

Emancipation from Tribal Influence

CANAPE-VERT. By Pierre Marcelin and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin. Translated by Edward LaRocque Tinker. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1944 225 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by THOMAS SUGRUE

THE winner of the Second Latin American Literary Prize Competition is important for more reasons than the excellence—which is high—of its literary structure. “Canape-Vert” is a pioneer, a pilgrim, in fact, walking among us with a story to tell and a lesson to teach. It is the first novel to appear in English giving a picture of Haitian life from the viewpoint of the Haitians themselves—it was written by two Haitians, brothers; it is a “regional” novel of native life on the Caribbean islands; it is a treatise on voodoo which gives a sensible and completely understandable picture of this over-glamorized remnant of the mystery religions. But for Americans who are interested in the Negroes of their own country, and the problem they present, it has a special significance.

In the United States the Negro slaves almost totally lost connection with Africa, forgetting their folklore and their tribal customs along with their religion and their language. In Haiti the uprooting was less successful. With a climate and a geography similar in many respects to those they had left; with fewer white masters (and these mostly French, who were tolerant of native habits); and with a community life which allowed freedom of individual and group expression—with these advantages the Haitian Negroes succeeded in transplanting a large portion of their African culture, and it survives to this day. They also transposed the French language into a Creole which is quite their own. The Roman Catholic religion they accepted as an exterior coating, a gloss, but no more than that. On Saturday night the drums of the Vodun beat; on Sunday morning the drum-beaters chant the litany. It is all the same to them. The world is full of people, the air is full of gods. You pay your money and you take your choice.

Thus Haiti offers a study of the Negro in transition. He is freed of the negative, smothering tribal influence which made change impossible in Africa. He is surrounded at all times with the opportunity to “progress.” But the opportunity is not pressed; he can take it or leave it. Thus advancement, or change, or evolution, however you may wish to name it, proceeds naturally. And it is this

natural change, this subtle development from an unselfconscious member of a group to a self-assured, self-directing individual which is illustrated so vividly in “Canape-Vert.”

Aladin, Florina, Grande Da, Tonton Bossa, Judge Dor, Sor Cicie, all the characters of the story, believe in the pantheon of the Vodun cult: Damballa Oueddo, the Master of Heaven; Papa Legba, guardian of the gate; Grande Erzilie, chief female deity; Baron Samedi, Lord of the Cemetery; General Anglessou, the “Bucket of Blood.” They are convinced that in all matters of importance these *loas* and *mysterés* are concerned, and that in matters of morals they are vitally interested and will take action within a short time. Here, of course, is the point at which the amount of change or evolution can be measured, for the emergence into self-consciousness is marked by the assumption by the individuality of this moral judgment, to be dispensed in the private hells of schizophrenia and neurasthenia—a conception which the mystic replaces by a projection of the imperfection into the future, there to be encountered by the individual when he seeks to return with his self-knowledge to the source of his pattern (on which he has sewed, he discovers, an imperfect design). The characters in “Canape-Vert” are at the same stage as those in the Greek and Shakespearian tragedies. They determine to express their personal opinions and satisfy their desires in the face of certain anger on

the part of the gods. Swiftly they are pursued and relentlessly they are punished. Aladin wants Florina, Judge Vor wants Tonton Bossa’s land, José takes Florina, Tonton Bossa drinks the three drops. Blood flows, and wind and rain tear through the town like angels of destruction. General Anglessou mounts Aladin, and the tree of wickedness which grew from a small seed of desire blossoms in the thick, heavy night of the tropics. Over them all hangs the fear of becoming a zombi, a soul returned to unconsciousness, the precious individuality lost.

