

SYNOPSIS OF HENRI CHARRIERE'S *PAPILLON*

Papillon is based on the true story of a chap by the name of Henri Charriere. He is known as "Papillon" (French for "butterfly") because of the big tattoo of a butterfly on his chest. In 1931, he fell foul of the police and when he was taken up on the charge of murdering a ponce he was convicted. The perjury of a witness for the prosecution, the thick stupidity of the jury, the utter inhumanity of the prosecuting counsel, and the total injustice of the sentence maddened him, for like many of his friends he had a far more acute sense of justice than is usual in the bourgeois world. What is more, the sentence was appallingly severe—transportation to the penal settlement in French Guiana and imprisonment for life without a hope of remission: and all this at the age of twenty-five. He swore he would not serve it, and he did not serve it. This book is an account of his astonishing escapes from an organization that was nevertheless accustomed to holding on to thousands of very tough and determined man, and of the adventures that were the consequences of his escapes. But it also a furious protest against a society that can use human beings so, that can reduce them to despair and that can for its own convenience shut them up in dim concrete cells with bars only at the top, there to live in total silence upon a starvation diet until they are tamed, driven man or physically destroyed—killed. The horrible, absolutely convincing account of his years in solitary confinement is very deeply moving indeed.

After years on the run, years of being taken and then escaping again even though he was on the 'very dangerous' list, Papillon finally got away from Devil's Island itself, riding over many miles of sea to the mainland on a couple of sacks filled with coconuts. He managed to reach Venezuela, and eventually the Venezuelans gave him his chance, allowing him to become a Venezuelan citizen and to settle down to live in Caracas as quietly as his fantastic vitality would allow.

BIBLIOGRAPHY