

CHAPTER XXX

RECOGNISED ?

NEXT morning, awakened at seven, he dressed and came downstairs.

The hot weather still held, but here in the Hotel Nesselrode it was not the hot weather of the Legion. Here electric fans were going, and here with the gorgeous light through the open front doors came the wind from the Thessala Mountains, warm, bringing the sense of Freedom and the jasmine—oleander—semi-tropical smell which is the scent of Sidi.

As he breakfasted he asked the waiter for a time-table, and now unhurried and with a cool head, he was able to unravel the intricacies of the time-table of the Algerian railways that had puzzled him in the café last night. There was a train to Oran at half-past nine o'clock. The waiter, on being questioned, said that the hotel bus would be available for it, and having tipped him Jean went to the office and asked for his bill.

The waxwork lady with marcelled hair made it out, presented it, received his thousand-franc note and gave him change, all with the absolute indifference and mechanical movements of a cash register. Then, his luggage brought down, he sat and smoked cigarettes in the lounge, turning over the pages of *Le Rire*, listening to the sounds from the street, the voices around him, the noises of the hotel.

It was now in this moment of forced inaction that,

despite his disguise and self-confidence, doubt began to assail him.

Would Sidi let him go?

The knowledge that if his position were known the hotel would be in a turmoil, and the marcelled lady telephoning for the police, lent a sinister something to all the sounds of the establishment. The rattle of the lift, the banging of doors, the jingle of glasses on a tray—then the sounds from the street outside, the honking of a motor-car, Arab calls, the trotting of a donkey and the noise of the stick of the brute running after it, the far crowing of a bugle.

He would have been missed last night on not returning to the barracks. The hunt was now hot after him, and the Legion hunts well. You see it has reduced the business of chasing deserters to a fine art, it has developed a mechanism almost faultless and working automatically. You have only to put an escaped légionnaire into the slot and the machine works. Before any train can reach Oran or Algiers, Algiers and Oran are looking out for a certain type of man, height so and so, hair such and such a colour. The description of his clothes is not given, but that is nothing. He is dressed as a deserter, that is to say in clothes that don't fit him.

The French police, and especially the military police of Algeria, can tabulate men by their appearance, almost pick out their professions and trades, and when they see a man in ill-fitting clothes who is at the same time obviously nervous, they know.

Listen!

The sound of far-away horses, the quarrelling sound of hoofs on a hard roadway. It drew nearer, loudened, and then passed the door of the hotel; a squadron of Spahis going where, who could tell?—but, happily, gone.

Then the little Arab page boy, who had been standing at the door, turned and came towards Jean.

The bus was there.

The railway station lies outside the old walls of Sidi. You approach it along a palm-bordered road, with here and there an olive grove, a yellow house, a burst of mimosa. With the sun blaze and blue sky, and the background of the yellow town, it reminds one of the road to the station at Nice, before Nice was modernised, and the Avenue de la Gare turned into the Avenue de la Victoire.

Along this road the omnibus took Jean, putting him down at the primitive-looking railway station, at whose entrance a couple of Zouaves and a sergeant of the Legion were lounging. They are always there on the look out for deserters. Without any manner of doubt, this morning they were especially on the *qui vive*, since a man had escaped last night—at least had not returned to barracks.

They did not notice Jean, or only as a traveller getting out of the hotel bus. He went to the guichet and bought his ticket, and ten minutes later was seated in the train pulling out of the station.

It is eighty miles to Oran, and after leaving the gardens and olive trees of Sidi, the train takes one through a country of sand and sand-hills, rock and desolation.

There was no one else in the carriage with Jean, so his thoughts were untrammelled, and this desolate, sun-bleached country held him like a wizard's spell.

It was Karan's.

She had become associated in his mind with all that was outside the pale of ordinary living. She was the wilderness expressed in life. That was perhaps part of her curious hold upon him.

Never could she belong to his world, and her

strange attraction seemed working vaguely but unalterably to draw him into her world, to make him tread a path through the desert by her side. The Plain of the Tombs had been her fit setting, and the desolation of Beljazi. Impossible in any city, she was possible and right and in her proper environment there—and here. This was her country too. Filled with vague dreams of the future born of his new freedom—dreams in which Paris and Art, success and fame had their place—his mind, still, held something not vague—something that his release had made most vital and vivid—something that made art a shadow and success a phantom—this girl and his renewed desire for her.

