CHAPTER III

A RECORD OF ESCAPE

AMONG the many curious and often unique souvenirs which I have accumulated during the course of my career, I might almost give pride of place to the actual record, set down by a French convict, of his escape from the penal settlement at Cayenne.

The writer was a man convicted of wilful murder in the early years of the present century. He stoutly maintained his innocence as did his counsel. After his successful escape, his lawyer gave me the manuscript of the autobiographical story of his bid for freedom. For obvious reasons the name of the escaped prisoner cannot be given to the public, but his narrative seems to me to bear every mark of authenticity, and while there is no means of obtaining any corroboration, it is at any rate certain that he *was* a prisoner and that he *did* escape!

The pages of the story dealing with the author's own life, his alleged crime and the prison conditions on Cayenne, were unfortunately lost before the manuscript came into my hands. I can, therefore, only impart to the reader of this book the bare account of the actual escape. This account begins abruptly enough, and is of course at first a little obscure without the immediately preceding pages, but I prefer to give it in its actual fragmentary state rather than attempt to build it up from my own imagination, falsifying fact by the admixture of fiction.

The writer found a good friend in prison with whom he threw in his lot. It is with mention of this friend, Petit Jean, that the fragmentary record starts.

" During his journeys into the interior of the colony, my friend Petit Jean had got into touch with an Indian, and had partly paid for the canoe by carrying the small planks of wood (shingles) which serve as roofing for houses. The Indian sold us the canoe for 150 francs and the transportation of the shingles. This latter my friend had contrived in secret and without the knowledge of the authorities.

We had to find among the convicts we knew men who were courageous and who had a little money. This was pretty difficult, for many would-be fugitives have been betrayed by men who pretended to be ready to join in their attempts to escape.

It was a great problem. Serving a life sentence I had to be particularly cautious, for if I had been caught trying to escape I should have been condemned to two to five years of solitary confinement. If alive at the end of this time I should have been sent to one of the Iles du Salut, from which escape is impossible.

Three months before the time I write of, a law still existed which condemned all convicts undergoing a life sentence to two to five years of the double chain if caught attempting to escape. This punishment consisted in wearing a heavy chain attached to the belt which hung down the length of the leg and finished in a ring attached to the ankle. It made running impossible, and the convict who wore it for a year or two became lame. The convicts complained of this punishment and solitary confinement was substituted. This was much more terrible, for at least seventy-five per cent of the men undergoing it died of scurvy.

After much hesitation my pal, Petit Jean, formerly a lobster fisher in Corsica, and I resolved to take with us a man of about forty, a native of the Drôme. He had been condemned to fifteen years for having tortured many well-to-do people of that Department by burning their feet to make them tell where their money was hidden. We imagined that to do a thing like that he must have had some pluck, but we were mistaken. We also chose a young man of our own age. Each of these two had a little money, and we took with us a third man who had already escaped once and had been caught in France and sent back to Cayenne. He had no money but we counted on his experience.

As my pal Petit Jean had found a man willing to sell him a canoe, all we had to do was to make our final preparations. We bought satchels made of sack-cloth, painted with oil to make them waterproof, and also some of the linen shirts that the Administration provides for the convicts. These were to make a sail. We got a convict blacksmith to make us four large iron bolts and a strong bar which we needed for fixing a rudder on our canoe.

Thread, needles, medicines—chiefly quinine. . . .

When everything was ready the three satchels were entrusted to convicts employed at brick-making, who could smuggle them out of the camp for us and hide them in the bush, the place being agreed on in advance. This was easy for the brick-makers. They went to work in the morning and did not get back till late, so that there was nothing strange about their carrying satchels, supposedly full of the provisions they would need.

It was a walk of three-quarters of an hour to the brick-kiln, the way being along the main road which had been driven through the bush. Our meeting-place was fixed in the bush, opposite the slaughter-house, which was midway between the prison and this brick-kiln.

Tuesday, 14th May 1907 was fixed for our departure.

