were not overlooked, either. Toussaint enjoyed broad support from the residents of Saint-Domingue, especially the colony's Black population. However, Toussaint's power was not unlimited. His countrymen, having fought for their own freedom, remained dedicated to democratic ideals. So, while Toussaint was a leader, many decisions were still made by local assemblies and citizens councils. And as it turned out, it seemed that despite all the conflict, Saint-Domingue had emerged as a shining example of republican ideals. While Toussaint had successfully remade Saint-Domingue into a more egalitarian society, he did not feel his revolutionary work was done. The French colony only occupied one half of the island of Hispaniola, while the eastern half of the island was still under Spanish control. In this colony, called Santo Domingo, slavery was still a widespread practice. For Toussaint, this travesty right next door was an affront to his broader vision of Black liberation. However, the French did not share his revolutionary zeal. Napoleon, who had recently seized power in France, was reluctant to start a war with Spain. Throughout 1800, French envoys and agents from the mainland worked to discourage Toussaint from taking any military action against Santo Domingo. Their efforts were in vain. In the winter of 1800, Toussaint gathered a force of 10,000 men and marched on the eastern half of the island. The Spanish put up surprisingly little resistance. In a matter of weeks, Toussaint was victorious. After a grand victory celebration in the capital city of Santiago, Toussaint issued an emancipation proclamation declaring that all enslaved people on Santo Domingo were now free. Moreover, he declared that all persons, regardless of race, would receive equal protection under the law. Toussaint's unification of Hispaniola ushered in an era of rapid change on the island. Shortly after his victory at Santiago, Toussaint organized a General Assembly to ratify a new constitution for the colony. Toussaint assumed the role of governor in this new system. The constitution also completely reorganized and updated the colony's agricultural, judicial, and financial systems, and, most importantly, it explicitly banned slavery in all forms. When the constitution was ratified in April 1801, pocket-sized copies of the

document were distributed all across the island accompanied by much celebration and fanfare. However, the celebrations would not last long. The European powers had become wary of Toussaint's massive popularity and hostile to the idea of an entire free, Black republic in the Caribbean. And so in a few months, the colony would once again be thrust into conflict. In the fall of 1801, a creeping sense of dread was circulating through the cities, towns, and farmlands of Saint-Domingue. One word was on everybody's mind: Invasion. In the past, there'd been periodic rumors that France would send troops to reimpose strict imperial rule over the island. Usually, these were nothing but rumors. But, now, with Toussaint running Hispaniola almost like an independent country, the prospect of a French attack seemed more likely than ever. And, people were right to be worried. Back in Paris, Napoleon had been closely monitoring Toussaint's actions. He was not happy with what he was hearing. He disliked that Toussaint disrespected and sidelined French officials and was displeased with the boldness of Toussant's new constitution. But, most of all, he was furious that Toussaint had invaded Santo Domingo. He wanted to put a stop to this insubordination before it was too late. So, in October of 1801, Napoleon dispatched an invasion force to the Caribbean. It was led by a general named Victoire-Emmanuel Leclerc, and his instructions were simple: depose Toussaint and reinstate slavery on the island.

Chapter 4

On 29 January 1802, Leclerc's fleet was spotted off the shores of Santo Domingo. Consisting of more than 25 massive vessels and a dozen more smaller warships, the invasion force was more powerful than expected. Clearly, the French commander had no intention of negotiating. They planned to overwhelm the island with superior firepower and crush the native army before they had time to mount a defense. But, Toussaint was ready. For months he had imported huge stores of weapons from America and hid them in secret stashes across the island. The plan was to slow down the French army by burning Saint-Domingue's coastal cities. Then, Toussaint's forces could stage a war of resistance from the countryside as the French struggled to live off their meager supplies. It was a risky plan but Toussaint was determined to repel the invasion. In a letter to his generals, he did not mince words, declaring, "destroy and burn everything, so that those who come to re-enslave us always have before their eyes the image of hell they deserve." Leclerc had expected a

quick victory. But, by the spring of 1802, it was clear that his dreams of a fast win weren't coming true. His initial landing on the island was met with fierce resistance. Leclerc had planned on winning over local leaders with promises of liberation and brotherhood. However, no one was easily fooled and very few locals willingly joined the French forces. Instead, they sabotaged the invaders at every turn. They destroyed French supplies and secretly spied on their movements for Toussaint. Meanwhile, Toussaint was back in his element as a military leader. From his hidden position in the mountains, the general staged a series of surprise attacks on the French. Just as in the war a decade earlier, Toussaint personally led troops into battle. Once again, he risked life and limb on the front lines only to emerge unscathed. Over the course of 70 days, Toussaint's forces slowly wore down the French invaders. By March 1802, they even managed to retake several key cities. As summer approached, it seemed as if the two sides were reaching something of a stalemate. Toussaint, ever the pragmatic leader, reached out to Leclerc in order to negotiate a truce. After all, despite the conflict, Toussaint and his men still held loyalty to France. In battle, the resistance fighters had even sang the 'Marseillaise' as they fired at Leclerc's forces. The two men settled on a deal. The fighting would cease and the two commanders would work out a peaceful way forward. Unfortunately, Toussaint would not see any peaceful future. In June 1802, he was invited to a dinner by the French general Jean-Baptiste Brunet. Shortly after Toussaint arrived at Brunet's estate, a contingent of Leclerc's men seized the commander and placed him under arrest on charges of sedition. Mere days later, Toussaint was placed on a ship and sent to France as a prisoner. It was the first time he had left the island. When he arrived in August, he was confined to a cell in Fort de Joux in the Jura Mountains. Here in the medieval fortress, thousands of miles from his home, he was stripped of his military uniform and given meager rations. It was a grim existence but Toussaint faced it with steady resolve. In a series of letters to Napoleon, the captured leader reaffirmed his commitment to the republican ideals of liberty and freedom. He wrote of his time serving France with "fidelity, probity, zeal and courage" and lamented that racism remained a driving force in French society. He asked Napoleon, "did my color prevent me from serving my country with zeal and loyalty? Does the color of my skin get in the way of my honor and my bravery?" Eventually, the cold weather and dire conditions of Fort de Joux became too much for the aging revolutionary. In the winter of 1803, he developed a strong cough and rapidly lost weight. On the morning of April 7, Toussaint was found dead in his cell. He was quickly

and quietly buried at the fort's chapel. But, while Toussaint himself had died, the struggle he had led continued. Back on Saint-Domingue, the French forces were losing control. The local population – incensed about Toussaints capture and wary of new rumors that slavery would be reinstated – was in open revolt. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, one of Toussaint's comrades and confidants, seized the moment. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared independence from France. From that moment on, Saint-Domingue would no longer be a colony, but it's own country, Haiti. The Haitian Revolution, and the legacy of Black liberation it represents, owes a huge debt to Toussaint's leadership. His vision of a society based on equality and self-determination helped guide the colony from its dark beginnings as a slave-state to the first Black democracy in the new world. While Toussaint himself didn't live to see Haiti's independent future, he knew it was inevitable. As the captured general was being delivered to France, he made a final declaration from the deck of the ship, "by striking me, you have cut the tree of Black liberty in Saint-Domingue," he declared, "but it will spring back up from its roots, for they are many and deep."

The End

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