

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

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the third 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 present efforts to abolish the colony.

By Morris Gilbert

PARIS.

**T**WENTY-SEVEN miles out to sea from the town of Cayenne, the capital of French Guiana, lies a small semi-barren rock. It is one of three islands in a meager cluster which goes by the name of "The Islands of Safety." It is called Devil's Island. It is perhaps the most famous island of its size in the world, because of an atrocity which commenced there 41 years ago and continued for four years.

"Devil's Island" is the small island on which Captain—later Colonel—Alfred Dreyfus was held by France in solitary confinement, and tortured, on a charge of treason which was unfounded and of which he was later acquitted.

Today, Premier Leon Blum has let it be known that he wants to abolish the whole penal settlement to which French criminals are deported. He has halted the usual shipment of human vermin from the port of St. Martin-de-Re for French Guiana and presented a law wiping out this form of punishment, be-



Benjamin Ullmo (right), the naval officer who sold official secrets and was sentenced to Devil's Island, returning to France after being pardoned. With him is Mlle. Madeleine Poirer, a nurse, who aided him in getting a pardon.

fore the French Chamber.

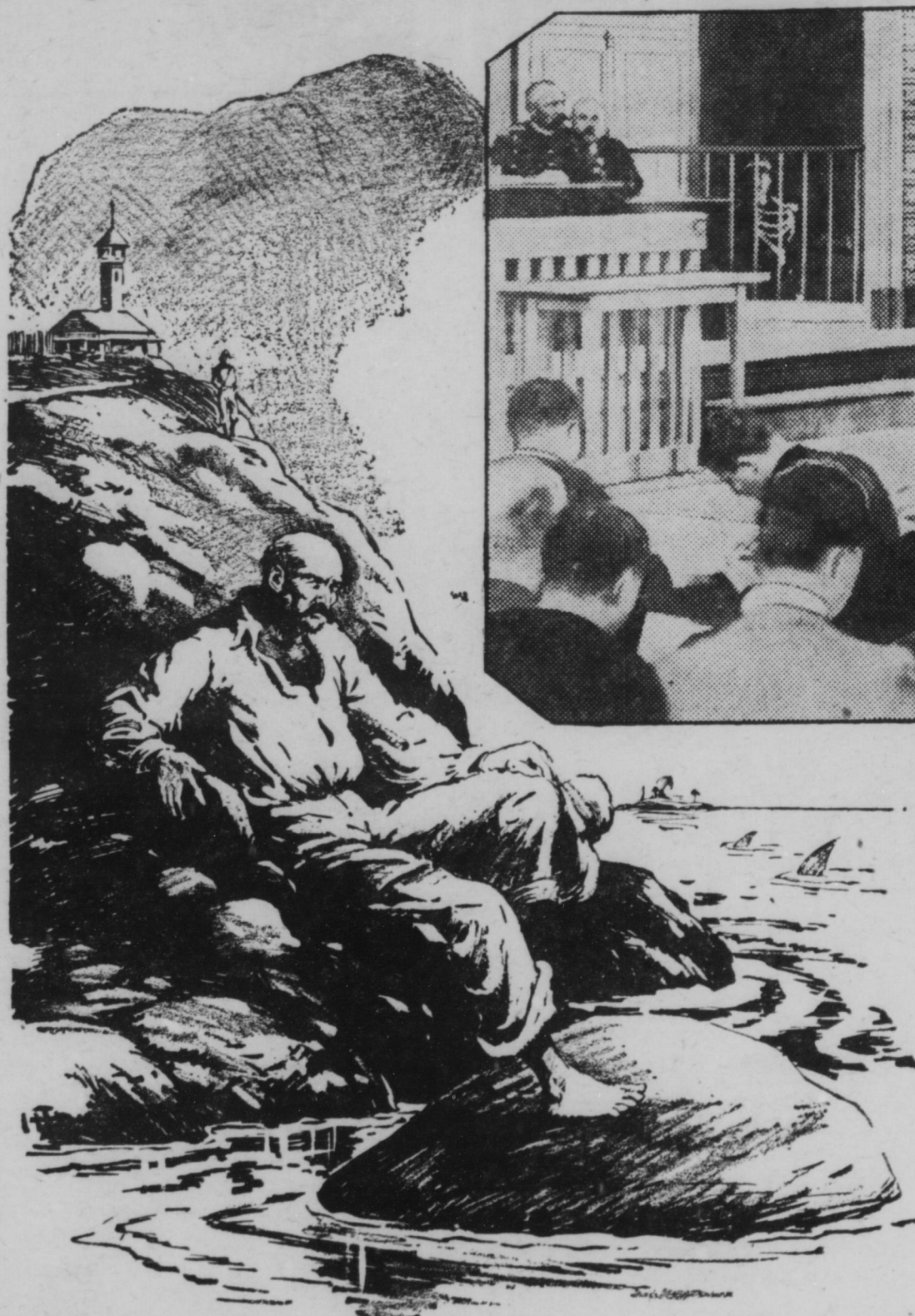
There can be no doubt that Blum, in taking steps to abolish this stain, is motivated by memories of the days when he was in the van of the fight to free Dreyfus.