That morning I asked permission of my chief to go to a Chinese

grocer in the village who bought two loaves of bread from me every day. Permission was given me and, at the Chinaman's, I met the man from the Drôme. We both set out to the meeting-place, where we were to join our three comrades. We had gone about a quarter of the way when we saw one of the military inspectors in the distance. He was coming towards us. The road was built on an embankment. We climbed down into the ditch on the right-hand side; the tide was high and we found ourselves in water to a depth of eighteen inches. We made a detour of at least a hundred yards. . . . It is absolutely impossible to keep a straight course in the bush. Sometimes it is completely impassable and to be able to make one's way a felling-knife must be used—a sort of sabre with a very broad blade, also called a cutlass.

As we had nothing of the sort we had to pick our way across the roots and branches. To make a guiding-mark for myself I would climb a tree from time to time, and when I had discovered the roof of the slaughter-house I would get down and off we would go again in the water and mud. I did this perhaps twenty times. We lost a good deal of time, but we did not dare to take to the road again.

After about four hours' walk, we arrived at the meeting-place. Here the others had been waiting for at least three hours. They thought we had been captured, and that would have put an end to the whole plan, as they had not enough money on them to undertake the journey without us.

Owing to this delay we arrived too late at the rendezvous fixed with the brick-makers, who were to give us our satchels. Our provisions were in one of them—bread toasted in order to preserve it the better, tins of corned beef, preserved milk, etc. We realized that we should have to go thirty-six hours without eating. If we had had a cutlass we could have cut down a certain tree which contains a soft pith, which even when cooked is indigestible enough, but we would have been prepared to eat it raw. We decided to hide ourselves in the bush and to pass the night on the branch of a tree.

The next day we set out on a road of firm earth about a yard wide. After walking about a hundred yards down this road we should have arrived at the path which we were to take. This path was cleared through the bush. It was about a yard wide, but, being very near the river—the Maroni—it was more than three feet under water when the tide was high. To make walking possible, two pieces of wood had been planted every five yards. On the cross-shaped wood tree-trunks about as thick as telegraph-

poles were resting and one walked on these supporting oneself with a long stick. One needed to be a bit of an acrobat, for the tree-trunks swung to and fro. The telegraph wires run along the side of this path and it is inspected every day by a convict telegraphist. The job is only given to those who have received short sentence and are nearly at the end of their term.

We were a hundred yards from this path when we suddenly caught sight of one of the military inspectors whom we all knew as a famous man-hunter. During his off-time he devoted himself to hunting fugitives so as to gain the rewards and also to get promotion. It was said of him that he shot before giving the customary three challenges. If the convict was killed, he always said that the three challenges had not been heeded, or that the man had resisted arrest. He must have had the deaths of many men on his conscience—twenty, fifty, I don't know how many. As soon as he saw us he put his rifle to his shoulder and we heard two shots. Luckily none of us was hit.

If this meeting had taken place on the path and we had had to jump into the water and then wade through mud before we could reach the bush I should not have been alive to write this to-day.

We had all five resolved to die sooner than be captured. Of the five, three were sincere.

We got into the bush. Luckily it was not too thick for us at that point. We ran as hard as we could. I remember I fell; I got up and again I fell. And so on the whole way.

Trees in the country have roots that stick out of the ground. How long did we run like this? I don't remember. But at last we were completely exhausted. We were breathless. We panted like hot and exhausted dogs; our legs and hands were covered with wounds.

I do not know whether the man-hunter pursued us into the bush, as I never looked behind me as I ran. I do not think he did for he was some distance off and before he reached the place where we were when we first saw him we were probably lost to sight. But this is simple supposition.

When we had recovered our breath we went on walking. We were lost in the bush but we were going in the right direction. My friend Petit Jean knew the times of the tides and, by the current of a stream that we passed, he was able to tell us that if we followed it upwards we should arrive at the path. Night came. We found a dry place and decided to stay there in the company of the mosquitoes. We were soaked and very muddy and the nights in Guiana are rather cool.

At dawn the next day we started off again and, after much wandering backwards and forwards, we arrived at last at the path—the only road which would bring us to the man who had promised to sell us the canoe.

