

CHAPTER XXV

THE PAQUETAGE

LACOSTE was slight, delicately made, blue-eyed and fair, only twenty-two, yet he had been in the Legion for a year. Born in Beauvais of well-to-do parents, he had run away from home owing to a stepmother and joined the Legion "for fun"—and he was the only being, perhaps, who ever found fun in the Legion.

He never cursed, he never swore, he never grumbled and when he got money from home he never kept it.

This bright and cheery soul had joined the Legion under an illusion and the illusion held. The white fatigue uniform with a blue sash, the red and blue for evening wear, the clash of arms, the beat of drums, the band and the blazing sun of Africa all held him under their hypnotism, the more surely because he never got into trouble.

He had two cardinal virtues beside the negative one already mentioned. He was a good marcher and a fairly good shot.

The most terrible factor in the Legion's make up is the power of the non-commissioned officers—the colour sergeants, the sergeants and the corporals.

What these say or report goes almost without question by the superior officers, and a sergeant taking a down on a man can make his life a misery, or break him.

Lacoste never had any trouble with these. He slept in the same dormitory with Jean, and his

bed was the fourth from the right of Jean's and next that of Werde.

One day at eleven o'clock Jean, released from Swedish exercises, was returning through the barrack yard when he was told that he was wanted in the dormitory.

He went up, and the room corporal, Joffe, and Sergeant Schneider were standing near his bed.

Schneider was a Bavarian with a compressed mouth and cruel face, one of the men who make up the steel of the Legion. He ordered Jean to undo his paquetage.

The paquetage is the bundle containing the uniforms and all the gear of a légionnaire.

If the légionnaire loses any part of his uniform or gear, this precious uniform and gear belonging to the French government, he is tried for theft—and sentenced. And the punishment for theft is more than severe.

Jean knew this, but he had no fear at all as he unstrapped his paquetage, knowing, as he did, that everything was all right.

Sergeant Schneider examined everything piece by piece. There was nothing missing.

Jean strapped up his things again and came down to the barrack square where he ran into Lacoste, who had, in fact, been waiting for him.

"Well," said Lacoste; "it was all right?"

"Which?" asked Jean.

"Your paquetage?"

Jean laughed. "And how did you know," said he, "that there was any trouble about it?"

"This morning," said Lacoste, "on the plateau, when we were doing exercises, I heard Corporal Joffe telling Sergeant Schneider that he believed you had sold your extra blue ceinture—you know

the Jew and Arab dealers are always willing to buy those ceintures or anything else for the matter of that. Then something seized me—I don't know what, but when we were dismissed I ran ahead of the others and right up to our dormitory. I opened your paquetage and look!—the blue ceinture *was* gone."

"Gone!" cried Jean.

"Yes. Gone. Something had told me that some one had played you this dirty trick for the purpose of getting you into trouble."

"But it was there," said Jean.

"No, my friend," said Lacoste. "That was mine. I had only an instant to think in, and I went to my paquetage and got mine out, and put it in your paquetage—see? It is nothing. To-night I will go to Mansour, who lives off Daya Street, and buy another for a few francs. You can buy anything from him in that way."

Jean was overwhelmed. Lacoste had saved him from imprisonment, and not without risk to himself.

"We will go together to Mansour," said he. "How can I thank you for what you have done for me?"

"La! It is nothing," said Lacoste.

"But who can have done it?" said Jean.

"Whoever did it," said Lacoste, "is your enemy. Sometimes the légionnaires steal things from one another, but that is rare and this is a different matter. Whoever took your ceinture must have lied to Corporal Joffe, telling him you had sold it—else why did they examine your paquetage?"

"But I have no enemies," said Jean.

He had forgotten Werde. Werde, ever since the incident in the canteen, had shown nothing of hostility towards the man who had struck him. He had seemingly accepted the apology which had

been offered. It was almost impossible to think that he should have nursed up the business in private, and then made it the basis of this terrible attack.

"We will see," said Lacoste. "Perhaps Mansour will be able to tell us something, for, look you, whoever took the ceinture, will most likely have sold it, and Mansour is the man who has most likely bought it. He deals with the Legion in matters like this and he is reckoned safe."

Lacoste, innocent creature that he was, had still a good deal of everyday shrewdness. He said nothing more. He and Jean, at five o'clock that evening, leaving the barracks gates, took their way past the Spahi barracks in the direction of Daya Street.

They had plenty of time so they did not hurry, pausing for a while in the Place Sadi Carnot, where the band was playing, to listen to the music and look at the crowd. Here is seen, of an evening, the strangest collection of people to be found in the world. Shopkeepers of Sidi and their families, visitors from Europe and America, commercial travellers, Arabs of the town, Arabs in from the desert and filtering through all the légionnaires in their red and blue dress uniform, mixing with, yet absolutely apart from, the others.

Mansour's place of business was in the lane, the first on the right in Daya Street as you go towards the gate.

