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Devil's Island

The Island of the Doomed. By E. G. Ettighoffer. (Hutchinson, 10s. 6d.)

THE case of Alfons Paoli Schwartz has already become notorious; but like many notorious things it is conceivable that it has already been forgotten, except by those whom it touched intimately, those who worked to rectify its injustices, and by Schwartz himself. Schwartz has been called the last of the War victims, and the German Press has often referred to him as the last prisoner of war; but Schwartz in fact was not arrested until after the signing of Armistice, and was then kept a prisoner for twelve years after the signing of the Peace Treaty. The bare facts of Schwartz's life are themselves

unique; and without the addition of a single word of comment they form the fiercest indictment of both international war and hatred and the national pride which breeds them. Schwartz was born of German parents in the year 1886, in the island of Corsica. His father's name was Heinrich Emil Schwartz, his mother's Maria Magdalene Schwartz, *née* Lutz; the son was named Alfons Paoli—Paoli after Paoli Pasquale, the Corsican liberator. Subsequently the Schwartz family returned to Germany. Alfons Paoli grew up, fought for Germany in the War of 1914-1918, and at the cessation of hostilities was a private tutor in Kehl, then under French occupation. The French, examining the list of the citizens of Kehl, observed a combination of names which struck them as unusual: Paoli Schwartz. This Schwartz had, they observed also, been born in Corsica. Wasn't he therefore a Frenchman? And what was a Frenchman doing in the lists of the German civilian population? A warrant was issued for Schwartz's arrest. Schwartz was duly arrested, accused as a shirker, a deserter, a traitor; tried first by petty courts and tribunals, then by more powerful judges, flung from one prison to another, and finally condemned to Devil's Island. He was released after twelve years.

These are the facts; they provide ironical comment on themselves. For here was a man who had committed the heinous international crime of being himself. It amounted to no more or less than this, for Schwartz was an admirable citizen, intelligent, reserved, honourable, obscure, innocuous. While awaiting his trial he was so absolutely certain of his innocence that he never attempted either escape or evasion, violence or abuse. He provided, however, an excellent victim for the fires of international hatred and national justice. It might be said indeed that in Schwartz the whole of Germany's humiliation and sacrifice to France has been embodied and that on Schwartz the whole of France's hatred for her neighbour has been vented. The facts of Schwartz's case provide a fine example of the iniquitous cruelty and vicious rottenness of international feuds and national selfishness.

This is, however, only one aspect of the Schwartz case: there is another, equally important, that forms largely the subject of Mr. Ettighoffer's book. It was not enough that Schwartz should be found guilty of a crime that was not a crime; he must be condemned also to Devil's Island, and *The Island of the Doomed* is largely an account of Schwartz's twelve years of confinement there. It is said that there has never yet been a reliable and authentic account of life in the notorious penal settlement on Guiana. I do not doubt it. For who ever returns from Guiana to write one? Or who, if he does return, can be reckoned upon for his sobriety, sympathy, reticence, and impartiality? "According to official French statistics, in the eight years 1920 to 1927 inclusive, exactly 3,393 *transportés* died in the penal colony, in addition to 917 *reliques* and three exiles. And then there are 500 to 600 yearly who try to escape. Of these, only on an average 150 are brought back." This, then, rather diminishes the numbers of those who are likely to write first-hand accounts. Nor does the Island breed geniuses; it is hardly chosen for that purpose. It seems therefore as though we must rely on second-hand accounts like Mr. Ettighoffer's, which is indeed as sober, unsensational and convincing as we can expect. He does much to destroy the legendary Devil's Island, which films and novels have depicted as a bare rock, scourged by heat and fever; in actuality, the Island "is a tropical island that might have been celebrated for its beauty." The prisoners are, contrary to popular belief, free within the boundaries of the island; they are allowed gardens; Schwartz himself translated Epictetus and some German poems into Esperanto, collected beetles and plants, wrote a little monograph on the *flora* and *fauna* of the island, and translated it into five languages, all in addition to tending his garden. Yet this very freedom only intensifies the cruelty of isolation and solitude, the lack of outside news and contact, the absence of female companionship and normal sexual relations. Yes; there is freedom. There are also words with which to describe the system which can tolerate the existence of such a penal settlement and the foul prison-ship which supplies it with men. But, unfortunately, they are words which cannot be printed on this page.

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