As we were walking along, searching for a place to spend the day in hiding, a convict appeared. He had been hidden in the bush for two months with a comrade wounded in the leg. The latter had been shot by the Inspector we had encountered the day before. The man we met had managed to escape, helping his wounded comrade. The other two of the party had been killed—at any rate they had fallen and had not been able to get up. These two remained in the bush, living on fruit and on animals which they trapped. They hoped to be able to join another escaping-party, though they were both without money.

He conducted us to his *carbet*, a hut constructed with the branches of trees, roofed with big leaves—mangrove-leaves, I think. The wounded man's leg was quite black and the wound was suppurating.

After we had talked it over, we promised to take them with us, but, as we had not much money to buy food, we told them that we would drop them in British Guiana, so that the sick man could be taken to hospital.

As we had to wait until ten o'clock before we could go to the brick-makers' rendezvous, the sick man's friend proposed to go to the village, which was about an hour's walk away, to buy a little bread and some salt fish. I gave him three francs, and he went off. It was a big risk to go to the village in broad daylight but he was full of enthusiasm, for with the three francs he could also buy quinine and boric acid for his friend.

The behaviour of this man was sublime. He had never left his friend and he risked capture when he went to the village in broad daylight. More especially, considering he had our promise to take him with us in our canoe. His filthy clothes and his two-months' beard would have given him away to the first man-hunter, civil or military, whom he met. But he went off all the same.

He had been gone for about an hour when he returned, out of breath. He had seen in the distance a military inspector accompanied by two liberated convicts, who were hunting for us.

As soon as he saw them, he turned back and ran as hard as his legs could carry him to warn us.

We left the sick man in the hut. It was quite impossible to take him with us, as he was suffering too much pain. A stretcher would have been necessary, and with a stretcher we could not

have moved in the bush. He knew it himself, and told us, " Leave me, leave me, save yourselves."

We ran, as we had done the day before. And, as we ran, we reminded each other that we must keep together. After zig-zagging many times so that our tracks should be lost we decided to climb a tree and to wait there for some hours. We took great care not to break any of the branches.

We heard voices and then the noise of a motor-boat on the river. Probably there were dogs in the boat. Dogs cannot walk on the track, and the men who were hunting us had certainly joined the men in the motor-boat at the point where the creek cuts across the path.

When we realized that there were dogs among the party we knew that we could not stay in the tree. We should certainly have been caught. There was a big swamp about fifty yards away and we decided to get into the water in order to put the dogs off the scent. It was the only thing to do. There was no wind. We sank in up to our necks. It was just about noon.

It was growing dark when the noise of the motor-boat, which had stopped, began again. We had barely time to get to dry land before darkness fell. In that country it is quite dark in a quarter of an hour, and walking when there is no moon is not to be thought of.

The swamp was big and, as we did not know where we were and were utterly tired out, the only thing to do was to remain on the spot. It was a feast for the mosquitoes. Ah, those mosquitoes!

We lay back to back. Like that, we sometimes had a few minutes' sleep. Then the mosquitoes would wake us up again. However, we were all happy. We were certain that the motor-boat had gone off, because we had heard the noise of its engine dying away in the distance.

At daybreak we started off again, and after a time we found the place where the hut had been. It was destroyed, the wounded man had been taken, and we found the traces of dogs.

Our new companion went to visit his traps He found a lizard (an iguana) and, as our matches were wet, we ate it raw.

That evening, we went to get our satchels. The one containing the provisions had disappeared—stolen, they told us. We did not ask for explanations; we continued on our way. We had cutlasses and, by using them, we could eat cabbage-palms, which I have already mentioned. Provisions did not matter so long as we had the tools necessary for our escape.

We were near a village. Our new companion would have been obliged to fetch provisions had we asked him, afraid that if he

had refused we should have declined to take him with us. But we asked nothing of him; we were in too dangerous a locality. There was no time to lose; we had to get away—far, far . . .

We arrived at the creek which we had to cross. It was about two hundred yards wide. In that country there is a species of floating wood called *canne à feu*. To support the six of us, we had to make a raft with a draught of nine feet. In spite of that, it sank twenty centimetres under water, for the wood is heavy. We clung to it, and swam with our legs to push it along. The two satchels, containing two blankets and the shirts to make a sail, were soaked. But we had put our matches inside a well-corked bottle.

