

## CHAPTER XXVI

## THREE DAYS LATER

ONE thousand two hundred légionnaires were on the plateau exercising in the sun blaze and a cloud of dust. They were in full equipment. Rifle and bayonet, three hundred cartridges, knapsack with two uniforms, tent canvas and tent sticks, fuel for fire and gamelle—nearly fifty kilograms.

They had been marching, marching, marching round and round, now at the double now going easy. As a rule, this business is done in white fatigue uniform, without the blue cloak, not in field equipment, but to-day owing to some order of the colonel it was different.

Then they marched back to barracks and as they disbanded a man came out of the postmaster's quarters near the barrack gates, he was carrying a handful of letters and was instantly surrounded. Jean was in the crowd, and he suddenly found himself in possession of a letter. It had been handed to him over the shoulders of the others, a poor, mean-looking letter bearing the postmark Ragusa, and addressed in a woman's hand.

Jean thrust it into his pocket.

He followed the others into the barracks, went up to his room and began to dispose of his things; rifle in rack at the end of the room, knapsack, kepi and the rest on the shelf above his bed.

He changed into fatigue uniform, placing the precious letter in his pocket, still unread. He could not open it amongst the shouting, perspiring crowd

that filled the room, changing their uniforms. Then the bugle went for soupe and after the meal there were potatoes to be mashed up.

The hot weather had come before its time—come with a vengeance, and the order had gone forth, *Siesta*.

In the hot days the Legion rests by order from eleven o'clock till three, an order not dictated by love of the soldier, but by fear of injuring the Legion as a weapon. Also, France has never forgotten that the Bastille fell in July.

The Legion is always "insurrecting" in spots, single soldiers, soldiers by twos and threes, even companies, sometimes break out, go *fantee* and try to escape. Sometimes the rising is serious as that at Saida which attracted the attention of Jaurés, and one never knows. If the whole first battalion were to revolt, turn Sidi-Bel-Abbès inside out and march for Morocco it would be decidedly unpleasant for the authorities, and such a revolt if it ever occurs will be surely in the hot weather. So the order for *siesta* has been promulgated.

The room was like an oven and filled with the sounds of men grumbling and talking, one to another or in their sleep.

Jean, lying now with the precious letter still unread and under his pillow, could hear the sounds of Sidi-Bel-Abbès through the open windows, the sound of the hot wind from the desert and the cries of the water sellers, and now shrill and clear the sound of a bugle from the Spahi barracks.

He was scarcely thinking, his mind dwelling entirely, if vaguely, on this letter that might bring him news of Karan, that might be written by herself. He could not open it in barracks, nor did he feel the desire to open it immediately, he would have to

get away with it by himself and that would be impossible before five o'clock.

At five o'clock the légionnaire's free time begins ; in other words he is free to wash his clothes and fatigue uniform, clean his rifle and polish his accoutrements, after which he can go into the town and enjoy himself, but if you are in a hurry you can always pay some one a couple of sous to wash and clean for you. Jean did this, and leaving the barracks took his way till he reached the avenue that leads to the Oran Gate.

The place was quiet as the sunset that lay on the Thessala Mountains, and here he took the precious letter from his pocket and opened it.

It was from Herdjiman's wife, the French-woman.

"I take up my pen for Herdjiman," wrote she, "to let you know that he is well as also the little one who is still on Beljazi, but the old soldier who is there with her is sick, but Herdjiman says you must not trouble about the little one (little Karan) as he will see to her. He has seen her and told her all about you and where you are—but there is great news for you besides this. The Baron is not dead (you know who). Herdjiman, two days after you left, came to me crying out that the Baron had been seen by him in the villa gardens, and indeed since that his yacht has come here from Spalato and he has gone on board, so you were mistaken thinking he was dead.

"Then when your letter came yesterday telling us you were in the Legion, Herdjiman threw up his hands, for he says now you will not be able to leave the Legion for five years—what a misfortune ! And yet it *is* fortunate that the Baron is not dead.

However, the time will soon pass, and remember you have friends.

“If you want money you will let us know.”

So ended the letter.

Jean folded it and put it in his pocket. He had reached the Oran Gate, beyond which lay a great avenue of palms, the dust of omnibuses and cars rising in the evening light in a golden haze, through which came flashing a company of Spahis at full trot bound for their barracks.

Spahis, vehicles, dust, palms—the whole picture and every detail of it seemed part of the fact that had suddenly stunned him. Stein was not dead.

He, Jean, had not committed homicide, he was an innocent man, free—but in the Legion. He turned and began to walk back. A weight had been taken from his shoulders, a weight whose greatness he only realised now.

The picture of that dead man lying on the floor had never left him and the dread inspired by it. The dread that had made the Legion endurable as a place of refuge. But the relief was short-lived, swallowed up by the thought, “If I had only held my ground.” If he had only held his ground and faced the thing out! Why, even if Stein had been dead, might there not have been a chance? Could he not have stated the truth, that Stein was the attacker. That he had only acted in self-defence?

A clear-headed man of the world would have told him, “No. You were in Stein’s house, in the room with his mistress, he must have had provocation to attack you and—you killed him.”