The story is beautifully told. The brothers who wrote it are poets, and they have written about the peasants of their country in lean, rhythmic prose that never uses ten words where one will do the trick. The picture they paint is full and detailed, but the fullness and detail are trapped in adverbial phrases and quick sentences that blossom into a dozen meanings when slowly read. The repressed and the sentimental may find the violence and simplicity of the book’s action hard to take, but any mature person will thoroughly enjoy it, and find matter for contemplation when he considers that these Haitian peasants are the same people as our American Negroes, from whom we are inclined to expect a great deal of cultural advancement in return for a limited attempt to understand a basic evolutionary problem.

There have been some fine novels by and about American Negroes, but none will teach the white reader as much about the soul of his black brother as this brief, simple tragedy of Haitian peasant life.

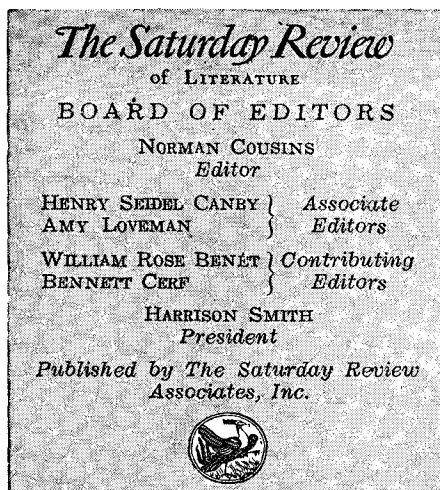
Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

POETIC EXCLAMATIONS

Quoted below are fifteen famous poetic exclamations. How many of them do you recall? Allowing 7 points if you can name the poet who wrote each one, and another 3 if you can name the poem from which it was taken, a score of 60 is par, 70 is very good, and 80 or better is excellent. Answers are on page 23.

1. Ah, take one consideration with another,
The policeman's life is not a happy one!
2. Alas, it is a fearful thing
To feel another's guilt!
3. Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
4. Break, break, break, on thy cold gray stones, O Sea!
5. But when to mischief mortals bend their will
How soon they find fit instruments of ill!
6. God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world!
7. Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
8. How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood,
When fond recollection restores them to view!
9. Oh God! that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap!
10. Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practise to deceive!



MELETUS RIDES AGAIN

NEWS ITEM: Washington. Representative Andrew J. May, Kentucky, has protested against Army distribution of the pamphlet, "The Races of Mankind," by Dr. Ruth F. Benedict and Dr. Gene Weltfis, both of Columbia University. Congressman May charged that the pamphlet contained a reference to 1917 American Army intelligence tests showing that Northern Negroes from certain states made higher median scores than Southern whites from Mississippi, Kentucky, and Arkansas. (The pamphlet explained that such differences came about "not because people were from the North or the South, or because they were white or black, but because of difference in income, education, cultural advantages, and other opportunities.") Congressman May said that as a result of his protest the Army would drop the pamphlet. "It won't be distributed by the Army," he declared. "If it is, we will have plenty to say and it will be said right on the floor of the House. It has no place in the Army program."

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ATHENIAN STREET SCENE

A National Tragedy in One Act

ANYTUS: And did you hear, Meletus, how they all stood around and cried like babies when the old man died?

MELETUS: The fools. It made me laugh to see the way grown men would drool at his feet. Well, I hope they will profit from the lesson of what happens to men of that stamp.

ANYTUS: They say the old man blabbed for more than two hours before he finally twitched his last. And that young Plato, with the tears fresh on his cheeks, came away and wrote it all down so that everyone would know.

MELETUS: How stupid. Doesn't he know we will destroy it, and him, too. But I never could understand that young idiot anyway. And it's all the old man's fault. He had the kid under his thumb from the start. Well, it is about time he got what he de-

served. Too bad we didn't prefer charges against him long ago. And do you know, Anytus, that my own son was beginning to come under his spell?

ANYTUS: Yes, and mine, too. A dangerous man, Anytus, a dangerous man. We mustn't let it happen again. It makes me shudder to think of all the young men whose minds were poisoned with all that heretical nonsense. What was the word we used in our charge, Meletus?

