

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

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the last of a series of six articles dealing with the history of, and conditions in, the famous French penal colony in Guiana.

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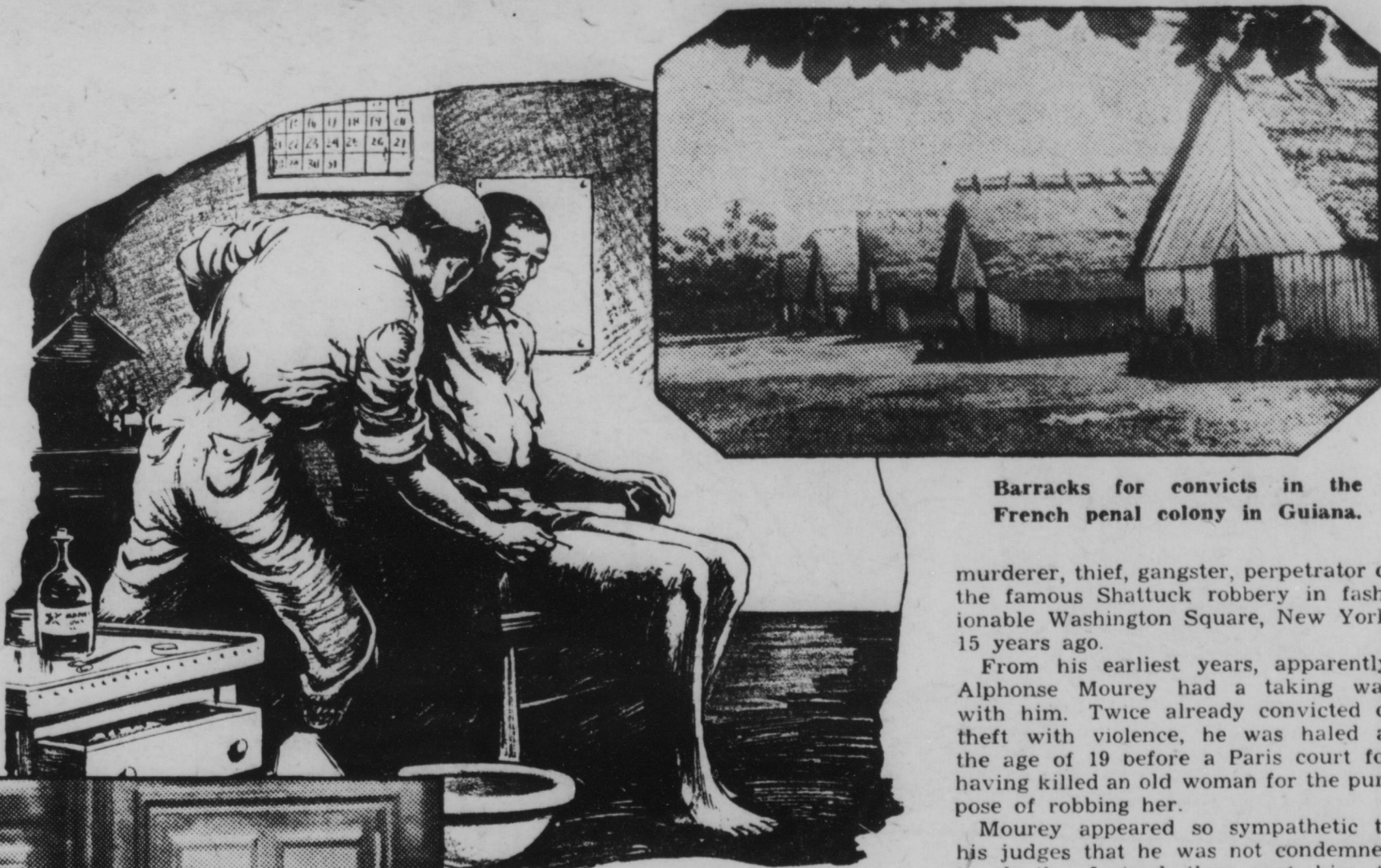
TORTURED souls, enemies of society, cut off from the life of men, the inhabitants of the French penal colony in Guiana, which the government of Leon Blum would abolish, have nothing better to do than escape—or go crazy.

If the "bagne"—the Guiana penal colony—were abolished, crazy tragic pictures like this would not flash on the screen of observation:

A certain Suc, incorrigible rebel against the rules of the "bagne," was in solitary confinement. A keeper brought his lunch, a revolting concoction. Suc suddenly took a knife, slashed off his own toe, and threw it into the mess kit.

"Take that back to the cook and tell him to make stew with it," he yelled.

Tattooing seems to be one of the principal diversions of Guiana convicts. A



Barracks for convicts in the French penal colony in Guiana.

One convict posed as a leper. The doctor, suspicious, jabbed a needle into his leg; the convict never flinched, and was sent to the leper colony—from which, next day, he made his escape.

rate from the convict colony, and where ordinary pioneering, well organized and equipped, might be very profitable.

Here are some recent figures on how forced labor in the convict colony works out.

There are approximately 4500 men paying for their sins against society by forced labor. (The other 1500 or so inmates of the colony are "freed-men," victims of the curious law which provides that a convict, having served his time, must remain in Guiana an equal time again.)

Of these 4500 men about 1500 are "repeaters," men who, having committed a sequence of several more or less petty crimes, find themselves sent to the settlement for life as undesirable.

The whole background of these men, the fact that in France they found themselves unable to get along by work inside the law, indicates that they are not good material for labor.

