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### THE SPIRIT OF FRANCE IN THE WEST INDIES

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*“La guerre est la solution violente d'un problème économique; la colonisation en est la solution pacifique.”*—COLONEL MONTEIL. Extract from an address, 1898, Paris.

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Liberty and Progress Due to the Freebooters—Martinique and Guadeloupe—Effect of Slavery

THE French colonists in Canada were much hampered by being from the outset smothered in priestly and administrative swaddling clothes. The French West India Islands, on the contrary, showed an extraordinary vitality and prosperity, owing to the large number of freebooters or buccaneers who composed the early settlements. At one time, San Domingo, while under French dominion, far exceeded Cuba in importance, and to-day, Martinique is the possession which Frenchmen regard with a just pride.\*

\* The spotted career of Hayti and San Domingo is illustrated by these dates: in 1492 it was discovered by Columbus; in 1493 was planted here the first Spanish colony. Its name was then Hispaniola. In 1697 it became French, after having for thirty years past been the chosen home of buccaneers. From 1790 to 1793 the blacks held a carnival of bloodshed by way of outdoing Paris; Toussaint Louverture became Negro Dictator, and in 1801 independence was proclaimed. From that time to this the island has been a byword for grotesque aping of white man's government. In 1844 San Domingo seceded and formed a second so-called Republic.

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On the occasion of my first visit to that part of the world, Martinique was under quarantine because of yellow fever, so I landed at Guadeloupe, its sister island—a trifle larger.

Martinique enjoyed the blessing of having been seized by England during the wars against the French Revolution, and of having therefore escaped the political chaos which followed the violent emancipation of negroes ordered by the Revolutionary Government of Paris. Guadeloupe did suffer, because she was not seized by England. Indeed, there is an element of the comical in the colonial development of Latin colonies, when it appears that war has blessed them, only when it has involved the defeat of the mother-country! The prosperity of Manila commenced with the English occupation of 1762—and of Havana the same may be said. The commercial prosperity of Argentine dates from the English occupation of 1808, and if Martinique is to-day richer than Guadeloupe or Cayenne, it may be attributed to the fact that England occupied the one and not the other.

At Guadeloupe I made the acquaintance of negro democracy, which finds loud expression since the establishment of the French Republic in 1870.

A mulatto boatman had been using offensive French expressions to some fellow-passengers from New York who were disembarking and had entered rival boats for the purpose of being rowed ashore. At that time I was on crutches from an accident and remained aboard, but, observing the rudeness of this particular boatman, I called the attention of others to it, with the result that he secured no patronage from our steamer.

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When I had returned to my long chair, and the after-deck was deserted of everyone but myself, there suddenly appeared at the head of the gangway the head of this same negro—he looked slyly to all sides—saw that I was alone—whipped out a knife, and made toward me with a springy step. Of course I was helpless, and my only hope lay in sparring for time—so I pretended that I rather enjoyed having my throat cut and lay back in my chair with my eyes fixed on the brute. I said nothing. He brandished the knife above his head and hissed at me: “*Je vais vous tuer!*”

“*Très bien!*” I said—“kill me—and then you’ll be hanged!” My only hope lay in treating the matter as a joke—and, fortunately for me, this succeeded, for the man was in a passion, and on the spur of the moment might easily have been provoked into a reckless move which no cry or action of mine could have prevented. But the wave of fury passed away from him as rapidly as it had come; for the negro is the same in Guadeloupe as in Mozambique or Alabama. In two minutes from his rush at me, he was begging my forgiveness, and that I would not hand him over for punishment.

At that time I was in no mood for undertaking police reforms, so I exhausted my French vocabulary in a sermon on politeness, which my would-be murderer promised faithfully to take to heart. Then I went ashore with him, and hobbled about Pointe à Pitre—the chief town. It was a little negro Paris. The architecture and dress were characteristic of the mother-country. The colored women swept along the

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streets in dresses suggesting the Empress Josephine, the long train hung over one arm, making a somewhat coquettish display of ankles, etc. The black women were singularly graceful and well dressed, comparing favorably with those in the English islands of Barbados and Antigua. But I saw mainly the result of unnatural alliances. Of course there was the inevitable kiosque with signs in French announcing dances, concerts, and the like; the streets were named as in Paris, and, of course, there were the familiar little tables under awnings outside of the cafés where *absinthe* and *siróp* were being sipped, and French newspapers were being read, and dominoes being played.