Arrived on the other bank, we had to tramp along the path. We took it by turns to carry a satchel. We did not want to waste time in letting the things dry. I was weak from hunger. I stumbled often—and there satchel and I were, in the mud. My comrades too fell again and again. We were in a hurry to get to the Indian who had sold us the canoe, for we knew we should be able to buy some food from him. This journey lasted four days. We met some convict telegraphists on the way, and they sold us some pieces of bread.

In all, we crossed five creeks, and on the bank of one we came upon a camp of Arabs, freed convicts, who were making charcoal. We understood by their gestures that they were arguing whether or no they should arrest us and claim the reward. There were seven or eight of them, but they were not armed, whilst we had between us three cutlasses, which we had in our hands, ready to cut the *cannes à feu*, in order to make a raft to cross the creek.

We went forward to meet them, all six of us, without giving them time to arm themselves, and we told them that, if they tried to arrest us, we would defend our liberty dearly.

They understood, and their attitude changed at once. If we had not frightened them, they would have got their guns and arrested us.

Whilst three of us busied ourselves cutting *cannes à feu*, others looked for creepers to tie the canes up. But, fearing that the Arabs had changed their minds, we constructed the raft so badly that it was nearly wrecked. Two amongst us could not swim, and the raft was breaking down on one side. Those of the party who could swim would have saved themselves but, if our satchels were lost, it was good-bye to liberty. For my part I would not have let myself be taken.

It seems these creeks that we crossed propelling the rafts with

our legs, are full of crocodiles. I never saw any, but it seems that there are a great number.

When we had arrived at the Indian's hut, we handed him our whole fortune, excepting about a dozen francs, and he went to the village to fetch the canoe and provisions.

He came back next day with an old worm-eaten canoe about thirty feet long by five feet wide—a canoe which doubtless had been stolen and which seemed to have been submerged, who knows for how long? To judge by its size it was a cargo canoe. The quantity of provisions represented about a quarter of the money which had been given to him.

We had been robbed once more, but that did not astonish us. But because he had behaved like this we lost all confidence in him and, instead of making our canoe more seaworthy, we resolved to set out just as we were, fearing that he would denounce us to his compatriots. We proposed to land in Dutch Guiana by paddling there. We were in very bad condition to cross the Maroni River. We had a wooden cask, which had held cement and which served as a water-keg. When we made a landing on one occasion this keg was upset; the waves being high and the keg not being fastened securely in the canoe, the water was spilt, excepting a few litres, which served us to cook the rice we had with us. It went sour afterwards, but we ate it all the same.

It was a very old canoe, much too big and worm-eaten. It was extremely dangerous to embark on it at all, for it was full of holes. To stop them up we stuffed rags from our shirts into them. But there was nothing else to be done. We had to embark. If we had gone into the interior we should have been lost and should have had little chance of finding a village, while as to walking along the bank of the river, there are hundreds of kilometres to get through which are uninhabited. We started off then but at the first village we sighted, the man we had taken with us for his experience and because he knew how to steer, declared that he would not go on with the voyage in such a rotten canoe. He landed, and so did the man we had found in the bush. Some people are afraid of water. I learnt afterwards from other escaped prisoners that fifteen days later they were back in gaol.

To strengthen the stern of the canoe, we had the idea of spreading a layer of mud twenty centimetres thick over it. We allowed the mud to dry, and it held throughout the whole voyage. If we had not had this idea, on the first day of bad weather one of the planks of the steering-gear would certainly have given way, the water would have rushed in, and that would have been the end.

Three days afterwards our provisions were finished and it was necessary to revictual.

From a distance we saw on the bank a big red brick building which we took for a barracks. We landed some hundreds of yards away and my friend Petit Jean went to reconnoitre. He soon came back and told us that the building was in British Guiana, and that it was a lepers' hospital.