MELETUS: Mental corruption.

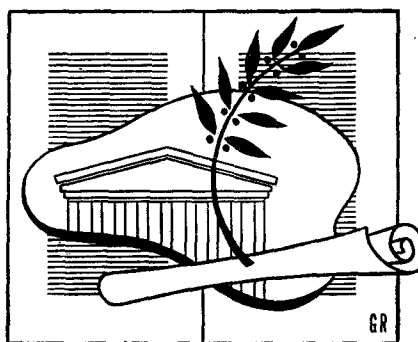
ANYTUS: Yes, that's it: mental corruption. There was hardly a youth able to escape it. A couple of more years of that subversive dry rot, Meletus, and this country would be completely overrun by the intellectuals.

MELETUS: But I'm worried now. We have got to act fast. Just getting rid of Socrates isn't enough. We thought our troubles were over when we got rid of Anaxagoras, and who should turn up but that scoundrel Protagoras. And just disposing of him and his book didn't give us any rest, either. I tell you, Anytus, we have got to clean out the entire crowd. That's the only way.

ANYTUS: But we've got to move very carefully. I wouldn't rush matters too much. As it was, the vote against Socrates wasn't as overwhelming as we had thought. And I doubt whether we could have pushed through charges right there and then against his followers, too. Don't forget that we had a majority of only sixty votes out of 501.

MELETUS: But still a majority. Actually the old man never had a chance. I have to laugh every time I think of the way the crowd roared when old Socrates, asked to state his profession, said he was a midwife! Everyone yowled so hard they didn't hear him say that he helped to bring ideas to birth out of laboring minds! Laboring minds! Haw! That's a good one.

ANYTUS: Yes, it was funny all right. By Jupiter, Anytus, the old man was even uglier than I had supposed. Did you ever in your life see such a nose? And that curly, uncombed hair of his! Do you know, Meletus, I shouldn't be surprised if he had slave blood in his veins.



MELETUS: That blood, alas, is already contaminating too many of our people. That reminds me. Did you hear what the old man was supposed to have told those young kids just before he took the cup?

ANYTUS: Wasn't it something about misology or misogyny?

MELETUS: Misology, Anytus, misology. I got my son to write it down for me. Here's what the old fool said: "Athens is endangered by misologists. Just as there are misanthropists or haters of men, so are there also misologists—the haters of ideas. Both spring from the same curse, which is ignorance of the world."

ANYTUS: Why, I believe he's talking about us. The ungrateful fool. We should have had him killed years ago.

MELETUS: And make no mistake about it, Anytus, there are other libertarians—many of them—who feel exactly the way he did. That is why we have to move quickly. I tell you the temper of the council is favorable. We've already been able to convince them of the subversive menace of the old man. They're worried. I believe we should lose no time in preparing new charges against all his satellites.

ANYTUS: But won't we be overreaching ourselves? Suppose all the intellectuals should join forces against us.

MELETUS: Impossible. You might as soon expect the moon to come to their defense. I don't have to tell you that the intellectuals are hopelessly split among themselves. Did you see the way most of them walked out on old Socrates? They're so preoccupied with their own caterwauling and back-biting and sniping that they won't pay any attention to us until it's too late. Look at the Sophists; why, they're suffocating in the blankets of their own tortured reasoning. Everything is so relative with them that they wouldn't lift a hand in their self-defense since there would probably be a question in their own minds as to whether they were actually being attacked, or whether the attacker was only a figment of their own imagination. By Zeus, I believe you would have to turn a knife in their back at least three times before you could convince them it was real.

ANYTUS: As you say, Meletus. You know you can count on me. When do we begin?

MELETUS: At once. The intellectuals have had their way for too long a time with their alien ideas. We have got to return to the ways of our forefathers. What's good enough for Draco is good enough for me!

ANYTUS: Yes, Meletus, he was a great man—Draco—a great man.

N. C.