Of course I rested in this little Parisian oasis, and a kindly French Creole gentleman, who occupied the next table, opened conversation, the burden of which was, on his part, that the Republic was ruining France and her colonies by throwing political power too much into the hands of the negro. He told me that all whites thought as he did, that Guadeloupe, as well as Martinique, would soon revert to the savagery of Hayti and San Domingo, unless a stop were put upon popular franchise in a community where blacks outnumbered the whites.

“*Voyez-vous, monsieur*, we Creoles are not republican, but our government pretends that we are. A black republic is an absurdity—*voilà tout!*”

I then related my experience of the morning, at which he shrugged his shoulders, saying, “*Ma foi!*” “That is the logical outcome of black democracy.”\*

\* Dr. DuBois, of the University of Pennsylvania, has made an exhaustive study of the negro in Philadelphia and also in other places further

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My French friend had praise only for the Roman Catholic Sisters of Mercy, and I felt with him on this subject, whatever opinions I might entertain regarding the political and theological machinery of which they form a part.

When I hobbled up to the door of their institution I was welcomed by the Sisters, who were pure French. The Mother Superior introduced me to a shed under whose protection swarmed hundreds of pickaninnies, varying in shade from jet-black to the color of honey.

They were a delightful picture of chubby, irresponsible life—more amusing than a basket of kittens. They all talked French—at least such as were able to talk at all, and the Mother Superior put them through a little kindergarten drill for me, which consisted mainly in clapping their hands, singing French songs, and marching around like strings of ducklings. At this institution mothers, for a nominal sum per day, left their children to be fed, educated, and entertained, while they themselves went about their daily work.

To impress the children with a sense of duty, the Mother Superior, a sweet, gentle lady in appearance, illustrated once more the common saying that the Roman Church permits prevarication when it is done

south. He says: "The great deficiency of the negro is his small knowledge of the art of organized social life—that last expression of human culture. His development in group life was abruptly broken off by the slave-ship, directed into abnormal channels, and dwarfed by the Black Codes, and suddenly wrenched anew by the Emancipation Proclamation. He finds himself, therefore, peculiarly weak in that nice adaptation of individual life to the life of the group which is the essence of civilization. This is shown in the grosser forms of sexual immorality, disease, and crime, and also in the difficulty of race organization for common ends in economic or in intellectual lines."

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in a worthy cause. She made an address in about these words:

“ Little children, you must now be very good. This gentleman has come from far away to see you. If you are not good, he will carry you away to Monsieur de Bismarck.”

The eyes of the little black tots “ bugged out ” portentously at this dreadful threat, and I could not but think, at the time, that M. de Bismarck’s would have expanded equally, had I driven up to the *Reichskanzler Palais* in the Wilhelm Strasse with a *droschke* load of Guadeloupe pickaninnies by way of tribute!

But the lady’s lie contained this truth: namely, the fact that the name of Bismarck had penetrated to the French Antilles as a bugaboo or Bogey Man where-with black babies were frightened into obedience.

Guadeloupe and Martinique to-day send senators and deputies to the French Chamber, and mulattoes preach a dangerous democracy among their *concitoyens* of the plantations, whose conception of *égalité* is to make a division of the white man’s property.

Thus much of personal note I have introduced here, merely to indicate the difference in spirit between the Frenchman in the West Indies and on the St. Lawrence. In both, his efforts have been marred by too free marriage or mingling with the natives—a mingling which has rather dragged down the white man than elevated the black. But in their origins, these French islands have a great advantage over Canada. The West Indies had, from the very beginning of Spanish Dominion, attracted the envious attention

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not merely of rival governments, but of enterprising freebooters, notably French, Dutch, and English. The French Government, it is true, presented the picture of a monarchy gradually crushing out representative institutions, but this very process converted many of the small gentry into outlaws and adventurers. The wealth of the Spanish Main, the freedom of the life, the exaggerated stories regarding the ease of living, the delicious climate and the beauty of the women, all these conspired to draw to this part of the world a French element, which, under happier political conditions, would have produced eminent servants of the Crown.

These Frenchmen cared little for prying into the theology of their neighbors, and whatever their home government might enact in the way of laws against heresy, there was no power in the West Indies strong enough to execute them.

In 1625, almost contemporaneously with the formal colonization of the St. Lawrence, and within a few years of the Dutch occupation of New York, an adventurous nobleman of Normandy sailed from Dieppe with some fifty men and four pieces of artillery. He reached St. Kitts and returned to France with glowing accounts of what he had discovered. In 1626 Cardinal Richelieu granted to this adventurer both St. Kitts and Barbados, reserving for the Crown a tithe of the products for a period of twenty years. - These islands at present are thoroughly English, so far as they are not United States in sentiment. But at that time they formed the basis of Louis XIV.'s West Indian Empire. The company was authorized to engage

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emigrants, who were bound to serve three years, practically as white slaves. This was the formal constitution of France in the Antilles—an aristocracy of landlords, white serf-labor, and Crown-protection consisting of trade monopoly with the mother-country. But the progress under this system was very slow, and the people of St. Kitts would have starved to death at one time but for a passing Dutch ship loaded with food supply. The Dutch soon did all the trade of the island in spite of French penalties on the subject.