We steered the canoe into a small creek. When they saw us, the lepers came to visit us. The man from the Drôme, who had worked as a shepherd in the United States and spoke a little English, was our interpreter. He asked the sick men, mostly negroes and Indians, if they would have the goodness to give us some provisions so that we might continue on our way.

In no time we had a bag of bread, some bits of meat and cheese and several green bananas, not good eaten raw but good when cooked.

After thanking them a thousand times we put off at once. But the man from the Drôme warned us that it was dangerous to eat the food. Contact with the lepers had infected it. What did that matter? It seems that leprosy takes seven years to declare itself.

A discussion followed, and the man from the Drôme decided to land, as there was a village not far off. He was right, perhaps, for some of our benefactors were in a sad state.

The perpetual sun had exhausted us. I had lost my hat at sea and I covered my head with a piece of the stuff of my shirt. It was ten days since our voyage had begun, and we had eaten food enough perhaps for three days. Three of us were left and only about a quarter of the voyage was accomplished. We had been told: 'When you see mountains on the sea-coast, you will have reached Venezuela. To guide you during the night, you must take the two last stars of the Great Bear as your steering-point. The head of the canoe must point between the two stars.'

This man's departure embarrassed us very much, for the canoe was shipping a great deal of water. We had to bale without stopping, and we arranged that one of us should steer, one bale, and the third sleep.

Our drinking-water was brackish. We had taken it from a creek, the same place where we stopped to make our canoe seaworthy. We three talked over matters, and, when we had patched up the leaks in the layer of mud, we decided to take to the open sea as far as the coast of Venezuela.

We put off from the coast, but the tide was too far out. We were stranded in the mud. We had chosen, without knowing it,

a very dangerous spot. The beach was nearly level for a considerable distance, so that when the tide rose it was followed by huge waves, regular breakers, like the *mascaret* I have seen in the Dordogne. When we saw them, we flung ourselves out on the mud to get our poor old canoe facing the breakers. If they had caught her sideways, she would have been rolled over, and, as she was not very strong, she would have been smashed to bits.

The land was about a kilometre away, and we were too weak to swim so far. At that moment the canoe meant life to us, not only liberty. The breakers reached us. Petit Jean held the canoe by the stern, in order to keep her bow on to the breakers. The other man and I were at either side. She floated. We got in, and began to paddle. In these latitudes, the wind comes always from the open sea and never from the land.

The canoe was heavy. It was large and the coating of mud covered the stern, while in addition we had put in big tree branches at the bottom to make weight, and also so that we might sleep without getting wet.

Owing to our weakness and our rotten paddles we had not gone far before the ebb came, and again we were stranded in the mud. In the hope of finding depth, we all got out and pushed the canoe, which glided some inches. But the effort sent us into a quicksand, up to the chest. We had to make a new effort, holding on to the sides of the canoe, to pull ourselves out.

We repeated this manœuvre over and over again. The sun grilled us, and the canoe made hardly any progress. This went on for three days. We had no water to wash ourselves with. We were covered with mud and, although we were very careful with them, our provisions were decreasing. We had only nine bananas left when we reached the sea. We divided them—three each.

When we tried to cook our bananas we discovered that we still had matches left but that it was impossible to light them. The stuff on which they are struck was completely worn-out. But after all, eating the bananas raw came to much the same in the end; they were perhaps a little more bitter than potatoes.

We ate a banana a day and were three days without food, as we took six days to reach the Trinity Islands which we had tried —without success—to sail past in the open sea so as not to enter the mouths of the Orinoco, where quantities of escaped convicts are lost among the uninhabited islands. The day before we made the islands a flying-fish of about half a pound in weight fell into the canoe. It was devoured—that is the word—raw.

From the sea we saw palm-trees, and thought we would

provision ourselves with cocoa-nuts. We landed; there were no houses. We tried to climb the trees but failed.

People arrived, and we made them understand that we were hungry, very hungry. About twenty people came to stare at us and asked in English: 'You come from Cayenne?' What were we to say? We dared not answer 'Yes,' and shook our heads. We knew that we must make off at once, for if the Police surprised us it would mean our return to gaol.

