

# "SENTIMENTAL DOMAIN"

## Island of Mauritius, Scene of "Paul et Virginie," Seeks Return to French Control

**T**HE cabled news from the Peace Conference has told nothing of the nationalistic movement in the little half-forgotten island in the Indian Ocean known as Mauritius. But the movement there is something new in the realm of international complications. The inhabitants have asked to be restored by the British Empire to France and the French are anxious to have the island back because it is the scene of "Paul et Virginie," published in 1787, by Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. The islanders have a new claim in that they say they belong to the "domaine sentimental" of France.

Mauritius since 1810 has been a British colony. Before that for a century it had been French and known as Ile de France. The name it now bears is in honor of the Dutch Maurice, given to it by his faithful subjects in the seventeenth century. It was, however, discovered by the Portuguese. It has thus passed through the cycle of colonization and exploitation. And now a committee of delegates in Paris has addressed a double memorial to Clemenceau and Lloyd George saying that they wish to return to the French family.

And here again is a new note. For the Mauritians have not drawn up a bill of complaints against England nor organized a Mauritian Sinn Fein. On the contrary, they say that they have only gratitude and respect for Great Britain for her generous treatment of them and their island.

Objections to this transfer there would certainly be. The government of a century is not easily switched. And under the English, who understand better than any other nation how to govern colonies (since the lesson of 1776), the island has prospered steadily. The most striking feature of the development has been the great influx of East Indians where there were formerly only French settlers and their black slaves. Now the white inhabitants, descendants mostly of the French colonists, number between 70,000 and 80,000, while the Indians are four times their number and have got into control of most of the business of the capital, Port-Louis. But the old French families, who have gone on with their own language, laws and customs, thanks to the kindly British rule, still consider the island as theirs and not the Hindoos'.

At once, after the signing of the armistice, a demonstration was held before the French Consulate in the capital, where the chief speakers demanded that the island be turned back to France, and in January of last year a banquet was held at the City Hall in honor of France, where the chief object of interest was a statue of the immortal lovers, Paul and Virginia, the work of the Mauritian sculptor, Prosper d'Epinay, draped in the tricolor of France. The guests at the banquet sang the "Marseillaise," which was taken up by the crowds outside. After the banquet a delegation was named to take up the matter of the transfer with the British and French Governments, and this commission, headed by Dr. Joseph Rivière, has been active in propaganda at home and in France.

The French writer Alberic Cahuet in L'Illustration puts the case for the French Mauritians as follows:

"The élite of the population of the

Island of Mauritius is made up of the descendants of the former French colonists, having piously preserved the integrity of their souls and their national culture and who, in spite of all the immigration, have remained the exclusive possessors of the soil and the agricultural riches. In vain has been the influx of indigenous races—negroes, Hindus, Mongols, and Arabs—which has swelled the figure of the general population. The little primitive kernel, 70,000 to 80,000 inhabitants in 375,000, has kept its preponderance.

In this island, where floats the British flag, every newcomer is made French automatically, even to the English functionaries sent from the metropolis and obliged to learn French to make themselves understood. The situation of the Mauritians has been not less paradoxical. British subjects in their island, they are treated as foreigners in the other British possessions because they speak only French. If the Island of Mauritius again became French it would be joined to Bourbon (the island of Réunion), its twin sister, and would complete the group of the Mascareignes. Its supplies would come naturally from Madagascar, 500 miles west of Mauritius. It would not constitute a burden upon our country, because, since sugar

cane was introduced there from Batavia in the seventeenth century, it has become one of the most flourishing sugar colonies."

When he was getting along toward the middle years of his life Bernardin de Saint-Pierre took up the pen which was to bring him a great reward in fame and fortune. He wrote in addition to an account of an earlier voyage to Mauritius, the first of his "Studies of Nature." These at once brought him into prominence. He got a pension from the King and settled down in a suburb of Paris. He married and was happy. He had two children, a boy and a girl, and their names were, of course, Paul and Virginia.

But he was still in search of a Utopia. He discussed the matter with Rousseau. He looked to the Sea of Aral in Central Asia, to the Amazon and elsewhere as possible sites for a colony of supremely happy men and women. Finally he turned to the island in the Indian Ocean which he knew, and instead of working out his Utopia in reality built it in his imagination. He worked over and over the subject-matter of the book and the result was a polished gem of literature, a classic of his language.

The little book appeared just on the eve of the Revolution. It hit the public fancy exactly. Here was something entirely new—a love story full of the last word in the new philosophy and a scene in a faraway and magically pictured island. The book was an immediate, enormous success.

Since that time "Paul and Virginia" has been translated into all languages. It is still read everywhere. A few years ago an opera was made from it, with the music by Massé, and it was popular in Paris. The story of Paul and Virginia made them immortal lovers of a peculiar kind—not Romeo and Juliet, not Dante and Beatrice, but something entirely original.

And so if in the remapping of the world it should happen that the Island of Mauritius should disappear from the large expanse of the British Empire, France and the colonists may give thanks to Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who made the island a part of the "sentimental domain" of France.