

CHAPTER 16

I dedicate this final chapter to all those who, on my arrival in London, requested details of my escape which I dared not give them for fear of compromising a number of good people whom the slightest suspicion of complicity would have exposed to very serious danger.

When I landed on New Caledonian soil after a hundred and twenty days at sea, it was already fourteen months since the frigate *La Danaé* had brought the first convoy of deportees there. Without instruments or tools of any kind, the Parisian workers who had been expelled to this place – a land more featureless, though less green, than the top of a billiard table – had nonetheless managed, using their bare hands, to build a number of dwellings out of tree branches and earth mixed with tufts of grass.

The house in which Olivier Pain and his companion awaited me was built in these inadequate conditions; but, being situated half-way up a hill, at the far end of the Bay of Numbo, it had the great advantage of isolation, thus allowing the three convicts to hatch their plans far from any inquisitive ears, as well as keeping their escape secret for longer after their departure.

The three of us were classified as “big guns” among the deportees, as they say in the navy, and as a result were kept under heavy surveillance. The very day when I disembarked, despite the fact that I was exhausted after four never-ending months at sea spent in steerage where I was constantly ill, I was taken hold of by two guards and placed in the prison on the Peninsula, where I spent twenty-four hours lying with no mattress on a wooden plank – of island wood, which made it all the harder.

One of my fellow-deportees, having protested against this system of colonisation, was sent to prison just after me. The administration could not have done us a greater service. It was in our dungeon that the unshakeable resolve to escape at whatever risk first entered our heads, not leaving them until we ourselves had left. We tossed around several escape plans. The boldest was to have weapons sent to us secretly from Nouméa, then to equip ourselves with fishing tackle, nets and ledger lines, and to set off one fine night by way of the mainland, following the coastline of New Caledonia to the northern tip which is only twenty-five leagues

from the New Hebrides. We would live on fish all along the way, trusting to our revolvers in the event of an attack by Kanaks and swimming past any gendarme posts that might be placed along the shore-line. Once we had reached the tip of the New Caledonian continent, we would buy a dugout canoe from a native and force him, if necessary, to take us to the New Hebrides – a country which, by the way, is inhabited by cannibals quite beyond redemption.

But this remarkably risky plan was to be adopted only in the event that we found it impossible to discover among the captains plying in and out of the port of Nouméa a man generous enough to take us on board his vessel clandestinely. The problem was how to track down such a *rara avis* and, secondly, how to make contact with him. We had noticed a certain fellow-feeling shown towards us by a very decent New Caledonian man, a fruiterer with whom we had struck up an acquaintance as a result of our appetite for somewhat more copious and varied victuals than the manna from on high provided by officialdom. I ventured to make overtures to him.

“I am expecting to receive from France,” I said to him one day, “the sum of fifteen thousand francs. But if the administration gets its hands on it, it will make sure that the money is not paid over to me, for fear that I might use it to bribe the prison guards. So I thought I might have it addressed to you. What do you think?”

“Why do you need fifteen thousand francs?” he asked. “You must be intending to escape.”

“I don’t deny it.”

He agreed quite heartily with my views and offered to deduct a commission of fifteen hundred francs from my bank-draft, money being the heart and soul of any escape, and to look for a determined mariner in Nouméa who would take it upon himself to carry out a triple abduction.

He had hardly embarked on his quest when we had a visit from an ordinary (non-political) deportee who had obtained permission to leave the Isle of Pines and come to live in Nouméa itself. We informed him of our scheme, and he promised to make enquiries on his part, while our friend would reconnoitre down at the harbour. It was he¹ who was first to single out Captain Law; but, in order to convince him of the seriousness of our intentions, he obliged that good coast-sailor to accept in advance the money that would come from the discounted bank-

draft, in return for guaranteeing the passage of the escapees who were entrusting themselves to his honesty. New Caledonia's banks, being established, it seems, on very liberal principles, allowed our friend to have my signature honoured, even though being deprived of my civil and political rights stripped my promissory notes of all commercial value.

Captain Law having accepted the ten thousand francs proposed, eight thousand of them on my word of honour, it still remained to determine the means by which we would reach his ship which was stationed in the harbour showing English colours. For the three non-political deportees, the difficulty was not great since they lived in Nouméa; but for the rest of us, who lived three leagues away in a fortified compound, it was almost insurmountable. To travel along the coast would inevitably mean running head first into a guard-post. To take to the sea and risk three or four hours swimming among the coral reefs with which the bays are teeming and among the sharks that explore them, would result in all of us going under.

So it was vitally necessary that those living in Nouméa should stretch their devotion to duty to the point of coming by boat to meet those who were on the Ducos Peninsula². It was equally necessary that the point at which the first group picked up the second should be far enough away for the latter not to be spotted by the guards on their rounds while they awaited the assistance needed for their embarkation.

