

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FAITHFUL HEART

THE night before at roll-call, when Jean failed to answer his name he was ticked off.

Absence does not always mean wilful desertion. A légionnaire may be absent at closing time and yet turn up at two in the morning, full of insolence and drink, hammering at the barrack gates under the delusion that they are the door of a night club or his own—once, hall door. Or he may lie drunk in some alley of the Arab quarter robbed of his bayonet and sash, and lucky if he is not robbed of his boots as well. Or he may lie drugged in the terrible village nègre which lies close to the plateau, and which is forbidden to the regiment. Or he may simply be dead.

But, if he has not turned up by six in the morning, then, automatically, the machine for finding him begins to work, and it does not begin to search for a drunken man or a dead man, but for a runaway. Dead men and drunken men turn up of themselves, or are turned up.

At a little after six the sergeant-major in the guard room ordered Corporal Joffe to detail two men from Jean's company for service with the police; Joffe picked out Werde and Lacoste. He knew Werde disliked Jean, and he knew Jean was often seen about with Lacoste, but he did not know the mind of Lacoste nor the strength of the friendship that existed between the two men.

These two "identifiers" then, were sent by train

to Oran, arriving there before Jean, and being despatched to the quays where a cargo boat was due out at five and the *General Chanzy* at six. The cargo boat was in the inner harbour, the *General* lying at the mole in the outer.

The two légionnaires were detailed, one for the party dealing with the cargo boat, the other for the party dealing with the *General Chanzy*.

It was the toss up of a sou whether Werde or Lacoste would be sent to the *General Chanzy*. In the former case all would be over with Jean. But Fortune or Derision, which is her other name, sent Lacoste.

Jean face to face with Lacoste met him eye to eye.

It was a strange meeting. Lacoste, without the flicker of an eyelid, passed on, he and the Arabs.

That was friendship indeed! Friendship risking much, asking nothing, not even the payment of a smile.

Jean turned again and, holding the rail, looked over the harbour. He heard the gang planks being pulled away, he felt the first thud of the engines, then he turned.

The police and the légionnaire, having landed after their fruitless search, were marching off back along the quay.

The légionnaire never turned to look. Ah! stop a moment! He was bending as though to do something to his boot. The Arabs went on, the légionnaire turned, looked towards the ship, then turned again and followed the others.

In that moment Jean nodded to Lacoste, a movement of the head so slight that any one, even close to him, would scarcely have noticed.

It was as though he were recognising the truth that Lacoste, who summed up in himself all the

good in the Legion, was his good genius, just as Werde who summed up in himself all the evil, was his evil genius.

An hour later he was taking his place at the dinner table in the saloon. He had no fear at all now, passed by Oran there was nothing to dread from Marseilles.

But it was surprisingly strange, the table where he was seated with its spotless linen, the menu before him, the wine card that had just been handed to him by a steward, the flowers. This time yesterday he was in the barracks at Sidi preparing to go out with Lacoste after a sweltering day, and still half-sick with the work he had been put to cleaning out those sewers.

And the people at table were talking about him. These inspections of the ship by the police always give rise to talk amongst the passengers. They were actually talking about his chance of escape.

"They are generally caught or else they come back," the second officer was saying, as he helped himself to cutlets and green peas.

CHAPTER XXXII

AND SURELY ALL IS RIGHT NOW?

AT Marseilles there was no difficulty at all, even the Customs gave no trouble, just glancing at the contents of the suit-case and chalking it.

There was just time to catch the Rapide for Ventimile, the train was not crowded and he easily found a seat. And now as he sat looking at that wonderful vineyard that lies between Marseilles