

## CHAPTER XXVII

## FIVE YEARS !

HE slept soundly that night, awaking suddenly and to full consciousness at dawn. The long room like a hospital ward showed up to the light from the east. Just like a hospital ward it was, and the likeness was made more striking by the cards above the beds hung like temperature charts—cards giving the name and number of each sleeper. Yet there was nothing depressing about this dormitory of the 8th Company, and despite its starkness nothing sordid, everything was neat and speckless, and the light of the hot African day just beginning had in it the cheer of vitality and the magic of morning.

It said to Jean as he lay there glancing across the beds on his right to the rack of rifles at the far end of room :

“ Five years. For five years all but a few months, my friend, you will wake every morning to find yourself a légionnaire.”

He had been one for some months almost without knowing it, the sense of escape and the necessity of sanctuary combating the main fact of his position.

Now that there was nothing to escape from and no necessity for concealment, the position took charge with ungloved hands.

That terrible flight from Ragusa had cast everything to the winds, including Art and Karan. A man can't think when he is running and being chased. He can't think when he has found a refuge and is lying panting for breath and still with an ear out for

pursuers, but he can think quite a lot when he finds that he has been pursued only by his own fears, and that the house of refuge he has darted into is a trap.

The room, with its two rows of beds, its tired légionnaires lying this way and that, one with his arm hanging down, one on his back, another curled like a dormouse and all lit by the African dawn, spoke to Jean.

It said, "Dawn in the barracks of the Legion. Paint me."

That is how Art came back to him—the art he had cast away in flight and half-forgotten in concealment.

The desire for creation had come back, and the desire to put his own position and the position of all these tired men into words—on canvas.

Lacoste, who was the man on duty for the day, moved in his bed, and Jean watched him. He rose up, left his bed and slipping into his clothes, stole out of the room without a sound. He had gone to fetch the coffee.

In a minute or two he was back, the coffee made and his voice calling to the others to wake up.

It was the first tick of the machine followed by the reveille from the barrack yard and the hurly-burly of dressing, polishing, bed making and sweeping the room.

No more time for thought—or only for the thought that did not require time or place, the thought that was to cling to everything now in connection with Jean's life, "Five years."

Half an hour from the sounding of reveille came the bugle again, and the clash of arms.

The légionnaires had fallen in, a brilliant picture in the great barrack yard under the blaze of the full-risen sun.

Drums, and the colossal body of men began to march in columns of four, wheeling towards the barrack gates, the sun flashing on the barrels of the Lebel rifles, magnificent—but Five Years.

Those two words were now mixed with everything for Jean, out on the plateau at exercise, returning at eleven o'clock for "soupe," during *siesta*; at six o'clock when he joined Lacoste for a stroll in the town, he gave voice to them.

"This is my first day in the Legion," said he. "The first day it has got on my back. I am not grumbling—but there it is. My God, three hundred and sixty-five days more will only make a year."

Lacoste, felt alarmed, less by Jean's words than his manner. He saw the first symptoms of revolt, and he knew what that meant if it was not checked.

"Don't think of it," said he, "after all the life is hard but not so bad. March, with your eyes shut. The time will soon be over." Jean laughed. Instead of turning for the town they had gone towards the plateau. Here in the evening light the great open space showed the village *négre*, dominated by the mosque of Omar.

A muezzin was calling from the minaret of the mosque, and from the village *négre*, that home of filth and debauchery, came the sound of voices, cries and the strumming of a *guzla*.

"It isn't the time, so much," said Jean, "though that is bad enough, but the fact that I am dead."

"Dead!"

"Listen, Lacoste, you are a good fellow and a good friend, but you can't understand me. I've been a painter, a man who paints pictures. I have never done anything else, never wanted to do anything else, it is more than part of my life—it's me. I have only come to see that now. You see,

Lacoste, when a man paints a picture or even when he draws something on paper he does it all in his head, it's the same with everything; when you polish your rifle you do it really in your head; your hand only obeys your mind. Well, my mind has been always working on the same business, living for that alone, and now that it can't carry on the business, it's dead—or worse—alive, but in prison."

Lacoste said nothing. He could not think of anything to say for he could not visualise the mind of an artist in all its complexities, littlenesses and greatnesses.

The mind that, as a rule, does not possess among its attributes the philosophy with which to meet misfortune.

But he could in a way understand that Jean wanted to go on with his job, which was the painting of pictures, not the cleaning of rifles.

But he had no need to say anything. Jean had done with the subject, and turning led the way back and along towards the town where they went to Mansour's café and had a drink.

They had both forgotten Werde and his infamous attempt to bring trouble on Jean by stealing his sash. They had consulted as to whether it would be well to tell the other man in the room of the business, but they decided not. Werde would most certainly have been thrashed, but that would not have done much good and might have raised inquiries involving Mansour. So they let the thing drop, deciding to forget it.

But Werde had not forgotten Jean nor that blow in the canteen.

Corporal Joffe was a friend of Werde's and Sergeant Schneider a friend of Joffe's, and the fact

had been hinting of itself to Jean for some days past that the non coms. had a down on him.

He hadn't bothered about it much. After the affair of the sash the thing had shown nothing of itself much except in needless fault finding now and then. Against this he had put up the defence of silence, complete obedience, and an honest endeavour to be correct at all points.

There are so many little fiddling regulations in the Legion that make excellent booby traps for the unthinking. For instance, there is a monthly regulation about overcoats; one month they must be buttoned on the right side, the next month on the left side. Jean, prompted by Lacoste, managed not to fall foul of these absurdities, but he could not escape *corvée*.

