

The Prisoner of St. Pierre

by  
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## **The Prisoner of St. Pierre**

Time: May 8, 1902

Place: A jail cell in the town of St. Pierre on the island of Martinique.

The Characters: (required: 2 men, 2 women, 1 voice)

Auguste Ciparis, 25, a black stevedore.

Varant, 30, white prison guard.

Barker, a carnival barker.

George Kennan, an American reporter.

(NOTE: Varant, Barker, and Kennan are all played by the same actor.)

Monique, 20s, Auguste's fiancée, black. A ghost.

Angel, the Angel of Death, a white woman, 25-45.

Offstage Voice of Charles, a rescuer.

## THE PRISONER OF ST. PIERRE

SETTING: The dungeon of the jail in the city of St. Pierre (on the Island of Martinique). May 8, 1902. Early morning.

A mostly bare stage, except for a large cell door in the middle of the stage, with a small grated opening near the top. One side of the door is the cell, containing only a dingy cot and a bucket of water. The other side is a hallway and can just be bare stage. The hallway is lit, but the cell is dark and has no windows or openings other than the grate in the door.

AT RISE: AUGUSTE CIPARIS, about 25 years old, a sturdily built black man, sleeps on the cot. He wears loose fitting trousers, a shirt, and a hat (no shoes). VARANT, the guard, older than 30, enters, eating his breakfast, and bangs on the door.

VARANT

Hey, prisoner. Wake up. Wake up, you piece of filth.

AUGUSTE

What?

VARANT

It's morning, yet again, nigger.

AUGUSTE

Good morning, Varant.

VARANT

There is nothing good about it.

AUGUSTE

Is Pelee still rumbling?

VARANT

I hate that stupid volcano. I am tired of ash in the streets, tired of ash in my coffee, tired of everyone running around like the world is going to end.

AUGUSTE

How can you blame them?

VARANT

St. Pierre is the safest place on all of Martinique. Nothing is going to happen. Last night Mister Pirinelle took his family away. Damn rich bastard ran off to Guadalupe. What kind of example does that set?

AUGUSTE

I think I'll send word to Monique. I'll tell her to go her cousin in Vive.

VARANT

She'll never get there. The Governor and the Mayor have set up a police line around the city. No one can leave except on official business. Not until people calm down.

AUGUSTE

That's crazy.

VARANT

They have a responsibility to maintain civil order. They can't let people flood the other towns.

AUGUSTE

It's dangerous here, Varant. What about the Guerin factory? I heard only the chimney is left above the mud. Forty people killed.

VARANT

The Guerin factory shows that everything is safe. The mountain has done its damage and now it will settle down for another fifty years. (beat) Bet you were sorry to hear that your accuser is buried under fifty feet of mud, eh?

AUGUSTE

I did not shed many tears over Bertrand... When is the judge going to let me out?

VARANT

Why should he?

AUGUSTE

No evidence. Who will press charges?

VARANT

They can't just let you go free. Maybe they'll flog you first. Probably they'll just make you stay here another month.

AUGUSTE

They'll let me out. Soon.

VARANT

The last thing St. Pierre needs is trouble-making idiots like you. What kind of native hits a white man? Stupid. I hear he accused you of stealing from the Arnaud shipment.

AUGUSTE

I did not steal any wine. I don't even like French wine. Dry piss burgundy. I'd rather eat ashes.

VARANT

Insult French Wine? You people... you... you... well, maybe you won't get breakfast this morning, prisoner.

AUGUSTE

Varant, it's already cold and dark in here. You don't need to starve me to death.

VARANT

You'd deserve it.

AUGUSTE

Varant.

VARANT

That's Mister Varant to you, nigger.

AUGUSTE

Excuse me, Mister Fuck You Varant.

VARANT

Maybe I should poke your ribs with my nightstick.

AUGUSTE

Good idea. I could use some fresh air.

VARANT

See you later, idiot.

(VARANT exits.)

AUGUSTE

Varant. Varant. I need my breakfast. Inhuman. Inhuman. Fine. Do what you want. I will be quiet, and you will start to feel guilty. I will get a late breakfast, but even late porridge is better than no porridge at all.

(Silence. AUGUSTE paces, impatient.)

AUGUSTE

Varant, bring me breakfast. Don't be a bastard.

VARANT

(offstage) I don't need abuse from you, prisoner. I get enough already.

AUGUSTE

Right, I forgot how Marie can nag.

VARANT

What did you say?

AUGUSTE

Nothing.

VARANT

I know you didn't mention Marie.

AUGUSTE

I would never.

VARANT

Filthy pig. You'll stay an extra month, if I have anything to say about it.

AUGUSTE

I look forward to the time with you.