But what boat-owner would lend himself to such a scheme? Nothing could be more dangerous than to let a new party in on our plans; so we fixed on the idea of going out by night, without forewarning anyone, and untying one of the little boats moored to the harbour piles. One of our fellow-escapees, who was employed by a food-merchant and delivered provisions to the Ducos Peninsula every day, naturally chose the boat belonging to his employer, an excellent man by the name of Dusser, who was subsequently accused of helping to plan our escape. After several weeks in prison, he was violently expelled from the colony, even though he was completely innocent of any part in our actions. The worst thing that can happen to a man when a plot is being hatched around him, is not being in on it. Having taken no special precautions on the day when the can of worms – which he knows nothing about – is discovered, he is sure to be the first one arrested.

The *P.C.E.*, our ship, was to weigh anchor on Friday the 20th of March, at seven in the morning; consequently, we had to go on board on the Thursday evening, with the prospect of spending the night down in the hold in mortal fear – in the literal sense, since it is probable that if they had been discovered there, not one of the six escapees would have got out alive. The three preceding days were spent by us in a state akin to sleepwalking. We might as well have walked round our thatched huts with a candle in our hand. Finally, on the Thursday morning, there arrived a triumphant letter, addressed by one of the Nouméa plotters to one of his accomplices :

“Dear friend,

I shall send you this evening the *eight* volumes you asked me for last week.”

In Kanak language, the note meant : tonight at eight o’clock is when you are to enter the water and make for the rock from which the boat will pick you up.

We had just finished reading this vitally important message when the food-merchant, of all people, good Dusser himself, as if hoist on his own petard, presented himself in our straw hut accompanied by two natives bent down by the weight of foodstuffs and fine wines. He had come to lunch with us and spend part of the day in our company. The rowing-boat that had brought him was the very one we were to take a few hours later. Once we had left, it would have been hard not to have found him “guilty in fact and law”³ of having supervised our departure. We were unintentionally to have at his expense, not so much a joke as a trip around the world⁴.

In the midst of our meal, which was a very happy one, a dreadful fear came over us. The sky was growing darker and the sea was starting to run high. If M. Dusser decided that, in view of the danger of returning to Nouméa, he would spend the night on the Peninsula, what would become of us? We would not have been able to leave him when the agreed time arrived, and our friends would not have found his boat in the harbour. It was appalling. Fortunately, the weather grew calmer and he was able to get back onto his boat. As the reader can imagine, we were loath to detain him. He bade us farewell, leaving with us a number of still-unopened bottles, and we went with him down to the shore, to be certain that he would get back home.

There was a deportee, more skilful in the culinary art than ourselves, who came every morning to prepare the day’s meals for us. It was essential to keep him away, since we could not let him benefit from our own good fortune. We invented the pretext of being invited to spend the

next day in a hut some distance away, so that “his services would not be required”. We even took our Machiavellian ruse so far as to offer him the bottles that had not been broached, in the unpardonable hope that a few libations might prolong the sleep of this poor companion of ours, who for the last two years had had nothing but brackish water to drink. Then, without any particular show of emotion, we took our leave of those of our fellow-prisoners who had taken part in that morning’s banquet; after which, in order to avoid any further visitations, we left our hut and took refuge amongst the tall grass on the mountain.

At half-past seven every evening, a loud cannon-shot announced the closure of the military canteens. This precaution on the colonial government’s part was the exact signal we had agreed upon. Evening was falling as fast as a stage-curtain. The storm, which had held off since that morning, decided to break. A pitch-black night and no indiscreet appearance of the moon to be feared. We went back to our hut for our final preparations and, feeling our way around, since we feared that to light a lamp might attract a visit from one of our neighbours, we took off our clothes and replaced them with bathing costumes. All the possessions we had brought from Europe were left behind for the guards.

The sea, for which we were heading, was about two hundred and fifty metres from where we lived. We entered the water, having no difficulty in getting over the prison wall which reached down to the shore-line. A guard was on sentry duty, but the lapping of the water masked the splashing of our three bodies. A little further along the route of the guards’ rounds, three sentries were walking and chatting. We remained motionless for a moment, not even daring to breathe. We were unable to hear what the men were saying, but in any case our own silence was far more eloquent.

This danger having been overcome, we struck out to sea and, after what seemed like two hours, we reached the rock which was at that time almost completely covered by the high tide. All three of us had gashed ourselves on the sharp edges of rocks. Olivier Pain, in particular, had quite bad cuts to his legs, of which he remained unaware until later. For the moment, we were standing on this volcanic outcrop, peering out into the darkness and evaluating the sound of any wave that might have been the noise of men rowing. After thirty minutes of more and more desperate waiting, one of the lights shining on Nou Island disappeared as if hidden by something

opaque, then it re-appeared, and soon afterwards the slap of a pair of oars on water could be heard. "It's the boat," I couldn't help shouting – unwisely, as it might have been one of the prison boats on its rounds.