Here there are Turks and Egyptians, Levantines, Arabs and men from Morocco all plying their trades in little shops with open fronts, and all sorts of flummery put out to attract the tourist: brass pots; slippers; silver jewellery; Arab guns and swords from Birmingham; sweetmeats; coloured confectionery (including Arabian stick-jaws and

Spanish sweets, yellow because made of yolk of egg) ; pipes ; hubble-bubbles ; Juan Bango tobacco and cigarettes ; in little booths, where the cigarette makers sit, human machines topped with fezzes and rolling, rolling, rolling, eternally rolling the dark Arabian or yellow Turkish tobacco between fingers that never rest.

Mansour's place was a café, the front part ; a junk shop, the back.

He was a bearded Arab of the higher class, far above the trade he engaged in, one might have fancied. But the world is a queer place and there is little room for fancy in it. And' Mansour, who might have been a sheik and who certainly was a gentleman in many ways, ought to have had a financial soul above that of a Polish Jew—but he hadn't.

He was out to make profit in a town where Levantines were in the same business, and he made it where he could. All the same he was to be trusted. He was a huckster yet an aristocrat, and he had been known to do kindly actions not for profit.

A plum-coloured Sudanese boy was serving an Arab with a grenadine in the café, but Lacoste, who knew the place, taking no notice of the boy, pushed on through a reed curtain, down a short passage and so to the back shop.

Here they found the dealer among his wares, a lean, hawk-nosed, bearded man who hailed Lacoste as a friend.

"Well, légionnaire, and what can I do for you to-day ?" asked Mansour.

"I have come to buy a ceinture," said Lacoste ; "mine has been stolen."

"Ah, stolen !" said Mansour. "Well, that is strange—for only to-day I bought one."

"But what is there strange in buying a ceinture?"

"Well, in truth, not many are offered now," said the dealer; "but leaving that aside, the strange thing is that this ceinture which I bought was sold me by the man who was with you the last time you were here, a fortnight ago."

"Why, that was Werde," cried Lacoste, speaking half to Mansour, half to Jean. "He it was who came here last with me when we came about selling those little carved figures, which he had bought in the flea market for ten sous and for which you gave us ten francs."

"Yes," said Mansour. "It was that man who sold me the ceinture to-day—wait."

He went to a corner and produced the ceinture. Lacoste took it and handed it to Jean. "Do you recognise it?" asked he.

"Yes," said Jean; "it's mine. I know it by this bit of red thread over at the end."

Lacoste stood for a moment dumb before the infamy of the business so strangely revealed. Then he broke out.

"Mansour, some nights ago in the canteen my friend here struck Werde. Afterwards he expressed regret, and the incident was closed. To-day I get to know that some one had accused my friend of having sold his sash. I went to his paquetage and found his sash gone. I substituted mine in order to save him. And here now is everything made clear. Werde stole his sash in order to get him into trouble, and he thought it safe to sell it to you, never dreaming that I would take a hand in the business."

"A bad business," said Mansour.

"What can we do?" asked Lacoste.

"Nothing," said Mansour, who had a twenty

years' knowledge of the Legion and its ways. "If you complain there will be an inquiry, you would most likely get into trouble for shielding your friend by putting your sash into his paquetage. I would get into trouble for having bought a sash, and so on—you see?"

"I don't want to get any one into trouble," said Jean. "Let the thing drop. I will buy that sash back from you. How much?"

"Nothing," said Mansour. "Had I known the story of it I would not have bought it—it only cost me four francs."

Jean took four francs from his pocket.

The dealer refused them; then, giving in, he took the coins and put them on a shelf.

"They are there for you whenever you need them," said he, with a laugh. "One never knows what may happen in the Legion; and a word more to you, beware of this man who has done this thing to you, he may try something else."

He called the boy from the front shop to bring in some coffee, and they sat and smoked cigarettes for half an hour before leaving.

This was the beginning of a friendship.

Jean used to patronise Mansour's Café, and nearly always drifted into the back shop to have a talk with the dealer in odds and ends—this commercial vulture who had, yet, in him something of the eagle.

One night he told Mansour about Karan. Told him the whole story we know, suppressing only the names of Stein and the Hauptmarch. He did this, yielding to the crave for speech on this matter and to the instinct that told him that there was in Mansour the wisdom of the East, as well as the wisdom of an ordinary business man.

Mansour, twisting a cigarette, smiled in his inscrutable way.

"She has never brought you luck," said he. "Look you, even now, you tell me that it was over the letter you sent about her you had that dispute with Légionnaire Werde, which might have ruined you, only for your friend, Légionnaire Lacoste. He is lucky to you. She—no. There are women like that. You have not told me what happened to drive you to the shelter of the Legion, nor do I want to know. In the East it is different, but in the West the story of every man is usually the story of some woman. And now you have written——"

"What else would you have me do?" asked Jean.

"Nothing," said Mansour. "It is Fate, and, besides, you have done it."

"Yet no answer has come."

"No matter. It will be sure to come—if she has not done with you."

There was no offence meant in this and none taken by Jean. Talking to Mansour on this matter was like talking to something impersonal.

An oracle of sorts, but in which he did not believe.