VARANT

Wait there, I'll get my nightstick.

AUGUSTE

Bring my breakfast while you're at it, will you? I hate to be beaten on an empty stomach.

(No reply. HE walks to the corner and drinks out of the bucket.)

AUGUSTE

(to himself) Idiot.

(HE peers out the grate in the door, and as he turns away, a gaseous hiss fills the air, and suddenly AUGUSTE screams in pain. HE dances around the room, as his back, legs, hands, and feet are scalded by the air.)

AUGUSTE

My hands! My hands! Oh, my feet. Varant! Varant! Help me. I'm burning. The air is burning me. Someone help me! I'm burning.

(HE sits on the bed to take the pressure off his blistered feet. His hands have been reduced to swollen claws, but his face is untouched. The light outside the cell dims to almost nothing. HE thrusts his hands into the bucket.)

AUGUSTE

Ahh. That's better... Varant! Varant! Varant? My hands and feet are all blisters. My back is on fire. Please, Varant, help me.

(HE looks through the bars but sees nothing.)

AUGUSTE

I know you hear me. Every day you complain that my snoring rattles up those stairs. Varant, I am injured. Something strange has happened. The air or steam or something has burned me. I need to go to the hospital. Now. Please. I beg you. This is an emergency! Someone help! Help! Okay. Okay. It's just you and me, Varant. No one else can hear me. Just come down and look. The air has burned me. Honest. When you see, you will rush me away. (beat) If you want a bribe, I will see what I can arrange. Maybe Monique can pawn something for me. I don't have much...

but I have a chair that my father made. Beautiful. He carved it out of mahogany for a French Captain, but he loved it too much to part with. It's yours. The chair is yours, just get me a doctor. (beat) You've left, you bastard, left to get some coffee. Help! Someone Help! Help me!

(HE finally gives up and hobbles back to the bed, groaning in pain. HE sits on the bed, trying to calm himself. MONIQUE, a young black woman wearing a bright red, patterned wrap, appears in the gloom of the cell. SHE stares at Auguste.)

AUGUSTE

Monique! Woman, I am happy to see you. Help me up, I need to go to the doctor, or to Madame Chatte, she'll give me something soothing. Help me up. Are you feeling all right? What's the matter? You're never this quiet. I think you are setting a Monique record for silence. Lost your voice? At least give me a smile. A smile for your Auguste. No? (he gets to his feet) My hands don't look so good, I know. I think my back is worse... Sorry about the smell--it's me--I got a little roasted. Something bizarre has happened... We'll have to walk slowly. I'll go first if you want... That's fine. But I might have trouble with the door.

(HE pushes on the door with his shoulder, but it doesn't move.)

AUGUSTE

It's still locked, Monique, how did you...

(HE backs away from her.)

AUGUSTE

Oh, no... Oh, no... No. It can't be. You're too young, too young.

MONIQUE

Auguste.

AUGUSTE

No. No. Not you, Monique.

MONIQUE

The volcano. The volcano.

AUGUSTE

Damn that mountain. Damn that mountain to Hell.

MONIQUE

We took an excursion. To Morne Rouge. A picnic.

AUGUSTE

A picnic? No. No. That's not right. People should not die on picnics.

MONIQUE

I know.

AUGUSTE

Did you see our spot? Did you think of me?

MONIQUE

Yes.

AUGUSTE

Sometimes I think we should live there. Set up a tent and let the world parade by, watching us live in paradise. We would survive on breadfruit, bananas, coconuts. Every night I would fill our mattress full of flower petals, we would sleep in the breath of heaven. (beat) I should have been with you.

MONIQUE

(suddenly exploding, angry) Yes! Yes! Why did you have to be such a fool? What about our future? How could you hit a white man? How was I supposed to marry a man who can't control his temper? How could you? How could you? (beat) Now you're gone.

AUGUSTE

I had such plans for us, Monique. I was going to make an honest woman of you, I swear. I already spoke to your father about it.

MONIQUE

I wish you'd asked me.

AUGUSTE

So do I.

MONIQUE

I missed you.

AUGUSTE

It's been horrible. Horrible. You're all I think of, all day, all night.

MONIQUE

But now I'm here.

(SHE's breathing hard now, almost gasping, her knees weak.)

AUGUSTE

I can't stay.

MONIQUE

Don't leave me. Don't--

(SHE sinks to the floor.)

AUGUSTE

Monique!

MONIQUE

The fire the smoke the mountain fire screaming I have years alone years alone to wait beware to wait Pelee alone I loved you gone St. Pierre far gone forever I'll miss you so alone all the years to wait alone the flames the air I am burning!