But Jean had no one to talk to him like this, he saw himself as a fool who had panicked when he should have stood firm, with the result that he

was now a prisoner, condemned to servitude for five years.

The Legion was no longer a refuge, but a prison.

As he walked along the street two of the Arab police passed him. Arab gendarmes, their horses going at a trot. Behind one of the horses ran a man, he was tied to the horse by a long steel chain about twice as thick as a watch guard ; he wore the Legion uniform, though it was almost indistinguishable owing to dust. His face was white as death, his mouth hanging open, he seemed on the point of collapse, but he had to run or be dragged by the chain.

He was a deserter caught by the Goums and being brought in, they would hand him over to the sergeant in charge at the barracks, and receive a slip of paper entitling them to twenty-five francs. That is what France pays for the return of a man that she has bought for a franc. A franc and a loaf of bread is what the légionnaire gets when he has signed the blue paper (along the dotted line please) that binds him to serve for five years, and whatever may be said of the bargain it is still a contract between white men.

But the infamous contract which France has made with the Arabs for the return of white deserters is quite a different matter, a thing against policy and decency alike.

Arab boys were running after the Goums and their captive jeering the white man—or the thing in a white man's image tied to a horse's tail ; three tourists, two women and a man, evidently Americans, had stopped to look. Disgust and horror on their faces, and tongues.

Jean went on. He reached the Place Sadi Carnot. The band had not yet begun, but a good many

people were sitting about on the chairs; visitors, shopkeepers and so on, with here and there a Spahi or two, gorgeous as fuschias in their coloured scarves and scarlet breeches. The heat of the day was tempered by a breeze from the Thessala Mountains.

Jean took a seat on a chair and rolled a cigarette.

The evening light, the mountains and something indefinable in the air brought him back to the great plain dominated by the Herzegovinian hills. The plain where stood the tombs. He saw again the great tomb with its faintly carved dancing girls on the side of which he had written, with a pencil, "Karan." "Jean."

Then he was on the road leading down to Ragusa, the blue Adriatic before him and the islands.

All that was over there and he was here, divorced from his art, from the woman he loved, from life itself—for five years.

Yesterday if not happy, he had at least not been suffering, but now that the weight of blood guiltiness had been lifted from him it was different. He had been tricked by fate. Cut off from everything that made life worth living, turned from an artist with the world at his feet, into a common soldier at a halfpenny a day.

There was a woman calling to him as he sat there in the Place Sadi Carnot, watching the bandsmen, who were now taking their places in the bandstand, and the woman was not Karan, not the Baroiness Hauptmarch, but the woman that Stein had killed, the woman he, Jean, had created on the canvas that Stein had slashed to pieces.

She was the symbol of his art, of the something that was the true texture of his mind and being, the power and passion to create.

Karan was outside him, much as he desired her,

she did not come to him now or only as a figure half-pushed away by that terrible and dominant ghost, the power of creation that circumstance and the Legion had suppressed till now.

The ghost that was crying to him, "I am cut off from you, I and my sister, Fame. March, carry a rifle, polish your accoutrements—that is your business now. Well, good-bye, légionnaire."

The band struck up into the first bars of the "*Sambre et Meuse*," and Jean, rising from his seat, walked off.

Almost at once he ran into Lacoste, just free of barracks and taking an evening stroll in the Place.

Jean linked arms with him.

"Come along," said Jean, "I have things to tell you. Let's go to a café and have something to drink."

They walked arm in arm to the Café de Galle, which is on the Place Sadi Carnot. Jean, choosing a table, called for a bottle of wine and two glasses.

Lacoste felt rather out of it. Légionnaires are rarely seen at the Café de Galle; officers of the Legion, yes, but not the common légionnaire. You find here Spahis and Turcos if there happen to be any in Sidi, but the wretched légionnaire with his halfpenny a day—no.

He hasn't got the money. If, perchance, he finds himself with a little money sent by relatives and friends, he is wise enough to spend it at the canteen, where a litre of red wine can be bought for a couple of coppers, not at the Galle, where the same stuff costs five francs.

Jean had told Lacoste about Karan, just as he had told Mansour, and just as in the case of Mansour, he had told all his story, leaving out the offence of

Stein. He had just said, "something happened and I joined the Legion."

Now, having filled Lacoste's glass he looked him in the face, and said, "I never told you what brought me here, but I am going to tell you now. I killed a man."

Lacoste laughed. This extraordinary Lacoste, all youth and innocence, seemed not at all disturbed by the fact that he was sitting opposite a killer.

"I knew," said he, "that nothing nasty had brought you into the Legion, and I know you did not kill this man for any bad reason—so tell me."

"I should have said," went on Jean, "that I thought I had killed him." He leaned across the table and told the story of Stein. It took him ten minutes. "And now," said he, "I get a letter to-day saying that he is not dead—telling me, in fact, that I am here for nothing, that I have lost five years of my life—for nothing—for nothing."

Lacoste clicked his tongue.

"Well," he said, "at least you are free of having killed him, and the girl—she is safe and well."

But Jean was not thinking of the girl just now, but of himself and the trap into which he had fallen.

He relapsed into thought.

Then they left the café and took their way back towards the barracks beneath a moon that was lighting the world from the Oran seaboard to the Thessala Mountains.