We showed the people about ten francs and tried to make them understand that we wished to buy provisions if there were a grocery in the neighbourhood. Petit Jean talked, now in French, now in Corsican, now in Italian, which he spoke very well in a Marseilles patois. We had no idea if they understood us, but we heard and understood the word 'Policeman.' We did not wait to hear any more. The canoe was pushed into the water. A black man tried to catch hold of it, but Petit Jean seized a cutlass and the negro let go. We hoisted our sail. There was a fair wind; the open sea was ours. When we looked back we saw two Policemen in uniform making signs to us to return. They called to us in English: 'Come back, come back!'

We had only just escaped gaol and solitary confinement.

Happily, a small boy had given us a cocoa-nut. It was cut into equal shares and the slices divided into three.

There was wind. Out at sea there was too much. We had to take down half the sail. The sea was very rough and we kept on shipping water. This rough sea lasted four hours, but the canoe was going so fast that we began to see the Venezuelan mountains in the distance.

Then the wind dropped and the sea became as smooth as oil. This was about twenty-four hours after we left the Trinity Islands.

The canoe was at a standstill, but we believed that liberty was in sight.

About eight o'clock that night the wind sprang up again. An hour afterwards a storm was on us—thunder, lightning, and rain. The night was pitch-black, without a star. The wind whistled against our mast and was so strong that it gave the canoe a big list. Two of us baled out the water that came in, while Petit Jean steered, and all three of us tried to counterbalance the list. Then a big wave lifted the canoe, and by the light of a flash of lightning we saw the sea a black gulf. Not one of us said a word. All at once we heard a loud noise of waves breaking against rocks. If our course had been on an even keel, we should have tried to tack and make for the open sea, but it was impossible. The

noise of the waves became louder and louder. Petit Jean, who was still at the tiller, said to me: 'Eugène, as soon as we are on the rocks you must jump into the sea and try all you can to prevent the canoe from breaking up.'

The other man was to lower the sail. He could not swim so well as I. Petit Jean himself was to unship the rudder so that it should not be broken, and then he was going to jump into the water to help me with the canoe.

We knew that it was absolutely necessary to preserve our canoe. We might land in a country uninhabited for hundreds of miles, or in a desert or in virgin forest.

But it was a hopeless scheme. I heard the noise the waves made against the rocks and I understood that this time, except for a miracle, we were lost. The lightning showed us the mountains of foam that the waves made. It was all over. Waiting for death, I began to pray. I said the Lord's Prayer and a 'Hail, Mary.' I was convinced that I was about to die, and I found it quite natural. I had no regrets. I thought of nothing. I waited.

A grinding noise under the canoe. The sea—or at least a huge wave—washed over it. Then a second, and a third. We were stupefied. The canoe was full of water and moved in a different way! We were on a shingly beach. The storm had thrown us up on the shore of a little bay, a hundred and fifty yards across.

When we awoke the next day we saw that at each end of the bay were pointed rocks running out to sea.

Our clothes being already soaked we tried to take advantage of the waves in dragging our canoe farther up the beach. It was hard work. We pulled and pulled; we were tormented by fatigue and the longing for sleep.

At last, when we had no fear that the rising tide would take away our boat, we lay down on the beach and slept.

Next morning when I awoke I saw that Petit Jean was not there. I woke up my other comrade and we agreed that he must have gone to explore. It was so—and above the rocks he had found a little path and the tracks of a donkey's hoofs.

He came back joyful. The country was inhabited. We were free.

The first person we met was a Martinique negro. He only spoke patois, but that was enough. We understood when he told us that we were in Venezuela.

Venezuela it was—our promised land.

Our escape took twenty-one days."

. . . . . .

It seems best to let the convict's story end here. Actually, there are in my possession a further five or six hundred words or so of the narrative dealing with the prisoners' reception by the Venezuelan authorities; their detention in an oddly casual sort of prison; their account of themselves as being fishermen shipwrecked in the great storm. But before any indication is given of the manner in which the writer eventually reached France again, the manuscript breaks off—it is a fragment, without beginning or end, and as such I have presented it to my readers, trusting that it will have held for them some of the interest which it aroused in me when first I read it.