

MUZZLING EDITORS IN HAITI

BY ARTHUR RUHI

AMONG the subjects of criticism of our present régime in Haiti is the part we play, or are supposed to play, in muzzling a patriotic native press. Vitriolic letters of protest, from the skillful hand of M. Georges Sylvain or some other engaged in the congenial avocation of putting tacks in front of the Occupation's tires, appear in this country from time to time and are read by serious Americans with more or less sympathy, bewilderment and indignation.

Nor are these complaints without basis in fact. Newspapers *have* been shut up in Haiti and their editors put in jail and permitted to languish there indefinitely. In the prison at Port au Prince, during my recent visit, there were enough journalists, including the much-talked-of M. Pouget, to have added a school of journalism to the wood-working classes which the Americans have established there.

The sight is not pleasant, and no American relishes it. But after looking into the matter with some thoroughness on the spot, I am struck by the fact that in this, as in many other Haitian questions, it is difficult to see clearly at a distance of fifteen hundred miles, and easy to be misled by giving one's own connotation to phrases which have quite other meanings in Haiti.

In the first place, the Occupation is not directly responsible for the arrest and imprisonment of M. Pouget and his colleagues. He was put where he is by the Haitian government, and the matter is something with which the Treaty officials, as such, have nothing to do. When the Haitian authorities are asked why imprisoned newspaper men are not brought

sooner to trial, their reply is that their cases are in the hands of the proper authorities—that evidence is being collected and will come into court in due course. It is the sort of reply usually made by Foreign Offices in similar cases.

The inside explanation, according to common Port au Prince gossip, is that inasmuch as any government, under present conditions of coöperation with the Treaty officials, is *ipso facto* "pro-American" and a target for "patriotic" criticism, no journalist, however unjust and inflammatory his attacks, is likely to be held by the lower courts before which his case would naturally come. The government therefore takes the somewhat unconventional method of punishing the offender first and trying him afterward. When he has been in jail long enough, his case comes into court and he is released. This seems odd to most Americans, but not so odd, perhaps, as the good old-fashioned Haitian method of shooting the critic first.

Some of M. Pouget's friends, while readily admitting that newspaper critics of the Government had short shrift in the old days, make the point that things are different now. The Americans have taken away their old weapon of revolution. They are now supposed to be enjoying the blessings of true liberty, and it is an anomaly, and a blot on our 'scutcheon, that such high-handed treatment of the press should go on under our wing. The point seems to me to be well-taken. The answer appears to be that the Treaty officials have no legal jurisdiction in the matter, and that while extra-legal pressure might be brought, it has evidently not been thought expedient,

in view of the many unescapable causes of friction in the Occupation's routine work, to stress a purely domestic matter in discussions over the tea-cups.

II

So much for the journalists in jail. There are, however, various differences between Haitian newspapers and our own which also may cause misunderstanding at this distance, and on this aspect of the matter a personal experience of the writer may possibly shed a little light.

I landed in Port au Prince, curious, naturally, to see something of the Occupation, but more personally pre-occupied with blue water and velvet airs, and in revisiting, after many postponements, a place where I had spent a few delightful days in that far-off time "before the War." Imagine the consternation of such a pilgrim, after drifting about for an afternoon in about the state of mind of Kipling's soldier returned to Mandalay, to learn from *Le Nouvelliste* that evening, in big type and a full column on the front page, that he was "a correspondent of the New York *American*, the great negrophobe daily," and had come à *la recherche de faits sensationnels*.

The Haitian people will recall the famous narrative of the so-called marine which the New York *American* illustrated with horrible pictures of human sacrifices. All the iniquities reported by it, happened, according to the *American*, in Port au Prince.

Is Mr. Ruhl going to arrange a scenario in order to say tomorrow that he has seen the same scenes which the alleged marine described with such detail and which the High Commissioner declared were non-existent when the clipping was shown to him?

Certainly the New York *American* is immensely rich, and if it has put sufficient funds at Mr. Ruhl's disposal, the latter can organize all the grotesque scenes he wants in order to picture them later as cross-sections of Haitian life. And the sad part of it is that he will find plenty of readers in the United States to swallow his yarns. . . .

The mere speculations of *Le Nouvelliste* did not disturb me, for news is scarce in Port au Prince and people are accustomed to reading all sorts of nonsense and taking it accordingly, but to be introduced to the

capital as the representative of a supposedly hostile newspaper with which I had no connection was embarrassing, for this much of the story would doubtless be accepted—as indeed it was—as a mere statement of fact.

