

# Why France Wants to Abolish Its "LAND of the LIVING DEAD"

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the second of a series of six articles dealing with the history of, and conditions in, the famous French penal colony in Guiana. The series is especially timely in view of Premier Blum's present efforts to abolish the colony.

PARIS.

**A**LBERT BLANC, 25 years old stands before the bar of justice in a provincial French court. He is guilty of stealing a bicycle. There's no doubt of that. The case is clear. The judge condemns him. There's nothing else to do.

Albert, a simple, adenoidal youth, has been in trouble with the law before. This affair makes, in fact, his seventh. Five were insignificant. Once he got four months. This time he gets four months, again.

In sentencing him, the judge sentences him for life—and, almost inevitably, to death.

Life imprisonment in Guiana will probably not mean long imprisonment for Albert, because if he follows the example of the average prisoner there, he will die in four years.

Albert is caught in the meshes of the Law of May 27, 1885, defining "relegation." The first article of this law announces that "relegation" shall consist of internment in perpetuity in the territory of the colonies. It goes on to describe what relegated persons are.

Relegated persons are those who in 10 years have been twice condemned to forced labor, or once to forced labor and twice to imprisonment for theft or crime, or to four jail terms of more than three months, or to seven terms of which two were for more than three months.

Since Albert is between 21 and 60 years of age, the law applies.

So, because inside 10 years Albert stole a bicycle, stole something else equally valuable, and five other times ran counter to the law in minor ways, Albert is doomed to endure the tortures of evil and brutal company, prevalent disease, continuous toil as long as his health will stand it, without hope of ever emerging from this situation, in a strange and terrifying land under a ferocious temperature and a worse than ferocious humidity, until he is dead.

**T**HAT is the remarkable situation which the Popular Front government under Leon Blum made an initial effort to change when, last autumn, it canceled the sailing of the sinister steamship "La Martiniere" from St. Martin de Re with, perhaps, 800 prisoners aboard bound for French Guiana's penal colony.

Albert and the scores like him who were to make up last autumn's shipment are now distributed throughout France in various prisons. Their position is most uncertain. Probably they don't like it. The Blum government may change at any moment, and Albert be belatedly shipped off anyhow to Cayenne.

But if Albert is sensible, he will be happy as long as he stays in France.

In a French prison, he will have a cell to himself at night. In Guiana he will not. There he would be brigaded with other men, most of them older and tougher than himself. They would take what little money he has from him, they would torment him, they would raise the curtains on ideas and passions and even expressions which provincial Albert, for all his swaggering around the market-place as the bad boy of his village, has never heard.

They would infect him, by proximity, with whatever diseases are going in that particular barrack. They might even cut his belly open some night, if Albert is a little rash in his observations, and leave him for the red ants to nibble before he is discovered in the morning and carted off at 5 p. m. to the Bamboos, the local burial ground.

In France, he will be merely a prisoner. In Guiana he would also be an object of contempt. He has neither



*The curious law of "doubling," under which the criminal condemned to five years in Guiana must remain there ten, and the man condemned to eight years never comes back.*

killed a man, robbed a bank, nor committed any other important crime. He has merely stolen a few chickens, a hundred francs or so, and a bicycle. He would be a pariah.

**JURIES** try only criminal cases in France. French jurors know that when they condemn a man to five years of hard labor, they are actually condemning him to 10.

That when they condemn a man to eight years or more, they are actually condemning him for life.

That is the curious law of "doubling."

It works out that if a man is condemned to pay for a crime by five years' servitude, he must do so in the Guiana penal colony. When he goes there and works out his time, he is not allowed to return to France at the end of it, but is obliged to remain in Guiana five years more, during which time the state washes its hands of him.

While he was a convict, France fed him, took care of him in hospital (if his fever was more than 104 degrees), gave him, in a manner of speaking, work. At the end of that time, France leaves him on his own to sink or swim—but always in Guiana, where swimming is hazardous because of the sharks.

If a French jury condemns a criminal to eight years' hard labor, he never comes home again. He works out his eight years, at the expense of and for the benefit of, the state; and then he remains in Guiana for life.

To be sure, the law provides that at the end of his term, a criminal is entitled to a "concession" in French Guiana, which he can work, exploit, profit from.

It is a fine compensation on paper. In practice it isn't so good.

"Why?" demanded Albert Londres in his volume, "Au Bagne." "Because the concessions are the baloney. They number seven or eight."

Londres' book was written in 1924. That year there were 2448 "liberes," or freed men in Guiana. Of those, seven or eight had been able to take up and

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keep concessions.

Conditions have changed a little for the better since then. But the abysmal fact remains that most of the freed men of French Guiana are beggars and worse. Unable to return to France, where there might be work for them, they are obliged to remain in the colony, where there is little or none.

Convicts, who, because of special attainments, such as capacity to do accounting, or an aptitude for laboratory work, have been kept busy—and thus, undemoralized—during their sentence cannot continue in those posts once they are free.

"We can steal—or starve," they told Albert Londres. Homeless, they haunt Cayenne. They sleep in the streets. They eat what falls to their hands, like the dogs that fed from the rich man's table, except that there isn't any rich man. They are pariahs; for a crime which a jury evaluated at a price they have already paid in full.

**H**EAR the story of Hespel, Isidore Hespel, French Protestant, lover and hater of his fellow man, eternal firebrand, eternal solace for broken souls.

When Hespel first burst on the attention of metropolitan France, he was a prisoner in solitary confinement in the death-house in Cayenne.

He was not there for the crime for which he came to the penal colony. According to his own statement, he had been sent to the "Bagne" because he threw a trouser button at his commanding officer, a colonel in Africa.

"I am now maintained in this cell," he explained, "because of a murder which I committed upon the person of a certain convict called Lanoe, who wanted to poison me and who assassinated the mother who gave him birth."

The problem which faced the administration was that Hespel, a criminal, merited death. But for several years Hespel had been the executioner of the penal colony.

There was a curious tenderness about the way Executioner Hespel performed his grisly functions with the guillotine.

Each time he laid a man's head on the block, for the tri-cornered knife to sever from the body, he seized the man's ear.

To it he clung fast while the knife descended. No head, during Hespel's tenancy, ever groveled in the dust, ever rolled in ignominious beefiness about the scaffold. Hespel held it firm, and then carefully lifted it into the regulation basket.

To the end, Hespel expected an acquittal. He had slain a matricide—a worthy deed, as he saw it.

The Guiana court thought otherwise. Hespel was condemned.

To the last, he grumbled. As a special favor, he demanded—since he alone was master of the craft—the right to rig the guillotine by which he himself was executed.

**NEXT WEEK:** The imprisonment and torture of Captain Dreyfus, the thing which made Devil's Island known around the world.