

Taming Mr. Dies

BY FREDA KIRCHWEY

IT DOESN'T matter who the malefactor may be, Morris Ernst takes him out to lunch or gives him a cocktail, and this alchemy is supposed to turn him into a civic benefactor. I don't say it never works; on the contrary, it is a technique that deserves every encouragement, especially since Mr. Ernst even tries it on *Nation* editors now and then. But its successes are, I suspect, occasional and accidental, like the rewards of virtue. The other day Raymond Clapper's syndicated column in the Scripps-Howard papers disclosed Morris Ernst's recent efforts to enlighten and reform Martin Dies, the one-man Gestapo from Texas. According to Clapper, Mr. Ernst "has been working on Representative Dies to interest him in using his investigation to bring out the differentiation between home-grown American liberalism and alien communism. The argument is that in this way a real service can be rendered to democracy. . . ." This is one instance in which the Ernst method will, I think, prove inadequate. Success would imply several almost comical presuppositions, such as a desire on the part of Mr. Dies to make the differentiation Mr. Ernst proposes, an absence of political motives in his investigation, and a sincere interest in democracy.

More realistic is the Eleanor Roosevelt approach to the Dies menace. As clearly as anyone in the country, Mrs. Roosevelt realizes that a major fight is in progress between the liberal forces in American life and the agents of repression. She knows who is who, underneath labels and pretensions. She knows what Mr. Dies is up to and why. She knows what his methods are and is shocked by them. She is not as free an agent as Mr. Ernst, but in her handling of the Dies committee she has, I think, proved a more effective one.

Mrs. Roosevelt is interested in young people; and when officers of the Youth Congress and the American Student Union were asked to appear before the Dies committee she appeared with them, not to testify but to watch. She watched silently through two sessions, invited the witnesses to the White House for lunch, approved in her daily column the "courtesy" and "helpfulness" of the committee members and its counsel, and commented on the rougher tactics of the committee's special investigator, J. B. Matthews. "His whole attitude, tone of voice, and phraseology made one feel that a prisoner, considered guilty, was being tried at the bar. I surmise that this impression was made on other people, for in a little while a gentleman came around and whispered in Mr. Matthews's ear. . . . Immediately the atmosphere changed. His voice was softer, his manners were more courteous. . . ."

Mrs. Roosevelt also gave it as her opinion, after listening in on these hearings, that "what is said by people

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about other individuals is not half as important as discovering what the people themselves, working in these organizations, say and do." In her presence the Dies committee was both tamed and at the same time most effectively shown up.

But if the youth organizations were spared the more unsavory tactics of the committee, the consumer groups have not done as well. Perhaps Mr. Dies decided after Mrs. Roosevelt's intervention that open hearings may be dangerous. In any case he released as a report of the committee a set of accusations against these groups drawn up by the same Mr. Matthews whose behavior distressed Mrs. Roosevelt. This report was, however, never submitted to the committee itself; it was placed in the record at a "meeting" at which Chairman Dies was the only member present. Another member, Mr. Voorhis, has openly attacked the report and the way it was prepared and issued.

In his relation to the consumers' movement, Mr. Matthews is an interested insider. He was a director of Consumers' Research when that organization was torn by a strike after refusing to recognize the union (A. F. of L.) set up by its employees. Out of the strike grew a rival organization, Consumers' Union, created by strikers and sympathizers and headed by Arthur Kallet, formerly associated with Mr. Matthews and Mr. Schlink in the direction of Consumers' Research. Consumers' Union and Mr. Kallet are among the chief targets of Mr. Matthews's present accusations.

It is impossible here to sort out and list the lies in Mr. Matthews's report, but I can vouch personally for the untruth of several of his charges. I marvel, for instance, at the inclusion of the Committee for Boycott Against Japanese Aggression among the organizations under inquiry. Since this committee urged Americans not to buy Japanese goods, only the inverse logic of a Dies investigator could have made it a "consumer" organization. But more important is the fact that Mr. Matthews's list of "participants" in the "operations" of this committee contained not one actual member. It was apparently culled from a much longer list of signers of a general manifesto sent out by the committee as part of its boycott propaganda, carrying the names of dozens of persons of all political colors. The names used by Mr. Matthews were taken from the *Daily Worker*, which for its own reasons ignored the larger majority of "respectables" among the signers.

This incident is small but typical. A committee which has no relation to the consumer movement is "smeared" by publication of a list of persons who had no connection with the committee; and incidentally the committee is no longer in existence. Much more serious, because of their possible effect, are the charges against such organizations as Consumers' Union, the Milk Consumers' Protective Committee, and various other genuine consumers' groups.

Even Mr. Matthews had the grace to admit that some of these were "devoted to legitimate consumer interests." But apparently one drop of red blood is enough to pollute any organism. The Consumers' Union has done an outstanding job, limited only by its financial handicaps, in exposing practices injurious to consumers of all sorts of goods. It is not a Communist organization. Communists are admitted to its ranks, as are all persons interested in its objectives. Even Communists, one may suppose, like to buy honest merchandise at fair prices; this is a human, not a purely Muscovite, failing. As for the milk committee, it has not only exposed the price-fixing methods of the major distributors but has also founded a cooperative concern which sells clean milk at less than the regular rate in New York City.

This latest star-chamber exploit cannot but reduce still further the prestige of Martin Dies in the eyes of ordinary men and women. An indiscriminate foray into the ranks of consumer protective groups hits the interests of too many of us. By the time the new session of Congress meets, Mr. Dies may well have cooked his political goose. Mrs. Roosevelt may drop in casually on the Dies committee room, but it is a long way from there to the White House just the same.