The memory, in the mind of a loyal defender of a gallant cause, is no doubt poignant. Leon Blum's youth was framed by the famous "Affaire," his political career grew directly out of it. That was because he met Jean Jaures through the Dreyfus case, became his collaborator in journalism, and on Jaures' assassination, at the outbreak of the World War, assumed his mantle as leader of the French Socialist party.

Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, 36 years old, well-to-do Jewish officer in the French army, first set foot on Devil's Island on March 15, 1895. He left it June 9, 1899. He arrived in degradation.

**I**N October of the previous year he had been accused of the most grievous crime a soldier can commit: treason. He was charged with having served Germany as a spy.

The accusation, as has since been established, was a bold effort on the part



Dreyfus used to go to the rocky shore and sit by the shark-infested water for hours, peering to the east as if he could see far-off France, his wife and children.

of certain French officers to shield a certain Esterhazy, an officer of mixed Hungarian and French blood, the actual culprit. The trial itself was a travesty of justice, conviction being based on forged papers not connected with the original accusation, not known to the defense but secretly confided to the military judges. Dreyfus was convicted, publicly dishonored, and exiled to Devil's Island.

He was transported thither in an open cage, subject first to the rigor of the North Atlantic in mid-winter, later to the heat of the tropics. Nobody spoke to him. He spoke to nobody.

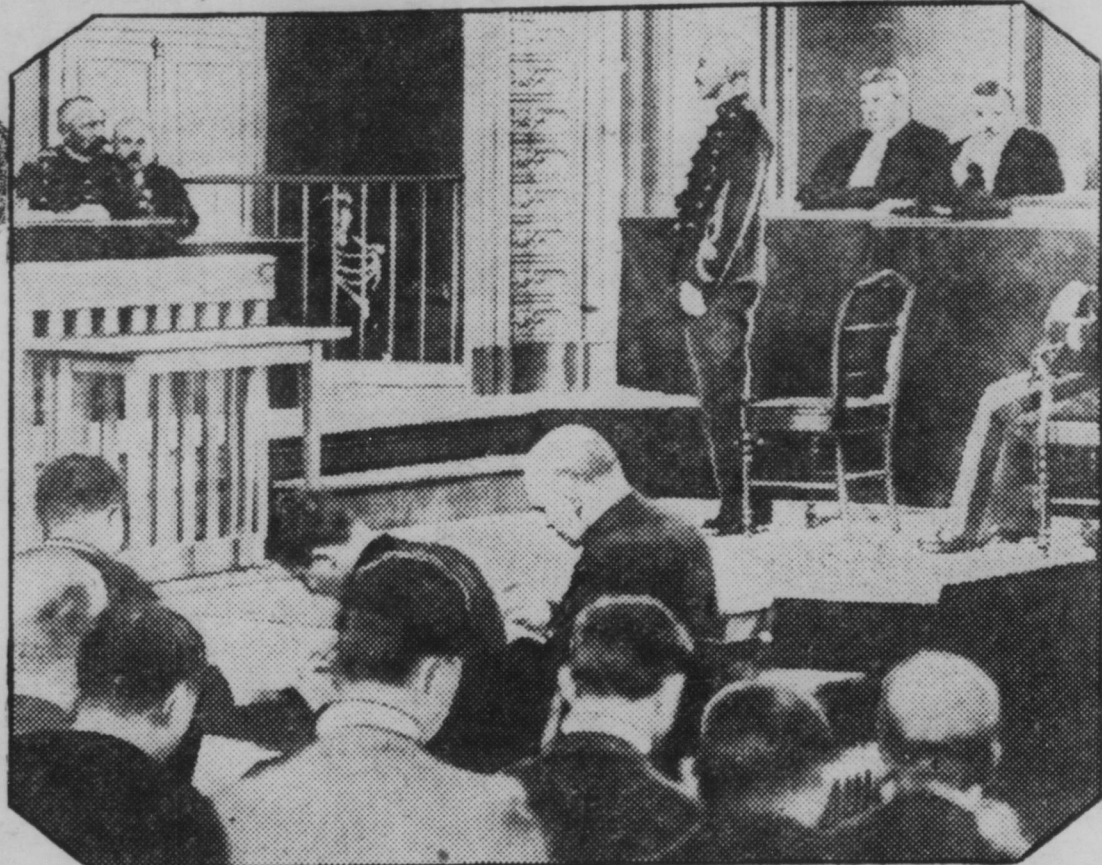
On the day he stepped ashore on the little barren volcanic island, separated from its larger neighbor, Royal Island, by a racing channel, a life of almost unique persecution began.