*Corvée* means work, not in the military sense. Road making, wall building, sweeping the Jardin Publique—the légionnaires are used by the Municipality of Sidi as scavengers, not to put too fine a point on it, and most days at one o'clock they are paraded in the barrack yard and the odd job men picked out by the sergeant *du jour*.

On the day after Jean's conversation with Lacoste on the plateau, Schneider was the sergeant *du jour*. He picked out a company of five men to do some job at the Spahi barracks. Another company he selected to do some wall construction and, having sent them off, marching each under command of a corporal, he looked round and selected a third company, including Jean.

The other four men he picked out were the roughest and worst lot imaginable, and the job was the clearing out of the sewer of the town prison.

That was the straw, if you could call it a straw, that broke the camel's back of endurance. On top

of everything he felt that he had been specially selected.

Lacoste that evening gave his opinion on the matter.

"Werde," said he, and that was all. They had come out of the barracks together, and strolling along the little lane that leads from the Spahi barracks in the direction of Tlemcen Street, reached the part where the great iron ornamental gates stand, a relic of the extravagance of a bourgeois citizen named Cazier, who had proposed building a house in the space that lies behind the gates. The gates, bought in Italy, had been put up; Cazier had gone bankrupt and the place was derelict, with the wall broken down on one side of the gates and a fallen palm tree lying rotting in the space.

They sat down on the tree and lit cigarettes.

"And that does not make it any better," said Jean, referring to Lacoste's pronouncement. "If Werde is like that he won't stop till he gets me into the penal battalion, maybe. There is only one thing for me to do, get out of this."

Lacoste shook his head.

"You know what happens if you try to escape and they catch you," said he.

Jean did.

He had gone into that question already; also, he had seen that man brought back by the Arab gendarmes, chained to a horse. But that did not frighten him.

"It's this way," said he. "They can't catch me."

"How?" asked Lacoste.

"This way. If I had to stay here I would put a bullet through my head—well, if they caught me—if they catch me—running off I would do the same. They might bring back my body, but not me."

"Merde," said Lacoste. The oath of the Legion broke from him involuntarily.

He had nothing else to say. The situation was beyond him.

Well, he knew the appalling difficulty of escape. Men are always escaping from the Legion. Some simple souls driven mad by the grinding and pitiless labour, by the hot weather, by nagging from the non coms., by this or that, just run away, run off without disguise, dressed just as they are in the uniform. It is quite easy to stroll beyond the gates and then take to the country. They go singly, as a rule, but sometimes after weeks of plotting half a dozen men join in a conspiracy, with the blessed word Morocco for a guiding star.

Strike across Algeria and get to Morocco is the idea; live on the land as you go; beg first from the farms; terrify the peasantry, if needful. But they cannot go armed, for the Lebel rifles in their cases in the barracks cannot be stolen; if they could they cannot be carried out of the town. And the cartridges when distributed for target practice are counted as carefully as a jeweller counts his pearls. So the "poumpistes" never get to the Morocco border; the news of them flies back to Sidi, and the mounted gendarmes armed with automatics finish the business.

Then comes the court martial at Oran, with its savage sentences.

The man Jean had seen being dragged back was one of these unfortunates, escaped, maybe, in the company of others, or just by himself.

But there are other ways of trying to escape from the Legion beside the simple way of walking off in one's uniform. There are lots of Jew shops in the Arab quarter, and Arab shops as well—witness Mansour's—that sell mufti, and where for a hundred

francs or so, one can get a complete rig out, of sorts, and for another few francs a suit-case. But the bother is, that once you are missed, Algiers and Oran are notified, your description is given and men from your company are sent to be on the look out for you.

The desert is no use to you if you are dressed in a bowler hat and suit of tweed or serge, and carrying a suit-case.

Lacoste knew all this, and he had summed the whole situation up in a word.

He was not prepared to combat the idea of escape. He knew Jean, he knew from his manner and tone that he had made his mind up on this business; if he failed he would kill himself—well, if Jean was miserable, what was there to be said? More, if Werde went on as he was going, might it not be better for Jean to take all risks in an attempt to clear out.

Then at last he spoke.

“How much money have you, my friend?”

“Over six hundred francs,” replied Jean.

“Good,” said the other. “Six hundred francs is a sum, but I can add a hundred if you wish. Oh, well, it would have been yours if you had wanted it, and when do you propose to make your try?”

A voice came through the evening air—the voice of the Muezzin from the mosque. *All' il Allah. God is Great.*

Jean had been speaking vaguely, though with a quite definite meaning. He intended to escape, but had not as yet made any clear-cut plan, but now, at this moment, the voice of the Muezzin came to him as though it were a message.

His mind, so reactive to suggestion, seemed to see



the Christian world reflected in the glass of the Legion, and in the sky of freedom the reflection of the world of Mohammed. It was as though the Muezzin were calling to him.

"When am I going?" said Jean. "I'm going now."

It was a little after six o'clock, the barracks did not shut till twelve—nearly six hours of time.

He rose, and Lacoste rising also, they took their way back down the lane. They reached the barracks and passed the gate where a sentry was standing, and where légionnaires were still coming out—men who had been delayed from their evening walk by extra cleaning or washing to be done.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### GOOD LUCK!

THE suddenly come to decision had something dramatic about it. A thing plotted and planned to time has lost some of its freshness at the moment of execution; all the same, the execution of Jean's design promised nothing of the dramatic or pictorial, at least in its first stages.

He simply would not go back to barracks that night. He had all his money on him, and he had nothing to go back for.

It is not realised that when France enlists a man for the Legion she strips him of his clothes. You cannot keep your civilian clothes in the Legion, you are forced to sell them or give them away, and the cruelty of this lies in the fact that when you have done your five years' service, if "bad conduct"