The next evening, during a ball at the Cercle Bellevue, another Haitian editor with whom I was chatting asked if I would not like to meet the editor of *Le Nouvelliste*. Although still somewhat aggrieved, I consented, picturing, meanwhile, some lowering pirate, who would doubtless reveal, in his furtive gaze, his consciousness of being in the wrong. Nothing further from the fact! The gentleman who presently blew up, broad, beaming, sanguine, and shook my hand emphatically, might have been my oldest friend.

"Well," said he gaily, with his air of the impudent *boulevardier*, "attack's the better part of defense!"

"Yes," I agreed rather lamely, "but why attack *me*? I've just landed. I came down because I wanted to see your country. I'm not . . ."

The editor of *Le Nouvelliste* listened rather impatiently, meanwhile taking in the stranger, the orchestra's seductive strains, and the beautiful ladies swinging by, in his look *tout Tartarinesque*. Suddenly he interrupted by grabbing my arm, whirled me toward the refreshment-room, and in a Manhattanese picked up during two years' reportorial experience in Brooklyn, exclaimed: "Aw, come 'n' have a drink!"

A "good fellow," in short, lively, amusing, and journalistically speaking, quite irresponsible.

The next day a young Negro poet appeared at my hotel, to interview me pleasantly and talk of books and things, and the following day came "Explications de M. Ruhl":

"Is it true that I am in the presence of the representative of the most Haitianophobe of the newspapers of the United States of North America?"

"What you say surprises me! It is true that I am a journalist by profession, but at present I am attached to no journal, etc., etc. . . ."

The *amende honorable*, evidently. But soft, not so fast! A day or two later a mysterious and anonymous subscriber writes to the directors of *Le Nouvelliste* that inasmuch as they are "interested in the object of the visit of a certain negrophobe now within our gates, it seems pertinent to report that the individual in question was seen on Sunday in the cemetery, hiring some poor wretches to dance for him, one of them waving over his head a bottle of rum." At the moment that he, the mysterious and anonymous subscriber appeared, the stranger, "betrayed by an emotion which he could not conceal, saluted *bien bas*, and caught full in the act, slunk away like a fox about to steal a chicken. But unhappily, he had already pressed the button of his kodak! . . ."

Such quaint attentions may be accepted philosophically by the casual visitor and even with amusement as part of the furniture of an exotic scene. But the stranger with serious business in hand, land to rent, an agency to open, a franchise to acquire, a factory to run, may find them more concretely embarrassing and even be forced to sprinkle a little sugar to satisfy the gadfly's hunger or deflect it to another trail!

III

Even the most serious Haitian journalist is faced with difficulties which can scarcely fail to stir the sympathy of his colleagues in more prosperous and sophisticated lands. Only a handful of the public can read newspapers at all; there is no news, no money, and a cultured gentleman who has served his country abroad as a diplomat in luckier days may have to grub along day in and day out with his one-page printed sheet, for a wage which, in Chicago or New York, would no more than hire the merest clerk.

But this very smallness of scale is partially responsible for differences which give such words as "editor," "the press," and "newspaper opinion," a connotation in Haiti, and indeed throughout the Carib-

bean, very different from that to which we are used at home. An American newspaper, because of the very size of its invested capital, if for nothing else, represents a certain continuity of policy and a considerable body of public opinion. It may over-accuse the virtues of its political friends or under-accuse those of its opponents, but in any case it reflects the average thought of thousands or hundreds of thousands of readers, and is more or less solidly and permanently rooted, like a railroad or church, in its particular neighborhood.

The little Haitian sheets are quite otherwise. They are not newspapers at all, in the sense that the vending of that curious objective commodity called news is their main business. Like the little papers which crowd and make so entertaining a Paris news-stand, they are, only on a smaller scale, organs of personal opinion, of more or less personal attack or praise, and the opinion is that of the editor and his little group of friends, for the great mass of the people—95% or 97%—do not read at all. Anyone who can get enough money together to print a few score copies of a single sheet a day can start a newspaper, and the custom of the country is such that freedom of the press implies a freedom to abuse and misrepresent which, whatever our newspaper faults, is almost unheard-of at home.

But these and other local habits, while they may assist in accounting for the occasional arrest of editors, certainly do not excuse their being held indefinitely without trial. No American relishes that sort of thing, and in talks with some of the Haitian ministers, I suggested as much. The reply, as I have already said, was that the cases were in the hands of the judicial authorities and taking the usual course.

