



# PARADIS

HENRI CHARRIÈRE

# *Papillon*

HENRI CHARRIÈRE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
JEAN - PIERRE CASTELNAU

TRANSLATED BY JUNE P. WILSON  
AND WALTER B . MICHAELS



AVON

## **DEDICATION**

To the Venezuelan people,  
to the humble fishermen in the Gulf of Paria,  
to everybody—the intellectuals, the military  
and all the others—who gave me the chance  
to live again,

and to Rita, my wife and dearest friend.

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## INTRODUCTION

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THIS BOOK WOULD PROBABLY NEVER have been written if, in July 1967—one year after the earthquake there—a young man of sixty had not read about Albertine Sarrazin in the Caracas newspapers. This small black diamond of a woman who had been all sparkle, laughter and courage, had just died. She was known all over the world for three books she had written in just over a year, two of them about her *cavales* and her life in prison.

The man's name was Henri Charrière and he had come a long way. From the *bagne* in Cayenne, to be precise, where he'd been sent in 1933. He had lived outside the law, to be sure, but he had been sentenced to life imprisonment for a murder he hadn't committed.

Henri Charrière—called Papillon in the underworld—was born to a family of teachers in Ardèche in 1906. French by birth, he is now Venezuelan. For the people of Venezuela chose to be impressed by his manner and his word rather than by his criminal record, and judged that the thirteen years he had spent struggling to escape from the horrors of the *bagne* were more eloquent of his future than of his past.

In July 1967, Charrière went to the French bookshop in Caracas and bought *L'Astragale*. Until then it had never occurred to him to write a line about his own adventures. He was a man of action who loved life. He had great warmth, a sharp eye and the rich and somewhat gravelly voice of a man from the Midi. You can listen to him for hours because he tells stories like—well, like all the great storytellers. Thus the miracle happened: following the example of Albertine Sarrazin, with no contacts and free of any literary ambition (in his letter to me he said, “Here are my adventures: have a professional write them up”), he wrote the way you tell a story. You see him, you feel him, you live his life, and if it's your bad luck to have to

stop at the bottom of a page just when he's telling you that he's about to go to the toilets (a place that has a multiple and important function in the *bagne*), you find yourself forced to turn the page because it's no longer Charrière who is going there, but you yourself.

Three days after he had finished reading *L'Astragale*, he wrote at: one sitting the first two sections in a student's spiral notebook. He stopped long enough to get some advice about this new adventure—probably more astonishing to him than all the others that had come before; then at the start of 1968 launched into the rest. In two months he had finished all thirteen notebooks.

As with *Albertine*, his manuscript arrived by mail, in September. Charrière was in Paris three weeks later. I had published *Albertine* with Jean-Jacques Pauvert, and that is why Charrière entrusted his book to me.