(Lights illuminate the BARKER. HE wears a straw hat, striped jacket, and holds a carnival barker's cane [this part should be played by the same actor as Varant].)

BARKER

Ladies and Gentlemen! Step right up, step right up and see the world's most spectacular, most stupendous, most exhilarating side show. Only two tickets. That's right, it'll only cost you two tickets to see the Zebra Man, Imelda--The Tattooed Lady, Zix and Zax--the siamese twins--joined at--well, I won't spoil the surprise. And best of all... I know you've heard the rumors, and they are entirely true, I assure you... (Spot suddenly shines on Auguste) The Prisoner of St. Pierre.

Don't worry boys and girls, we've got him securely chained, though you may want to keep away from his claws. See the horrific scars left behind by the world's most incredible natural disaster of all time.

AUGUSTE

Excuse me. Sir?

BARKER

Not now, Ciparis, I'm in the middle of my pitch.

AUGUSTE

Are you a dream?

BARKER

See those rubes? They ain't coming in the tent if I don't make 'em, see? And if they don't go in, you don't get paid. Ladies and Gentlemen, this ferocious Martinique native is a negro Rasputin.

AUGUSTE

Can you help me?

BARKER

Help? Help? How do you mean, help?

AUGUSTE

I am burned; I need a doctor.

BARKER

Look at those hands, boy. Look at those feet. Not good for much, are they?

AUGUSTE

No.

BARKER

Not going to get much work loading ships with a body like that, are you?

AUGUSTE

I will find something.

BARKER

Will you? That's quite a wager, ain't it? Now look, boy. I've come all the way from America. Know where that is?

AUGUSTE

Yes. It's very far.

BARKER

That's right. A long way, at great expense on my part--and why? Why?

AUGUSTE

I don't know.

BARKER

Because you're famous. I've heard of you, the whole goddamn country's heard of you. They want to see you.

AUGUSTE

I am Auguste Ciparis. Nothing more.

BARKER

Au contraire. You, mon ami, are "The Prisoner of St. Pierre." Everybody's read Kennan's interview.

AUGUSTE

Kennan?

BARKER

I'm telling you--there's money in this. Not a lot, of course, but there is some.

AUGUSTE

What do I have to do?

BARKER

Nothing. That's the beauty of it. What can you do anyway? Look at those limbs. I'll keep ya from starving to death. I'll give ya room and board, and a dollar a week. That's more than Zix and Zax make, and there's two of them.

AUGUSTE

I don't understand.

BARKER

Mulligan hasn't been here, has he? You haven't been talking to Mulligan?

AUGUSTE

No.

BARKER

Good. Listen, I'll even throw in the trip for free. We'll get you a costume and some gear. I'll loan you the cash, don't worry. We'll just take it out of your pay.

(AUGUSTE turns his back on the Barker.)

AUGUSTE

Please, go away.

BARKER

You want to play hardball, that's fine. Fine. See if you get any other offers like this... I can wait. Ladies and Gentlemen, step right up, step right up, see the world's most amazing negro.

(THE BARKER exits. AUGUSTE opens his eyes, glad no one is there. HE staggers over to the door.)

AUGUSTE

Hello? Hello? Can anyone hear me? Someone let me out. Someone tell me what's happened. Where is everyone?

(HE pushes on the door with his shoulder again, but it doesn't move.)

AUGUSTE

Someone will find me. You'll see, Monique. Someone will set me free, because God will see me, and he will say, "Auguste Ciparis is not a bad man. He should not starve to death in the dungeon."

ANGEL

(from offstage) Don't be so sure.

AUGUSTE

I treated my parents with respect as a child. I honor their memory as a man. I go to church, sing the hymns loudly up to God. Don't drink much. I don't lie when it comes to important things. I don't steal. Bertrand took the missing case of Arnaud and tried to blame it on me, that's why I hit him. (beat) I love the world, Lord. The beach and the palms and the coconuts. The thousand flowers and the waterfall in the Botanic Gardens. Breadfruit and eels from the river... And you, Monique. Your laugh, your silky skin, your hat with the parrot feathers. I love the blue sky and the taste of the air after a thunderstorm. I have not grown tired of the world.

MONIQUE

What if you do?

(Lights reveal GEORGE KENNAN, an American reporter, in a suit coat and white cork helmet. HE carries a notebook and pen as he walks cautiously towards Auguste [Kennan should be played as the same actor as the Barker].)

KENNAN

(to an unseen companion) Whew. What's that stench? Oh? Is he burned that badly? (He sees Auguste) Oh, my. Oh, no, I'm fine, I just need a few deep breaths, that's all. I'm fine.

AUGUSTE

I am only interested in real people who can open that door.