Nobody likes to stay in jail, but even the woes of the muzzled journalists cannot be swallowed quite literally as pictured in the Opposition press. The responsible editor, an individual whose curious *métier* it is to answer the summons of the authorities and possibly to serve terms in jail, is found

sometimes in Haiti as he used to be in Russia, and the exploitation of his martyrdom is such good business for the Opposition that there is suspicion, sometimes, that his detention was premeditated.

Once in jail, he immediately begins to "rot"—the orthodox Caribbean phrase—and if starvation and disease can be added to his supposed sufferings, they heighten the villainy of the authorities and the force of the fervid appeals for saving the unfortunate's life. In Port au Prince, journalists continue now to "rot," although the spotlessness and general attractiveness of the prison is one of the things to which the Occupation—with possibly characteristic military naïveté—points with special pride. At the precise moment that M. Pouget, for instance, was pictured as rotting there, I visited and chatted with him one day, as he lay on his cot, in a clean and by no means disagreeable room, opening on a sunny court, and he told me that he had no complaint to make, aside from objecting to being in jail at all, and that the behavior of the American commandant

of the place had been entirely correct. Another journalist, about whom a great outcry was made before his release shortly before my arrival, came back to the prison one day during my stay in Port au Prince to pay the commandant a polite call. The visit seemed to be in the nature of a bread-and-butter call, so to speak, a courteous salutation to one whose hospitality he had shared, and was characterized by the most graceful and gracious amenity on both sides!

Other lands, other customs! Other realities behind the same words. With all due respect for the difficult position in which upper-class Haitians now find themselves, with every sympathy for their quite natural exasperations, an editorial quotation from *Le Nouvelliste*, for example, does *not* carry quite the same relative weight as similar comment from the *Manchester Guardian* or the *Paris Temps*. And whoever tries to pass on events in Haiti without some little acquaintance with what a Haitian journalist once called the "tragic operetta" of Haitian political life, will simply get his fingers burned.

CLINICAL NOTES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Art in the Sewer.—The exponent of that one of the graphic arts which has to do with the laying of paint beautifully upon canvas finds his lot increasingly discouraging in the present-day Republic. In the last fifteen years, his patrons have been recruited less and less from Americans of sound taste and appreciation and more and more from newly-rich bounders who have made fortunes out of khaki cloth, oil manipulations, bootlegging, gasoline-barrows, chewing gum and enterprises of a piece. It is this latter class of Americans, most of them with no more actual knowledge of painting than a Hottentot, who currently satisfy their vainglory and posture a fictional culture by unbelted themselves for his works. The old order of American, who had at least a measure of sympathy for and understanding of the artist's aspirations and achievements, has grown poorer as the new order has grown richer, and it can no longer afford the luxuries it once could. And it is thus that the artist is compelled presently to rely for a livelihood not upon persons who can comprehend him and, comprehending, encourage him with their taste, their intelligence and their honestly founded enthusiasm, but upon persons who are not likely to buy one of his paintings until after it has been given the imprimatur of the Sunday rotogravure sections and been reproduced alongside the photographs of Cal Coolidge shaking hands with the Dolly Sisters, Jack Dempsey's pet dog, and a scene from Gloria Swanson's latest movie.

It isn't that the artist has to go hungry and sleep on the floor of a Macdougall alley garret; as a matter of fact, he makes a great deal more money today than he ever

made before. It is, rather, that he steadily gets less and less encouragement, both from without and within, to do fine work, and more and more, both from without and within, to do merely the hollow and flashy work that the purchasing pack of ex-cloak and suit merchants, ex-army raincoat manufacturers and ex-delicatessen dealers can handily understand. He searches his æsthetic soul, and throws up his hands in despair. The sincerest artist in the world must inevitably lose his sincerity if he is condemned to paint the walls of pig-stys. The sincerest artist in the world must inevitably give up his dreams in disgust when he sees the labors upon which he has expended all his heart-ache and all his joy and all his love hung upon the walls of golf clubs and meat packers' and knit-tie manufacturers' houses. Art can thrive under the patronage of a Lorenzo or a Sixtus IV, but it cannot thrive, though millions be laid at its feet, under the patronage of stock-jobbers, Florida realtors and pants makers.

The Yellow Lack-of-Peril.—Back of all the romantic blather about Uhuhu, Ahahaha, Umhumha and the other South Sea island maidens in whose amiable embraces the Anglo-Saxon heroes of current fictional *opera* find at length the peace and solace and comfort that have been denied them in paler embraces nearer home, there is, I have a notion, a soupçon of disconcerting truth. A man, as I have observed in the past, is always happiest with a woman who is deferentially his inferior. It is the equality of woman to man in the Anglo-Saxon countries—and not only the equality, but often actually the superiority—