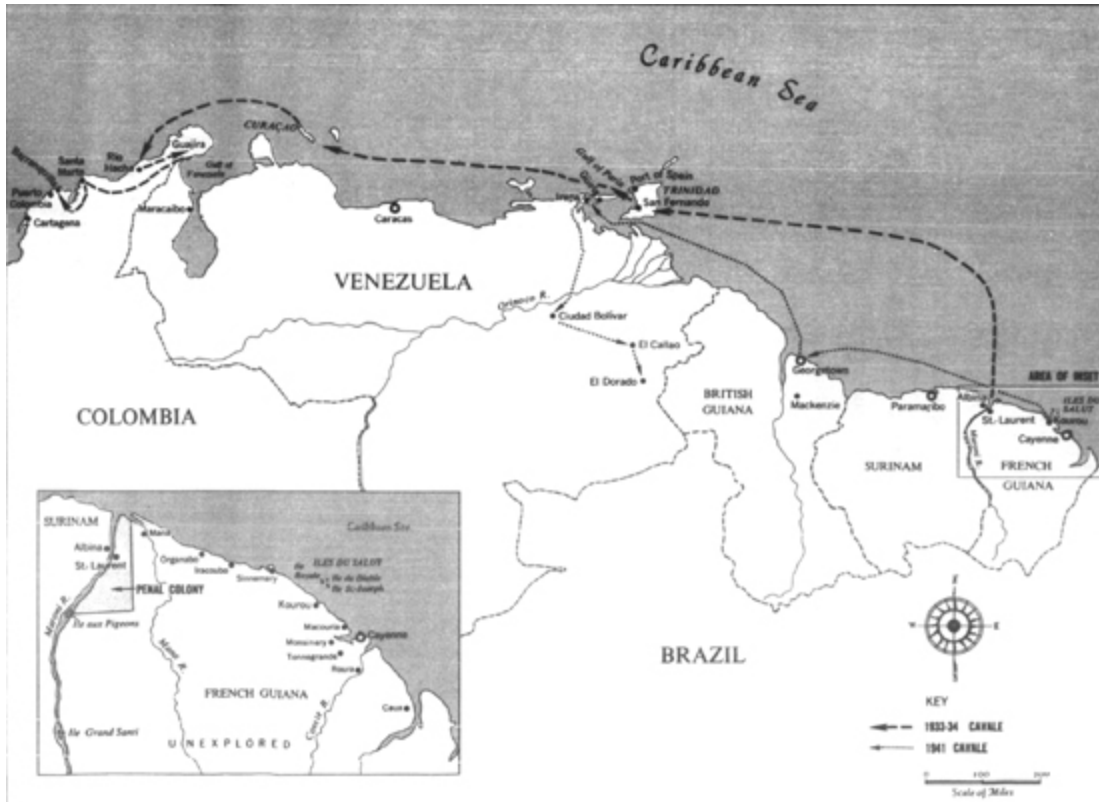
The book was written in the white heat of recollection, then typed by enthusiastic amateurs not too familiar with French, but I altered virtually nothing. I corrected the punctuation here and there, amended a few Spanishisms that were too obscure, and corrected some confusions of meaning and an occasional inversion that stemmed from the fact that the everyday language of Caracas comprises three or four dialects that can only be learned by ear.

As for its authenticity, I can vouch for it. Obviously, after thirty years, some of the details had become blurred and modified by memory. As for the background facts, you need only read Professor Devèze's book entitled *Cayenne* (Juilliard's Collected Archives, 1965) to be convinced that Charrière did not exaggerate either the way of life in the *bagne* or its horror. Quite the opposite.

As a matter of principle, we changed the names of all the *bagnards*, guards and wardens in the penal colonies. The purpose of the book was not to attack individuals but to describe particular types in a particular society. The same holds true for dates: some are precise, others approximate. That seemed enough. It was not Charrière's intention to write a history but to tell a story as he had lived it, to the full, with no holds barred and with complete faith in himself. The result is the extraordinary epic of a man who would not accept the disparity between society's understandable need to protect itself from its criminals, and a system of repression unworthy of a civilized nation.\*

JEAN-PIERRE CASTELNAU

# MAP



## FIRST NOTEBOOK

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# THE DESCENT INTO HELL

### THE ASSIZES

IT WAS A KNOCKOUT BLOW—a punch so overwhelming that I didn't get back on my feet for fourteen years. And to deliver a blow like that, they went to a lot of trouble.

It was the twenty-sixth of October, 1931. At eight o'clock in the morning they let me out of the cell I'd been occupying in the Conciergerie for a year. I was freshly shaved and carefully dressed. My suit was from a good tailor and gave me an air of elegance. A white shirt and pale-blue bow tie added the final touches.

I was twenty-five but looked twenty. The police were a little awed by my gentlemanly appearance and treated me with courtesy. They had even taken off my handcuffs. All six of us, the five policemen and I, were seated on two benches in a bare anteroom of the Palais de Justice de la Seine in Paris. The doors facing us led to the courtroom. Outside the weather was gray.

I was about to be tried for murder. My lawyer, Raymond Hubert, came over to greet me. "They have no real proof," he said. "I'm confident we'll be acquitted." I smiled at that we. He wasn't the defendant. I was. And if anybody went to jail, it wouldn't be him.

A guard appeared and motioned us in. The double doors swung wide and, flanked by four policemen and a sergeant, I entered the enormous room. To soften me up for the blow, everything was blood red: the rugs, the