And the Algerian desert said to him : “ Look, you are escaping from me to go to her—she is here. The desert is her home and the waste places of the world, and the wind of the desert is her sister.”

But this saying of the desert brought no warning with it, nor regret for the past, nor fear for the future. It only added to the attraction that was drawing him to the place where he would find her—it was part of that attraction.

Drawing nearer to Oran the country changed, the desolate plains and rock and occasional palm tree passed away, giving place to cultivated land, farms and then, at last, gardens and villas, vineyards—the outskirts of Oran.

He left the train, carrying his suit-case and umbrella, and at the barrier came upon two Zouave sergeants and a corporal of the Legion, who were narrowly inspecting all the passengers as they passed through.

They did not stop him. No doubt his highly respectable appearance contributed to his safety, but besides that there was the umbrella. No

légionnaire making his escape, either in reality or the dreams of a military policeman, has ever carried an umbrella, the thing was in the nature of the impossible. And Mansour, great artist that he was, had seen that.

Safe !

The streets of Oran were around him, humming with business and filled with the scent of the sea. Arabs in white, and negro porters, half-naked, jostled him. He gave his suit-case to a little Arab boy to carry, and told him to show him the way to the offices of the French Mediterranean Line. He had found the name in the Algerian time-table that morning, and the address. Five minutes later he entered the building, the little porter with the suit-case going with him.

A man with a jet-black beard reaching to his cheek bones, such a beard as only a Frenchman can cultivate, gave him information.

A boat, the *General Chanzy*, was starting for Marseilles that day. At six o'clock. Yes, there were berths still available. He got out a plan and ran over it. *Première Classe*. Yes, here was cabin thirty-nine—or cabin thirty-four, both equally good. Monsieur would take cabin thirty-nine ? *Bien*.

He made out the ticket. What name ?

Matisse, said Jean. Just as in the hotel at Sidi, he gave his real name. To do so was part of his new-found liberty, and it was quite safe.

He looked at the clock on the office wall, it pointed to quarter to four, and leaving the place he made for the wharves, the child with the suit-case trotting beside him.

The *General Chanzy* was still loading, crates of oranges and Algerian tobacco and dates going on board, a steam crane lifting them and lowering them

through the open main hatch. There were no signs of military or police anywhere, but that meant absolutely nothing, for the boats going out are never inspected till just at the moment before starting.

One does not disturb a mouse-trap too soon.

The passengers were now arriving, English and American tourists with piles of luggage, Southern French people, a few Arabs travelling second-class. Jean, having deposited his suit-case in the cabin, came on deck again.

At half-past five mails came down, and the rumble of the boilers told of steam being got up.

Safe, quite safe, yet now in this critical moment of departure, just as in the hotel at Sidi, Jean's heart made him aware of its existence.

The hatches were now being shut, and the steam crane, swung back, ceased its rattle.

Then along the quayside came the last passenger, a stout man followed by a porter wheeling some luggage.

The clock of the Custom House pointed to ten minutes to six, and it was evident that the boat would start true to time, for the cargo was done with. Stay! What was that?

Away in the distance coming along the quay were three men. Two Arab policemen and a légionnaire. The police were in white, the légionnaire in the red and blue of full dress.

As they drew closer they formed a striking picture, interesting to the passengers, terrible to Jean.

He knew. It was the custom of the Legion when a man belonging to a certain company escaped, to send a couple of men from the same company to help the Arab police to identify the runaway and

assist in the search for him. Here was a search party, most surely.

After the first glance Jean could not look. To be guillotined is one thing, to watch the knife descending on one's neck—if that were possible—quite another thing.

He turned and found himself close to the second officer of the ship, a bronzed man, heavy and with the face of a Rhine boatman. A true Ponantaise.

"When do we start?" asked Jean.

"In a few minutes, monsieur," replied the other; "when we are done with these gentlemen who are coming on board to look over the ship for deserters. It is the same every voyage; but I see one of them is a légionnaire, so some poor devil of a légionnaire must have escaped."

"Well, I hope they don't catch him," said Jean, with a laugh, and turning, went forward a bit and stood looking across the harbour with his back to the quay.

If that légionnaire coming on board was a man of his company he was lost, even the umbrella could not save him from face to face recognition.

It was impossible to stand with his back to the business, that would only draw attention to him. He turned.

The Arabs, two police sergeants and the légionnaire were passing about among the passengers, glancing here and there. They came closer and the légionnaire's eyes fell on Jean, their eyes met, and Jean knew that he was recognised.