But it was the rescue boat. Olivier Pain jumped into the water and swam out towards our friends so as to indicate our position to them. We followed, and once hoisted aboard the whaler, we threw away our bathing costumes and put on the clothes that had been brought for us. We thought ourselves safe, or nearly so, but when we entered Nouméa harbour and had started looking for the English three-master, we saw coming towards us a craft manned by a number of individuals who seemed highly intoxicated and were laughing loudly. Instead of attempting to avoid them, we steered a course as though we were aiming directly at them. Perhaps they were guards meant to be on watch and anxious to avoid any encounters, as they turned the rudder so they could not be recognised. They missed a wonderful opportunity for an arrest which would have let them off any punishment their escapade might have brought.

After some time spent looking for the *P.C.E.* among the ships lying at anchor, we eventually found her. We tied the boat to her, and in a few strides we were all at the top of the ladder. Our arrival took place during a howling storm, in pouring rain, and with our clothes clinging to our bodies. Captain Law, who was fond of staying out late in the cafés of Nouméa, was not on board, even though we could hear midnight striking from the clocks in the town. The only crewman who was not yet asleep was the cook, whom this nocturnal invasion took greatly by surprise.

"What do you want?" he asked in startled English.

"We want to see Captain Law," answered the only one of the six escapees who had some smattering of that tricky language.

"He's on land."

"When will he be back?"

"I don't know. But at seven tomorrow morning we're heading for Australia."

"We've known that for the last three days."

"Then you had better leave the ship if you don't want to be taken with us."

"Thank you for your excellent advice, but we won't be following it."

Law arrived while this conversation was taking place. He sent the cook off to bed and,

once alone with us, shook hands affectionately with us. He had mentioned nothing to his sailors for fear of gossip. The plan was that we would go deep down into the hold and hide as best we could beneath coils of rope. Only when we were on the high seas would we emerge from this secret dungeon. We were standing gesticulating on the deck listening to the captain's instructions, when he suddenly put a finger to his lips. "Sh!" he said, "don't let yourselves be heard speaking French here. I'm tied up next to a French man-o'war, *la Vire*, which is guarding the harbour. If the officer on watch heard you, he might wonder why you are on my ship, and then all would be lost."

We disappeared into our hiding-place where, despite our anxiety – by now, our escape from the Ducos Peninsula might well have been detected – we managed to sleep thanks to the fatigue brought on by the evening's exertions. At seven the next morning, we were awakened by the sound of the anchor being raised. But the previous night's storm had given way to a dead calm. We could hear the pilot who was to guide us as far as the reefs shouting impatiently at the captain, telling him repeatedly that it was impossible to get through the harbour channels, that he should take in the sails and defer his departure to the next day. We were beginning to blanch. To heighten our anxiety even further, every five minutes a little piece of paper would be dropped through the trapdoor leading down to our refuge. These would read as follows :

"Not a breath of air; we have to wait."

Then :

"I'm insisting on leaving, but the pilot has ordered me to give up any attempt at going out via the normal channel."

And then :

"Nothing new to report."

And later :

"We have decided to leave via the Boulari channel. At the moment we are passing the Ducos Peninsula, with the wind behind us. The breeze is picking up."

These pencilled words threw us into a state of agitation which was at once delightful and cruel. To be sailing a matter of metres from our fortified compound, so close to our former guards who had perhaps just discovered our escape and who could have given the ship, which at that moment was deep inside French waters, orders to stop! But we kept sailing on. After a further hour of increasing hope, we could hear the footsteps of the pilot leaving the ship to get back into his

boat. At last, a final note – and we had never received a more delightful one – came fluttering down to land at our feet. It bore these glorious words :

“We have passed the reefs; you can come up on deck.”

Our friend Captain law feigned great astonishment on seeing us emerge from his ship’s hold. The sailors, in turn, pretended to believe in their captain’s astonishment; and from Nouméa to Australia, in a seven-day crossing, all was for the best in the most successful of escapes.

NOTES

1. I.e. the ordinary (non-political) deportee (*le déporté simple*).

2. *R* “la presqu’île Ducos”. Rochefort constantly refers to it as a peninsula, although it is today referred to as the “île Ducos”, Ducos Island. It is just off the south-west coast of New Caledonia, a short distance north of Noumea.

3. *R* : “Il était difficile qu’on ne le déclarât pas «atteint et convaincu»”. This is a term of the French legal system.

4. *R* : “Nous lui jouions, malgré nous, un tour comme on n’en voit guère, puisque c’était le tour du monde.” It is not possible to reproduce precisely in English the play on words here between “jouer un tour à quelqu’un” (to play a trick on someone) and “le tour du monde” (a trip around the world).