

PART IV

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE RETURN TO THE TRAP

AT Marseilles Jean took his passage for Oran on board the *General Negrier*.

Yes, entering the shark's mouth was quite an easy business, not a tooth pointed at him. The *General Negrier* had no Zouave or Turco sergeant at the gangway, spying for runaway légionnaires; in fact, there were twenty-five of those gentlemen on board, not runaways, but recruits, some bound for Sidi, some for the second battalion at Saida—all in high spirits and mostly in rags.

One had, perhaps, better not start abusing the Foreign Legion till one has done abusing civilisation. Civilisation that produces the foreign drafts one sees at Fort St. Jean at Marseilles.

Jean did not see much of these men, they were travelling in the third-class. And at Oran they were disembarked before the other passengers, and tramped off in a haze of dust for the high fortress which lies above the town.

It was a splendid morning, one of those mornings when the hard brilliance of the North African skies becomes softened without losing colour or luminosity. Softened as if by the breath of spring.

If Marseilles was the mouth of the shark, Oran was the gullet, and as easily passed. The train, which takes six hours to do the eighty-mile journey,

did not start till noon, so he had a couple of hours free to dispose of as he liked.

He spent part of the time sitting on a bale by the harbour side watching the work of the port, and letting his mind wander over the points of the problem before him.

Had Karan arrived yet? How had she travelled?

She was used to the road and no doubt to railways. She was used to men and their ways, strangers would not frighten Karan nor strange places cast her down. And now that she was free of Cavani she could travel swiftly and no longer at a crawl.

Yes, she had arrived by this he felt sure—arrived at Sidi to look for him, and now he was coming to look for her. Never before, perhaps, had two lovers been engaged in such a strange search one for the other, a game of blind man's buff, in a land where death or imprisonment were the alternative penalties for failure.

The train, when he got into it, was stifling—it is always left standing at Oran Station in the sun after the carriages have been made up, and as a consequence every carriage becomes an oven.

It grew cooler a bit after starting, owing to the breeze of movement. And as he looked out of the window he saw the same country through which he had passed the other day.

The other day it had been a journey from the desolation of the desert to the pleasant gardens and olive groves, and cultivated fields round Oran. To-day it was a journey from all this civilisation to the desert—to the land of Karan.

It was as though civilisation had refused him on his return to it, saying, "Go back to the land of your girl; in choosing her you have chosen the

desolate places of the earth for your dwelling place, go to them."

They stopped at little stations where the air blew in hot from the sun-stricken sand and rock; the bleating of a few lamentable goats, Arab voices, French, and the sound of the wind rustling in the desiccated leaves of the palms by the station entrance—that was all.

Desolation, but desolation without beauty or nobility, that is the Algerian desert in the latitude of Sidi. Farther south, where the sand takes charge and its windswept smoothness hides the print of old battles and of lost caravans, it is different.

They arrived at Sidi a little after six o'clock.

Jean had made his plans, or at least, had come to a decision. He would not return to the Nesselrode, it was safer not. He drove to the Sud which adjoins the Place Sadi Carnot. Here he registered under his own name and, having dined, came out.

It was half-past seven. The streets were full of people; in half an hour more they would be fuller, for it was still the dinner hour at the hotels, pensions and cheap cafés. But they were full enough. They put a question to him. "Well, here you are," said they, "and how are you to find her?"

Over there at Ragusa Sidi had seemed small. He had only to return there to find Karan if she had arrived. Sidi is not large, but it is quite large enough to hide a person for whom one is seeking.

It what street should he search for her, in what place?

As he came along towards the Tlemcen Gate he looked at the people he passed, Jews, Levantines, Arabs, Spaniards from Morocco, Turcos, Spahis just released from barracks—no légionnaires yet.

Presently, however, coming back, the red and

blue of the Legion's uniform began to show amongst the crowd, and from far off came the strains of the band playing in the great square.

The lamps were alight now.

He came into the square and took a seat, watching the crowd, listening to the chatter, feeling hopeless and absolutely lost.

If Karan were in Sidi he might meet her at any moment—or never.

Of what use was money? He had still over fifteen thousand francs of the money he had won, but not a franc could he spend in his search for her. An advertisement would be useless—and how could he advertise? The police—why, the very description of Karan would bring suspicion on him and inquiry, and even so would be useless.

She was a noticeable figure, she and her drum, if she still carried it, but in this town of fantastic people she would pass, with comment, maybe—but only passing comment. She would be put down as belonging to some show, some troupe of circus people or jugglers. Where had she obtained lodging? Heaven knew, but the instinct born of her wandering life would lead her to some hole or corner, some cheap lodging unreachable by search or inquiry.

Then the thought came to him. She is searching for you. She knows you are in the Legion, she does not know that you have escaped. Can it be possible that she has gone to the barracks?

She would ask for you under your own name. She would be told that such a name was unknown. What then?

As he was thinking this, a légionnaire passed by smoking a cigarette. The légionnaire glanced at Jean, half-paused as though he had recognised him and passed on.

It was Werde.

A cold hand seemed to have been laid on Jean's heart for a second. To meet an enemy just at that psychological moment was all that was wanted to complete his distress.

He was not afraid, the man had evidently, though fancying he had recognised him, fancied that he had made a mistake.

Escaped légionnaires are not found seated listening to the band of an evening, well dressed and seemingly well to do. No, the thing on the face of it was ridiculous, there was no danger from Werde, it was just the face of an enemy at this particular moment that hit him—hit him so that like a man returning a blow, he came to a sudden and violent decision. He rose and, passing through the crowd, sought the way towards the barracks of the Legion.

If Werde of his own company, and a man more clear of sight, because of his enmity, passed on like that, the sergeant in charge of the barrack gate was safe and might even be spoken to, and for a five-franc piece would answer a simple question. The question whether a girl had been inquiring for a légionnaire.

The question had to be asked, come what might. The intolerable suspense had to be relieved in some way.

He came into the road that leads to the barracks, and there before him the great building stood cutting the night sky with its sharp angles. The long lines of windows could be seen, darker showing than the yellow whitewash, with here and there a point of light.

The thing seemed lying for him in ambush, pretending silence and blindness, only waiting to seize him with a sudden outburst of clamour and a blaze of lights.

A bugle sounded from the Spahi barracks, a quarrelling of hoofs came from behind and, passing at a trot, went a patrol of Arab police. Silence closed down again except for the sound of the hot wind from the desert blowing across the streets, the palms and the orange trees of the town.

Now as he approached he could see a glimpse of the barrack gates. There was no one near them, but the sergeant of the watch would be inside. A dog crossed the road, and now, close to the wall of the Spahi barracks, he saw three figures—two Spahis and a girl.

The soldiers were talking to the girl, they seemed talking in a light-hearted way, for he heard one of them laugh, then they left her and went on, evidently for the town.

The girl was Karan.

He could see now the scarf bound round her head, the white haversack she always carried and a glint of the little drum.

He stopped, for his heart had stood still in him. Karan! Karan!—at last!

CHAPTER XXXVII

KARAN!

HE stood and watched.

She was walking on, but not for far. Not more than fifty paces she went and then returned, walking slowly, evidently with an eye on the gates of the Legion's barracks.

He came towards her diagonally across the road. She had just turned again, close to him now, he