

PART III

CHAPTER XXIV

8TH COMPANY, 1ST BATTALION

SIDI-BEL-ABBÈS, the city of the Foreign Legion, lies eighty miles from Oran—eighty thousand miles from the fringe of any civilisation that prescribes honest dealing between man and man.

For here lies the great factory that takes in vice, misery and misfortune—and makes a profit out of them.

Who bothers about the hard life of a légionnaire, the severe punishments, the wretched pay? What troubles the thinker is the fact that France, a civilised western nation, keeps a pawn shop where the miserable pledge their liberty in exchange for a franc and a loaf of bread, paid down with the pawn ticket and a halfpenny a day promised.

The Legion, stripped of its drums, flags, uniforms and high-sounding name, is simply a dirty trick played on the destitute. Yet the city of the Legion, that yellow, perfumed, sunlit city backed by the Thessala Mountains, has a fascination not to be denied; whether it is viewed by night under the great stars of the south, at dawn when the hot blaze of the sun meets the chill wind of the desert, or at dusk when the electric lights are lighting the streets and the palm-lined avenues to the music of the band of the Legion, playing in the Place Sadi Carnot.

Some one has said that to think in the Legion is to go mad. A statement that requires amending

since nearly every one in the Legion is mad—to be there, and since in the Legion, anyhow, there is no time for thoughts.

Opposite the Spahi barracks, the great barracks of the Foreign Legion stand silent as a sphinx from the hour of twelve midnight till the hour of half-past five. Sidi-Bel-Abbès, that town of surprises, slashed across like a hot-cross bun with the four streets leading to the Oran, Maskara, Daya and Tlemcen Gates, Sidi-Bel-Abbès never quite sleeps; the infamous negro village is never quite silent, the expensive hotels never quite closed. But, reflecting the moonlight from its windows on the starlight or the red of dawn, the barracks of the Legion stands silent as an obelisk from the hour of midnight to the hour of day, a monument to men, not dead, but dead asleep.

At half-past five, like the wards of a great infirmary, the dormitories begin to wake up; men detailed for the business are bringing in coffee,—a can for each ward. The reveille sounds from the barracks square, telling the légionnaire that by six he must be on parade in spotless white uniform, blue sash and all, *and* his dormitory—or such part as he is responsible for—left behind him neat and swept.

From six to eleven comes exercise at the double, or Swedish gymnastics, under the blazing African sun—at eleven, soup. Twelve to five are the hours for rifle practice, *corvée* or marching. At five, soup again—after the cleaning of accoutrements and washing of the white uniforms. After that—why, the légionnaire is free to leave the barracks and enjoy himself in the town.

Jean, during the first month or so, used to go to the Place Sadi Carnot of an evening with the men

of his company, stroll about, listen to the Legion's band or sip coffee in one of the small cafés kept by the Arabs for the benefit of themselves and the légionnaires.

Jean had seven hundred francs in his pocket when he joined at Oran, and thereby hangs a tale.

Flung into this new environment, half-stunned by the strangeness of it and the sudden hard work, almost incapable of thought, he yet clung to his money. He who had always been free of hand, almost a spendthrift.

He would stand drinks in the canteen, but that was nothing where a litre of wine cost only a penny, where a franc was a fortune. But even so, after the first fortnight, he ceased to stand drinks, relying entirely on his pay.

The légionnaire receives his pay every five days, every five days he receives twopence halfpenny. Jean managed to make this do.

There was no conscious idea behind this penuriousness, it was just an instinctive clutch on the money that remained to him as a relic of the world he had lost.

When a man has been chased by and has just escaped from a mad bull, he does not regret the pleasant field where he was sitting before the bull made its attack.

It was pretty much the same with Jean. During the first few weeks of his new life his escape from the Law was a fact that cut off the view of the liberty that had been his; behind that great fact everything was vague and small.

His future had been brought to ruin—well, at least he was alive, breathing, free to move, a man amongst men—not a criminal in a gaol.

I have said hard things about the Legion, but

there is at least one good thing to say of it: the criminal who finds a refuge there, though he works hard as any galley slave, is not branded. As the weeks went on the assurance of safety grew stronger and stronger.

Werde, a German with whom he had picked up an acquaintanceship, made this quite clear. No matter what crime, unless confessed murder, a man may have been guilty of, the Legion wipes it out.

"That fact is its chief recruiting officer," said Werde; "that and hunger. Well, what will you have; there is at least something to be said for something in 'his worst of impossible worlds.'"

Werde had been a professor at Königsberg, a man of forty, dry as a stick; a profound mathematician who had become a criminal—and a légionnaire.

Jean's mind at rest and reassured began, after the first month, to cast back, to contemplate and to calculate.

The object around which his thoughts centred was Karan. Karan on the shore of Beljazi as he had seen her last—Karan on the road by the tombs—Karan in the avenue of Serajevo.

A figure fantastic, remote, belonging to another world, yet holding him by multiplex threads—even by desire.

All his troubles had come through Karan.

If he had never painted her, Stein would not have given him the commission to paint the Hauptmarch. If he had not delayed over long with her on Beljazi, the picture of the Baroness would have been finished before Stein left for Berlin.

He told himself this. Brooding on the fact sometimes he tried to find resentment in his mind against Karan—there was none.

She was no longer a person, she was an idea, a dream, a desire unobtainable, and yet he could communicate with her. Herdjiman had said, "Write to me—Dirk Herdjiman, Ragusa, will find me"—and it was quite possible to write and quite safe. He need give no name.

Legionnaire 1763, 8th Company, Battalion No. 1, Foreign Legion, Sidi-Bel-Abbès, was his safe address and would bring him a reply.

Herdjiman would tell her and maybe send him word of her—if she were still at Beljazi.

Herdjiman had said that he would look after her, and something in Jean's mind told him that, this being so, Karan, despite Cavani and his insatiable desire to keep moving, would remain near Herdjiman.

One day he went into a café and wrote the letter, whose postscript ran :

"Above all, tell me about her and if she is still with you."

Then he posted the letter. As he dropped it into the box he felt as though his fingers had touched Karan. The Legion receives its pay every five days, and that evening, owing to its being pay day, the canteen was crowded. Jean, turning in, found Werde, Lacoste, Blanc and Jenez (a Spaniard), all mer of his company and room, seated drinking and smoking by the counter.

He joined them. He was in such good spirits that he forgot his usual abstemiousness and producing a five-franc piece called for more wine.

An hour later, half-drunk, the thought at the bottom of his mind rose to the surface and exhibited itself in speech.

"Come," said he to Werde, "you are a mathematician and a man of the world. How long do you think will a letter take going from here to Ragusa?"

"What letter?" asked Werde.

He was as fuddled as the other, only the drink was tending to make him gloomy and quarrelsome.

"No matter what letter—I asked you a plain question, can't you answer it?"

"*Nom de Nom!*" cried Werde. "What do you take me for? Plain question—I'm not a postman."

The quarrel once started began to blaze. Next moment Werde was lying on the floor.

The noise of the canteen ceased. A ring was formed in expectation of a fight, and Werde helped on to his legs.

But he was not a fighting man. He looked at Jean, picked up a packet of tobacco that belonged to him from the counter and left the canteen, followed by the jeers of the others.

Jean, sobered up by the incident, felt sorry.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Lacoste. "Werde is a bad man to vex."

He was right.

An hour later in the dormitory Jean apologised to Werde, who was just turning in.

"Oh, that is nothing," said Werde.