

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE TENTH KILOMETRE

A SOUND came from behind—the sound of cart wheels, and Jean, glancing back, saw a cart with a white tilt drawn by two mules.

An Arab was striding along by the head of the near mule. It was Mansour.

Jean recognised him at once.

Mansour was out on business. He had pounced on the situation like the hawk that he was.

When the news had spread through the Arab quarter that there was trouble in the south, and that the Legion would be moving, Mansour had borrowed his mules and the cart from his uncle.

It was one of his ways of trade to follow the Legion, either on a *marche militaire* or even on serious business like the present.

Madame la Cantinière supplied the common soldier with Algerian wine and tobacco—the officers were Mansour's game. He was well known to them, and his cart was packed with all sorts of things from Martell's brandy to Abdulla cigarettes.

Mansour in his turn recognised Jean when the latter held out his hand to stop him.

"Why, 'tis you!" cried the dealer. "How came you here?"

Jean, in a few words, told how he had escaped to France and had returned to Algeria "for a purpose." Mansour had started the mules, and as Jean talked they walked, Mansour with his hand on a bridle, Karan by Jean's side.

"And you have got a girl with you," said Mansour.

"Yes," said Jean.

Mansour halted the mules. Then he motioned to Karan to get into the cart. There was plenty of room and to spare, for the trader's goods did not want much space.

"Is that the girl?" he asked when the mules were restarted.

"Yes," said Jean, knowing what the other meant.

"Was it through her that you came back here to Algeria after getting free?"

"Yes," said Jean, "it was."

Then he told exactly all that had happened, and of how Ben Oman had helped them with disguise and directed them to seek Ben Osman of Samia, who would hide them for a while till they had time to think and make plans.

"But Ben Osman is not at Samia," said Mansour, "he is in Sidi, I saw him but yesterday, and he will not return to Samia for some time."

This news put Jean all astray.

Samia had been a haven of refuge where, like the hind flying south, they might pause and rest. With the money in his pocket things might have been possible, a new disguise arranged, but all that was useless if Ben Osman was at Sidi.

"Mansour," said he, "I must return to Sidi, if what you say is true."

"How much money have you?" asked the dealer.

Jean told, and Mansour though surprised at the amount, showed nothing of his surprise.

"It is a good sum," said he, "and with it we may do something, but I can do nothing to help you till I return to Sidi. As for Ben Osman, even if you were to find him he is not to be trusted—no, he is not to be trusted."

"But what am I to do?" asked Jean.

"You had better come with me south," said Mansour. "This business with the Legion will be only a matter of weeks; I know, for I have had news of the strength of the rising. It is only the Shiek Usuff who is burning villages and military posts, and there will be nothing much unless Shalim joins him. I will charge you a thousand francs for the excursion for you and she, and in Sidi I will arrange matters so that you may escape—if she does not bring you back to look for a lost handkerchief."

Mansour's tone and words seemed to imply "you are just a marionette in the hands of this woman." But Jean scarcely noticed. The proposal of Mansour that they should go along with him and return with him to Sidi seemed feasible.

"But," said Jean, "you will be selling things to the Legion; how if any one were to recognise me?"

"I have nothing to do with the Legion," said Mansour, "only the officers. You must know that when the Legion camps or rests on the march nothing may come near it but the wind or the shadow of the bird in the air. Sentries are placed round it and it is death for an Arab to approach unless, like myself, he has his credentials.

"My cart does not go near it. I stop and hobble the mules, and go to the camp and take my orders and fetch my goods. That is all. If you stop with the cart you will not be seen."

"Well, then, I will come with you," said Jean.

"As you please," said Mansour assuming indifference, though, as a matter of fact, he saw a good profit to himself over this business. "But all the same, I would be as pleased if we were travelling alone."

"How?"

"We have a saying that every man's life is a caravan journey across the desert, from mirage to mirage, from oasis to oasis, and it is always a woman who leads the caravan. When a caravan is lost and the birds pick its bones it is the woman's fault or Fate—it is the same thing. Some women are fatal. A man is made by one woman for another woman to make or break—so it is written."

"Well," said Jean, "we are not going into the desert. It does not matter. Where I go she must go also. Have you anything else to say on this matter, Mansour?"

"I say nothing," replied the other. They passed a mile-stone marked, Sidi-Bel-Abbès, 7 kilometres.

The marching troops were so far ahead that had one listened, no sound of them could have been heard.

"At the tenth kilometre, they will rest," said Mansour. He explained the marching system on active service.

Every march, no matter what the conditions, must cover a distance of fifty kilometres; at every tenth kilometre five minutes rest is allowed.

They had passed the ninth kilometre stone some time when Mansour laid his hand on the near mule's bridle, stopping the cart. His quick ear had caught a far away whistle.

It was the signal for rest of the rear company. As the signal went along the line the whole regiment would cast itself down on either side of the road for a precious five minutes' breathing spell. This Mansour knew.

He lit a cigarette, and Jean, standing beside him under the ceiling of leaping stars, heard the wind flap the tilt canvas of the cart and far away from some farm or vineyard the barking of a dog.

He peeped into the cart where, huddled up in the gloom, he could make out the white figure of the girl. She seemed asleep.

Something showed beside her. It was the little drum. When she had changed at Ben Oman's she must have concealed it under her robe. The sight of the thing hit him strangely, bringing back the avenue at Serajevo and the Plain of the Tombs, Beljazi—and now here.

It was the visible symbol of her wandering, out-cast life. Was it the symbol of their future?

The far away whistle shrilled again through the night. The five minutes' rest was over.

The Legion was marching again, and Mansour, flinging away his cigarette end, restarted the mules.

CHAPTER XL

ROAD NO. 13

ALL the Algerian national roads are numbered. No. 1 is the great road that runs from Algiers to Medea, and from Medea across the Region des Hautes Plateaux and by the Oulad Nail mountains to Laghouat.

The road on which the Legion was now marching, followed by the cart of Mansour so strangely laden with Destiny and cigarettes, Passion and sundries for sale to the officers of the regiment, is No. 13.

It runs from Sidi to lé Télagh and Bossnet, and on to El-Aricha, bending west towards the Morocco frontier, and through a country of desolation and rock with mountains to the south. There is little or no sand. Farther south there is sand in places,