THAT leaves 3000 criminals as a staff for performing the great public works which Napoleon III envisaged. Of these, there is a regular average of 200 hospitalized from the start. There are approximately 300 cripples. There are 100 or so more who are sickly.

There are 200 more convicts, on an average, in prison, as incorrigibles. There are some 500 more insane or so vicious that they must be kept in solitary confinement. A hundred men are needed for the daily wood supply, since even the locomotives in the penal colony run on wood fuel. Another 100 men have comparatively soft jobs as hospital attendants. The bakers, butchers, cooks, office workers take 150 more. There are that many more servants, working for officials of the colony.

That leaves about 1000 men at liberty to attack the virgin forest, build the roads, make the developments which the colony was originally intended to accomplish. It is easy to see why, in these conditions, Guiana is still unexploited, why the colony imports its food.

What has all this record of agony, this picture of a modern Limbo, got to do with the United States? Why should it interest Americans?

There is a very good reason. Take, for example, one Alphonse Gabriel Mourey,

murderer, thief, gangster, perpetrator of the famous Shattuck robbery in fashionable Washington Square, New York, 15 years ago.

From his earliest years, apparently, Alphonse Mourey had a taking way with him. Twice already convicted of theft with violence, he was haled at the age of 19 before a Paris court for having killed an old woman for the purpose of robbing her.

Mourey appeared so sympathetic to his judges that he was not condemned to death. Instead they sent him to Guiana.

Mourey jumped the wall after about four months of servitude. He didn't get far and was picked up, close to starving, two days later.

He stayed quiet six months, then escaped again. This time, being captured within 48 hours, he got only 15 days of the dark cell.

He tried again, 18 months later, and again was caught. By 1915, he had served his seven years, and was a freed-man, obliged to stay in Guiana seven years more.

BEFORE long he evaded again. This time he evaded for good. He set sail for New York—where, in some way, he got a job as chef in an aristocratic home on Washington Square.

At the home of Albert R. Shattuck, banker, nobody asked for references. Mourey's unflinching charm won him an entry. Mourey was traveling as Henri Boilat, and called himself Swiss, not French, just to be on the safe side. "Monsieur Henri" was one of those "jewels" for whom housekeepers are always looking.

Another kind of jewel presently made "Monsieur Henri" prick up his ears. He learned that gems worth \$24,000 were kept in the house.

Shortly afterward, he disappeared. With him went \$12,000 in diamonds and other precious stones.

For several years he drifted. But he never forgot the Shattucks; and on April 2, 1922, he returned to New York from France with three companions and broke into the house.

They sacked it. In doing so, Mourey thought best to lock the Shattucks and their servants in a cement-walled airless cellar. Old Mr. Shattuck had a pen-knife in his pocket. With this, he managed to remove the lock and save his companions and himself.

Two of Mourey's gang were caught the same day. Mourey made for Texas, crossed the Rio Grande and returned to France—where, at last, he was caught, tried and convicted of the robbery.

Mourey was condemned to death. But that remarkable quality of charm with which he had been blessed all his life worked again. The American banker wrote the President of France to intercede for him. Mourey's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He went back to Guiana and solitary confinement.

Two months and 11 days afterwards, Mourey disappeared. As far as the French authorities can say, he is still at liberty.



Alphonse Gabriel Mourey, who fled from Guiana, got a job as chef in a fashionable New York home, and then robbed his employer of valuable jewels, on trial in Paris after his re-arrest.

reporter entered a barracks where some 50 men were locked each night. Confronted with 50 naked torsos, he was amazed at the prevalence of tattooing. A bald man had tattooed a fine shock of curly hair, with side parting, on his pate. Another was covered with dirty words. Another, of more philosophic temperament, displayed the three sentences:

"The Past deceived me.
"The Present torments me."
"The Future appalls me."

Amazing cases of stibicism develop from the tormenting lust for freedom. The lepers of the Guiana colony live on an island, not far from the free shores of Dutch Guiana; hence they are envied. Their island makes a good hopping-off place for "La Belle"—freedom.

A convict reported to medical authorities with the telltale red blotch of leprosy on his neck. The doctor carefully examined it. It seemed authentic. But Guiana prison doctors are suspicious. Real leprosy deadens the nerve centers, places a barrier between the flesh and the brain.

The doctor suddenly plunged a needle inch-deep into the convict's thigh. The man didn't jump. The doctor was still dissatisfied. As the man was leaving, he jabbed him again. Still no effect.

Twenty-four hours later the convict

had escaped to "Holland."

Between the deaths which ensue from unsuccessful efforts to escape and those caused by the inhuman climate, shipment to the Guiana colony—even in cases where a man is sentenced to as short a time as five years—is almost inevitably a sentence to death.

THERE have been 52,000 convicts shipped to Guiana from France in 70 years. Six thousand of these are still living, including the small number of freed-men who have been able to resist the climate and establish themselves economically there. Of these, according to Charles Pean, Salvation Army worker who is devoting his life to the convict settlement, 5000 were not originally murderers but were convicted of lesser crimes.

"The 'bagne,'" he says, "has killed more men than the men of the 'bagne' have killed."

If there were an economic benefit derivable from the institution of the Guiana convict settlement, there might be some justification for it. Actually the colony, instead of fulfilling Napoleon III's dream that it would develop a great territory for France, costs France millions of francs a year. It also hinders the development of those parts of French Guiana which are quite sepa-