

PEOPLE TALKED ABOUT

MARINE WHO BECAME A KING

MORE than 80 years ago a negro named Soulouque who became emperor of Haiti rode off in gorgeous uniform to one of that island's sanguinary wars, and disappeared. But he left behind him a superstition that some day he would miraculously return from the heavens to again rule his people. For some reason unknown to history this negro ruler, when crowned, had taken the title of Faustin I.

Some 74 years later a plane swooped mysteriously down from the skies and deposited on the island of La Gonave a uniformed white man to rule that Haitian possession. This was accepted by the simple island folk as a promise fulfilled.

But the strangest part of it is that the new ruler, though white, was also named Faustin!

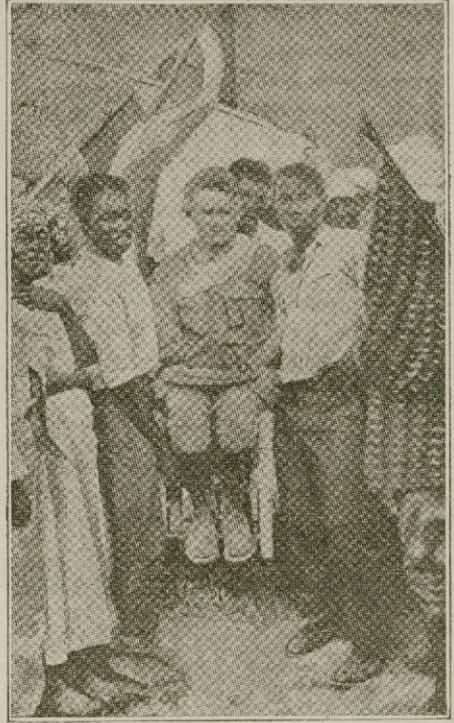
"Faustin II," if we may call him that, is Gunnery Sergeant Faustin E. Wirkus of the United States Marines and a lieutenant in the Haitian constabulary. He returned to this country on a two months leave of absence to publish a book, "The White King of La Gonave" (Doubleday, Doran & Co.) and for the incidental purpose of visiting a certain young lady of Newport, R. I., who, it is whispered, is not unwilling to become "queen" of the "Kingdom of Wirkus."

It is a far cry from that little Haitian island to the little coal mining town of Pittston, Pa. It was in the latter place that "Faustin II" was born. Was it coincidence that links the two names? We'll call it fate but in a strange land such as Haiti, where voodooism is rampant and where people believe that the dead are resurrected by sugar companies to work in the fields, anything seems possible.

Born of a German-American coal miner and a Polish-French mother, Sergeant Wirkus was not by them named Faustin. That name was selected by a local priest to whom the parents had appealed for a name. At the age of 20 Wirkus ran away. A stomach which needed food and a colorful recruiting poster made a combination which led him into the marines. The "sea soldiers" send their men all over the world. The recruit could have been sent to China, Nicaragua, San Diego, or the Brooklyn navy yard. But fate willed that he be sent to Haiti.

Someone was needed to establish order and see that the natives of La Gonave paid taxes. Oddly enough, Sergeant Wirkus was selected. Though La Gonave is within sight of Port-au-Prince it is best reached by plane. So a Faustin really did return from the skies to minister to the natives.

Communication by plane between the island and the mainland was infrequent. Several months after Ser-



—From "The Magic Island"

"King" Faustin II, better known as Sgt. F. E. Wirkus, and his court.

geant Wirkus had been deposited on the island there were rumors (in Haiti news spreads among the natives like a prairie fire in our own West) that the "reincarnated" Faustin had been crowned king of the island. Sergeant Wirkus's superiors didn't care, particularly since the Sergeant's reports were excellent and tax collections in La Gonave had doubled. If the blacks chose to call him king instead of lieutenant, why worry.

According to Sergeant Wirkus, when he first went to La Gonave he found the island virtually ruled by an old negro woman who held court in a forest near a mountain top. Though this woman had held sway for 30 years, local soothsayers professed to recognize the white visitor from the skies as "the returned one." So on a certain formal occasion they welcomed him with native flags, strewed flowers and palm leaves in his path, put a big yellow bandana over his shoulders, set him in a chair and carried him round and round in a circle, singing and kneeling before him, laying machettes upon his shoulders and "other stuff like that," he said, which, in effect, crowned him King Faustin II.