KENNAN

Ahem. Ah, yes. Well, I'm sorry that we do not have the appropriate medical supplies. But I assure you that Mr. Jaccaci is sending to Fort de France for bandages and antiseptic as we speak.

AUGUSTE

Who are you?

KENNAN

George Kennan, reporter.

(KENNAN extends his hand, sees the shape of Auguste's hands, and quickly withdraws the offer.)

KENNAN

Yes, well, then... no need to shake.

AUGUSTE

I don't know you.

KENNAN

Well, no, I suppose not. In America, I have a certain following. I'm an American.

AUGUSTE

Oh.

KENNAN

I'm doing a story on the tragedy of St. Pierre. I've heard about you, but I didn't think the stories were true.

AUGUSTE

What stories?

KENNAN

I realize that you're wounded, that you're in a state of shock, but I'd like to ask a few questions. For The Outlook Magazine, a very respected journal. I'm sure you don't mind. Now, do you recall an explosion?

AUGUSTE

No.

KENNAN

Sulfur in the air?

AUGUSTE

No.

KENNAN

Was there smoke?

AUGUSTE

Where? When?

KENNAN

During the eruption.

AUGUSTE

What eruption? What has happened to everyone?

KENNAN

(to himself) Appears disoriented. (to Auguste) Now, there has been considerable distrust on the part of the papers about your story. Apparently there were no reliable witnesses. Did anyone of... European descent see your rescue?

AUGUSTE

I haven't been rescued! I am still here!

KENNAN

As I said, Mr. Jaccaci is arranging--

AUGUSTE

Get me out of here.

KENNAN

I understand that you must be in a great deal of pain.

AUGUSTE

Look at my hands, my back, my feet. Of course I am in pain. And I am very hungry.

KENNAN

Hungry? Well, yes, of course. Unfortunately, our food is probably a little rich for you. Why don't we go over your story again?

AUGUSTE

My story?

KENNAN

Yes. Now you said you were waiting for breakfast when--

AUGUSTE

I am still waiting for breakfast. Still waiting for Varant to save me from this wretched place.

(An ANGEL, a woman in a long white cotton dress, with a death's head mask over the upper part of her face, enters. SHE carries an intricately carved walking stick.)

ANGEL

Auguste Ciparis, I have been looking for you. Hello, Monique.

MONIQUE

Hello.

KENNAN

I am interviewing this negro right now. If you will please be patient, you may speak with him later.

ANGEL

Maybe I should be looking for you, Mr. Kennan. Perhaps we will meet on top of Mont Pelee, in the clouds of steam and ash. Take care not to lose your way.

KENNAN

(ignoring her) Now... Father Mary has vouched for your friends, the ones who rescued you. So that will help establish some credibility. And Mister Clerc says that he knows you.

AUGUSTE

I load cargo for him.

KENNAN

It's important that I get all this, because, of course, people won't believe you're telling the truth.

ANGEL

Maybe you should come back later, if there is a later.

KENNAN

I'm sure you mean well, Miss, but I'm trying to do my job here, if you please.

ANGEL

Go away.

(KENNAN exits.)

ANGEL

He's a nice man, deep down, but more than a little tiresome.

AUGUSTE

I don't like him either.

ANGEL

Well... We're alone now. Finally.

MONIQUE

Not completely.

AUGUSTE

Are you going to help me?

ANGEL

That depends on how you look at it. Do you know who I am?

AUGUSTE

Yes.

ANGEL

I've been looking for you for three days. You're well-hidden down here.

AUGUSTE

Too well. I'd like to be found.

ANGEL

Alas, I found you first.

MONIQUE

No. I did.

ANGEL

Irrelevant.

AUGUSTE

Yes. Well... It's nice to have company. Isn't it, Monique?

ANGEL

I imagine you've had enough company.

AUGUSTE

They are not so pleasant, so beautiful as you.

MONIQUE

Auguste.

ANGEL

That's nice a thing to say.

AUGUSTE

When death comes to visit, it pays to be nice.

(The BARKER returns.)

BARKER

Ladies and Gentlemen, step right up, step right up. We have here two of the wonders of the world. I am talking about the beautiful, the stunning, the miraculous, Angel of Death. Spotlight Please.

(Bright light shines on the Angel. Perhaps she bows and shakes a few hands with the audience.)

BARKER

This, my fellow spectators, is a woman, sorry, a Lady, who has some mighty sore lips. Why, she's spent the last three days dishing out more than thirty thousand kisses, just in St. Pierre alone. How does she do it? How does she do it?

ANGEL

Practice, practice, practice.

BARKER

And with her is the one man, the one person, she hasn't taken a liking to.

ANGEL

Hold on, I haven't decided yet.