The regime was one of silence. The guards who watched him day and night spoke not. He was enjoined to speak to no one.

He lived in a shack five yards square, with barred windows, which had been specially built to receive him. It consisted of a single room with a little alcove where, perpetually, a guard equipped with side arms watched.

He was allowed ordinary prison rations, but was obliged to cook the food himself. He took care of himself, too, as far as housekeeping and washing were concerned. At first he was allowed no books, no pen, or paper, or pencil.

**T**HIS was all illegal. By the law under which he was convicted his wife and children should have been allowed to accompany him. They were never allowed to do so.



Dreyfus at his first trial, at which he was convicted of selling military secrets to Germany and was sentenced to Devil's Island.

quickly checked on by cable. Nevertheless the good Lebon considered this the moment to curry favor with his superiors. He cabled orders for Dreyfus to be guarded doubly, to be surrounded by a double palisade, and to be shackled to his bed at night.

**S**O, in the early autumn of 1896 began the torture of the "double buckle."

Two ring-bolts were fastened to either side of Dreyfus' bed at the position of his ankles. A bar, one end of which was hinged to a bolt, the other capable of being fastened with a padlock, was placed between them. Two shackles to fit around his ankles were added. Each night Dreyfus was pinned to this arrangement from nightfall until 5 a. m.

Meanwhile a double palisade was built around his cell. The view of the sea, which had been at first a nightmare, later his only solace, was shut off. He was allowed an hour's walk a day, within his barriers. It was like walking in a treadmill. An armed guard paced by his side.

His lot was made worse by the arrival of a certain Deniel as governor of the islands. This man's name has come down through French records as an inquisitor, a sadist, and a truckler to his superiors. It is chronicled that he detained Dreyfus' mail for months, had letters from Dreyfus' wife copied by ignorant and careless hands, held up the prisoner's rations, and otherwise made life as much of a hell for his victim as possible.

On June 9, 1899, Alfred Dreyfus quitted Devil's Island. He was going home for a retrial. Eventually, after many more sufferings, he was restored to rank and society.

During Dreyfus' imprisonment, the eyes of the world had been focused on that little rocky shore of Devil's Island. After his departure it was to lie empty for years. But presently it was occupied again, this time by the unfortunate Lieut. Benjamin Ullmo, naval officer, also a Jew, who stupidly sought to sell naval secrets because of the avarice of a beautiful girl.

Came the World War. Devil's Island was crammed. The old shanty of Captain Dreyfus—the island, by the way, had originally been used as a leper colony—was surrounded by a dozen more. There were two men to a cabin those days.

Now it is languishing again. The sharks, once so tame because of the food they gleaned there, are pampered no longer.

**NEXT WEEK:** The wooing of "La Belle" and the legend of Dr. Bougras.

His daily ration was brought to him at 10 a. m. Each morning he went to cut wood. He drew water. He washed his clothes, his tableware, which he had been obliged to improvise from tins.

Presently he was allowed writing material and began to keep a diary. Each page of his paper had previously been numbered and initialed by the commissioner in charge. Eventually, his letters, pitifully brave and simple—like Alfred Dreyfus himself—were allowed to go forth, and he received mail from his wife and a few relatives and friends after it had been censored.

He had moments of great physical weakness. The baking sun, the rain, the humidity of that terrible climate; the lack of proper food, the agony of not knowing anything of his fate, of not understanding how his conviction could have come about, all these factors made it almost miraculous that Alfred Dreyfus did not go crazy, or simply die.

It is recorded how his guards would see him go to the shark-infested, dismal shore, facing the sun and France. He would sit there for hours peering into the east, as if he could see that land 4000 miles away where his wife, his infant son and daughter, his brother, his life were.

Worse was in store for Alfred Dreyfus. A certain ambitious young man bearing the ironical name of The Good—Lebon—became Minister for Colonies. The Affaire Dreyfus was beginning to make a stir in France. A few army officers, notably the brilliant and honorable Picquart, not only suspected but knew the truth.

A Welsh daily newspaper printed a false report that Dreyfus had escaped. This was highly implausible and was