

# Comment

## Face-to-face with evil incarnate

A thoroughly frightened President for Life Jean-Claude Duvalier, aka Baby Doc, has packed his bags with money and fled strife-torn Haiti. In the days of his father, Francois Duvalier — Papa Doc — it would have been the Haitian people, not the president — who was terrified.

Old Papa Doc ruled Haiti through his Tontons Macoutes: Denim-clad killers in one-way sunglasses. Much as Haiti's 5.5 million peasants feared the Tontons (Creole for bogeyman), they feared even more Papa Doc's black powers. Duvalier, the former country doctor and intellectual, was also high priest of Haiti's most secret cult of black magic, Oungan. Compared to the necromancy of Oungan, voodoo is merely folk-dancing for tourists.

In the spring of 1964, Haiti was deep in a nightmare of fear and terror as Papa Doc sent out his Tontons to hunt down enemies, real and imaginary. Driving in from the airport, a terrified man ran in front of our car, pursued by a Tonton Macoute. The Tonton halted and calmly shot the fugitive in the back with a long-barreled .38. "Welcome to Haiti," said Tijo, my host.

We were staying at the Oloffson, a delightful old Victorian ginger-bread hotel immortalized by Graham Greene in the *Comedians*. Chickens ran through the halls hung with lovely Haitian art; Cesar, the lame bartender, presided downstairs. The manager, Mr. Seitz, was leaving for Miami and offered us an invitation to the National Palace. The only problem was that it was made out to "Monsieur et Madame Seitz."

Duvalier's reign of terror had scared off all tourists: Haitians were not used to seeing whites. Just having



**ERIC MARGOLIS**

returned from living in Europe, my hair was fashionably long at a time when North Americans wore crew-cuts. Haiti's humidity turned my locks into curls. I was thus elected to go as Madame Seitz; friend Tijo went as Monsieur.

The Tontons at the Palace gate held our invite upside-down, pretending to read it. After a long, nerve-racking pause, they waved us through.

Breathing a big sigh of relief, I wondered what the penalty in Haiti was for female impersonation and crashing the president's party.

There, in the middle of a large ballroom, was a small, wizened, grey-haired figure, slightly stooped, peering out from behind thick glasses. Tontons armed with Thompson .45 sub-machineguns and sawed-off shotguns surrounded Duvalier. The hot, sultry atmosphere smelled of sweat, rum and fear.

I reached into a back pocket for my handkerchief. At once, three Tontons pounced on me. Two shotguns were jammed against my chest, a pistol under my nose. I withdrew my hanky, very, very slowly and tried hard to smile.

A few minutes later I was chatting with Venezuela's

ambassador. Two Tontons straightarmed him aside; others surrounded me. Papa Doc stood before me. I can still feel the aura of evil that emanated from this small, quiet man. His eyes stared into mine for what seemed minutes as he studied my face — and perhaps my mind. Finally, he addressed me in elegant French, his voice a muted, frightening whisper.

"We do not have many visitors to our country," hissed Duvalier. "It is said that you are a spy from Washington." My legs shook. That morning I had heard that U.S. Embassy officials, sure no one in his right mind would visit Haiti, were saying I was an agent. In a few hours, the rumor had reached Papa Doc.

"No, no, Monsieur Le President for Life," I explained, "My visit is here only as a student."

Duvalier looked at me quizzically, said nothing for a moment, and then smiled a smile that could have liquified stone.

"Look well, Monsieur the student," said Papa Doc, "and take care." He walked off surrounded by a human cloud of Tontons Macoutes.

Next day I watched schoolchildren parade through the streets, chanting, "Our Father, who art in the National Palace, hallowed be thy name." And I saw the place where Papa Doc had the body of one of his recently shot enemies propped up in a chair.

For four mornings, Papa Doc went and spoke to the body as crowds watched. They knew the corpse was answering back. Papa Doc could command the dead as well as the living.

Haitians may fear Baby Doc's Tontons. But they do not fear the man. Unlike Papa Doc, he cannot talk to the dead or walk on the night mists.