

# Why France Wants to Abolish Its "LAND of the LIVING DEAD"



Five convicts from Devil's Island who escaped by sea to Trinidad, photographed resting on their small boat. Convicts who reach Trinidad may remain there for a time, and then are permitted to push on to any other destination they select.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the fourth of a series of six articles dealing with the history of, and conditions in, the famous French penal colony in Guiana.

PARIS.

**D**EEP in their fevered hearts and grievance-ridden brains, 5000 convicts in France's penal colony ponder something which they fantastically call "La Belle"—the Beautiful.

"La Belle" is not a pretty girl. "La Belle" is not wealth or position. "La Belle" is, simply and solely, escape. Escape from jail, but, most of all, escape from hopelessness. Escape from the deadening limbo of the penal colony.

There is little or no prevention of escape. The administration of the "bagnes" blinks. The guards or keepers let it go on. Secret fixers continue to collect the funds—for "La Belle" is not cheap. And convicts by the hundred yearly take the road to liberty, more likely to surrender or recapture, most likely of all to death.

There are three general routes toward freedom from the big convict center at St. Laurent. One is across the Maroni river, and thence by land into the heart of the jungle. The Maroni is the boundary between French and Dutch Guiana. Maybe a stout-hearted convict can win through to the Dutch ports, even to British Guiana to the northwest, even to Venezuela, beyond the Orinoco.

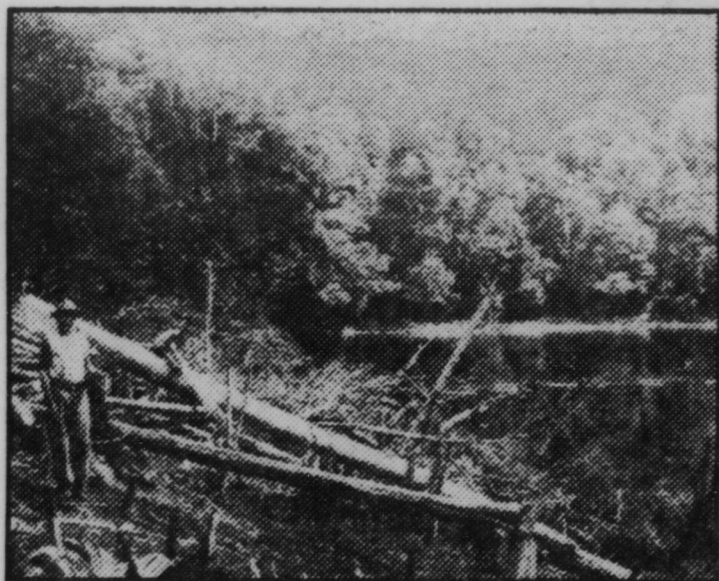
The trouble with this route is the fundamental hazard of the jungle. Beasts are in wait for the traveler. Snakes, even small snakes, can kill him with one thrust at his bare feet. Food is lacking. Fever is always present. Native tribes may be feared.

The overland route is the cruellest of all the cruel ways to freedom. Naked men can thrash about the jungles for a fortnight and suddenly find themselves back where they started. They move counter-clockwise; such is the law. So, often, they move in circles.

By the end of 10 days the memory of the "bagnes" is like a heaven to exhausted, fever-ridden, forest-fogged wanderers. They deliver themselves up with joy. The menace of the glooming

trees and the enemies that they conceal is too much. Hardly anybody finds "La Belle" at the end of a jungle trail.

Not that the other routes are easy. It is calculated that only one man in 10 makes his getaway. The rest perish. They perish hard, by thirst, by sharks, by tempest, by starvation; or they return to try again.



**T**HE second route needs help. And that means money.

A coast trader, sailing his "tapouille" down the meridians to Brazil, may pick up the occupants of a fragile canoe tossing on the Atlantic billows beyond the mouth of the Maroni. He will sail the wanderers down to Para or farther. Then it is a case of looking sharp. If a convict has a trade, he is welcome.

The third and classic route is to Venezuela via Trinidad. This is the normal sea route for small craft because the currents go that way.

By the law of the "bagnes," a prisoner's time is his own from 5 o'clock in the afternoon until 5 in the morning. The tropic sundown comes sharp at 6.

A group of convicts lounges down the village path at nightfall. A guard on duty gazes the other way. Probably he has been fixed.

Presently a tiny craft forges out into the great river from an obscure clump of bankside brush and begins to drift



Many are the risks of the sea route of escape, and many lose their lives in the attempt. The map shows the best route for such ventures.

Most dangerous way of escape is via the "bush" and alligator-infested river of the Guiana jungle, as this photograph hints.

downstream. Only a helmsman is visible from shore, the innocent figure of a Chinaman, a native black, or some other lawful individual. The bulwarks hide whatever cargo the boat contains, crouching men, a meager store of food.

Fugitives, reaching the mouth of the Maroni, may lie hidden for a few days to mystify or exhaust pursuit. Sooner or later, however, they must broach the sea to make for Trinidad. At sea the hell begins. Thirst, fever, hunger, shattering heat beating on cramped space, and always looming the terrible might of the sea in storm.

Innocent citizens of Trinidad, going their peaceful ways under a slumbrous moon, sometimes come upon a broken-ribbed boat stranded on their beaches, filled with skeletons. Sometimes the skeletons are alive, barely alive. If so, they are lucky and will, for a few days or weeks, be luckier still, for Trinidad is more or less like a temporary garden of Eden for fugitives from Cayenne.

police fire them back again.

Maybe the news hasn't reached the Maroni yet that Venezuela doesn't give a man the chance to become a rich, respected, gaudy resident, like the fabulous Dr. Bougras.

This Marseilles physician had been sentenced to the "bagnes" for the murder of a long-time friend. He escaped to Venezuela.

Soon people in France learned of Dr. Bougras' escape and, what was more astonishing, of his appointment as physician to the late Dictator Gomez. He was lolling in influence, they heard, and the medical profession in Caracas was his debtor, his worshiper.

The fact of the matter is that Venezuela has an excellent medical school in Caracas, that nobody in the country practices medicine without its permission, and that Dr. Bougras was relegated to a tiny village on a small pearl island, where he earns a modest living.

But for years to come, despite the facts, Dr. Bougras will live in the annals of the French penal colony as the man who has most brilliantly wooed and won "La Belle"—that illusive, coy, and fatal demoiselle called Liberty.

**NEXT WEEK:** The tragic story of "Mandra" and of the evil Rousseng.