Smuggling in the West Indies, to say nothing of piracy, was immensely favored by the wonderfully fine weather prevailing most of the year; by the steadiness of the trade winds, and by the large number of harbors or refuges unknown to all save those who navigated constantly those waters. Small craft with a light draught, a relatively large spread of canvas, and a cargo of nothing but war material, and fighting men, had, among the Antilles, many advantages over the heavily laden deep-sea merchantman or man-of-war of those days. Spain, at the height of her power, found it impossible to suppress the buccaneers, and no other country had the same direct interest in such an object. The wealth of Spain and her European wars had created a class of adventurers whose piracy was condoned so long as it injured the enemy of the mother-country. Thus the West Indies became full of "honest" pirates who scuttled Spanish ships one day, carried on contraband trade the next, and ultimately squared accounts by dividing a portion of their plunder with the French Roman Catholic missionaries at whose hands they received the Sacrament.



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That master missionary—the Dominican Father Labat—narrates somewhere in his delightful book on the West Indies, that, during his years in Guadeloupe and Martinique, he never had to spend a farthing on altar-cloths or other church decoration—he got all he wanted through pious pirates on their return from plundering expeditions along the Spanish Main.

Père Labat has left a memory dear to the French Creoles, and he is worshipped as a god by the blacks for the vast amount of good he did in his day—building churches and fortifications; encouraging trade, and, above all, by judiciously ignoring instructions from home.

The more intolerant France became, the more obstinately did the West Indian French make a virtue of nullifying acts of the home government. The law forbidding all but Catholics to colonize was repudiated by none more contemptuously than this Dominican father, who wrote in a famous letter that “he was quite indifferent whether his sugar-cane was grown by a Lutheran or a Catholic so long as it was good and white.”

It was to a Jew (Da Costa) from Brazil, that the French West Indies owed the introduction of the sugar-cane, and the means of manufacturing it for consumption (1644). Respect for heretics was too deeply ingrafted among the orthodox Creoles of Martinique for them easily to adopt such narrow views as were current in Paris. Piracy, smuggling, and buccaneering proved for Louis XIV. a better colonial school than any ever divined for him by ministers of state or cardinals. His West Indian colonies thrived, not by reason of his protection, but in spite of it.

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In 1635, one hundred years after the discovery of the St. Lawrence by Cartier, Louis XIII. sought still more minutely to regulate the condition of his West India Islands, and, above all, to maintain an exclusive trade there—which for obvious reasons was impossible.

He granted to the original company of 1626 an enlarged charter authorizing them to conquer the whole of the West Indies, and to administer it pretty much as they pleased, provided that only Frenchmen and Catholics be admitted, and that three missionaries be allotted to each settlement: that efforts be made to convert the natives, and that in the following twenty years 4,000 emigrants be colonized there from France.

The Christianizing clause was the signal for a general massacre of natives under the plea that they resisted missionary entreaty, and by 1642 the company announced that already 7,000 Frenchmen had colonized.

Thanks to the freedom that flourished, in spite of Louis, the population was of a most varied and useful kind, and under the influence of the local self-government of the buccaneers the Creole community rapidly fused into a body politic in which all did a share for the common good, and no one class lorded it over the rest.

There was from the outset an abundant supply of white labor, which consisted of the very unfortunate, who accepted three years of slavery as a means of securing ultimate independence under better political conditions. The dignity of white labor was recognized at the outset, but afterward, when the manufacture of sugar became the absorbing industry, and when all the plantations were given over to this one

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industry, and when African negroes were introduced and made a part of the great industrial machine, and, above all, when the social position of a planter came to be measured by the number of slaves he possessed, then white labor ceased to be respectable, and blacks became the exclusive tillers of the soil.

The plough disappeared with the arrival of the negro and the sugar-mill—and while more money was made on the plantations, French writers lament the decay in political virtue which resulted from the accumulation of large fortunes in few hands.

Adam Smith, as well as others, noticed that in the French Islands slavery was less harsh than elsewhere. No doubt the Church must be credited with this blessed result, and in a second degree the fact that the French planter lived more intimately with the natives than did the Englishman.