

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,

and all the attributes of the real desert, but that is beyond Oglat Nadja.

Mansour told Jean this as he strode along by the mules, halting them always just before the rest places of the phantom regiment ahead. The regiment that marched without ceasing save for these five-minute rests, marched in full field equipment, laden like beasts.

Mansour knew more about the Legion even than Jean who had served in it.

"And if a man faints or falls sick they tie him to an ammunition cart and drag him along," said Mansour, "for his own good. A légionnaire left behind on active service would be carved by the tribesmen and their women. How would you have it? The Legion is not loved."

The biting cold before dawn made the stars furiously alive, and then in the east, away beyond Saida and the Oulad Nail Mountains, came the light that lifted the sky above a cloud, diaphanous, gold-tinted, like a ghostly bird escaped from Paradise.

Then came the sun, and from far ahead the cheery notes of a bugle. Then came the warmth of morning, with the sun climbing the triumphant blue, and far ahead the dust of the marching columns, still marching, relentlessly, inexorably, but still viewless—a ghost by night, a column of dust by day.

Jean, half-broken with tiredness, could not complain, away ahead there were the men he knew, Lacoste amongst them, laden with rifle and ammunition, knapsack, folding tent, water-bottle and the rest. Mansour showed nothing of the journey, he seemed unbreakable, like a man of iron.

Karan still slept.

Peeping into the cart, Jean could see her huddled up almost in the same position, and now, clattering

along the road behind them came the sound of hoofs.

It was a squadron of Arab police following after, and soon to be sweeping ahead of the troops as advance guard, eagle-eyed and swift to pounce on snipers or rifle thieves.

As they passed the mule cart Jean felt their devouring eyes on him and his companion, but they did not stop. The leader had recognised Mansour, and with a hail and a wave of the hand passed on.

“Had you not been with me,” said the dealer, “those goums would have stopped and questioned you, and you, who can scarcely speak the tongue, what would you have said? Ben Oman was a fool sending you to Samia, but you are safe with me, and when we return to Sidi I will arrange matters so that you may leave the country——” He stopped and, as he strode along, he seemed thinking of the money still in Jean’s possession.

At the forty-ninth kilometre stone he halted and listened.

The sound of a bugle came on the wind. The Legion was camping.

Right ahead all the land by the roadside was being covered with little tents; the vivandiere was setting up her bar; the fires for the cooking pot were being lit.

Half a kilometre farther on Mansour turned the cart off the road, unharnessed the mules and, hobbling them, turned them loose to graze on the sparse grass and grey-green bushes between the rocks.

Karan had got out. She helped him to hand out the parcels; he waited, and having made a bundle of them, he took an automatic pistol from under his robe and gave it to Jean.

"I will be gone, perhaps, two hours," said he. "In chance of robbers take this. Should any one speak to you make the sign that you are dumb, by placing your fingers on your lips. So. But there will be nobody, for this is a very desolate place." Then he went off.

Jean looked at the girl, who had removed her yashmak. Their eyes clung, and in a moment his weariness had vanished.

He turned with her, his hand across her shoulder, and they sat down behind a great rock that sheltered them from the road.

Then, and still without a word, he turned to her and their lips met in a deathless kiss; the world, the Legion, Mansour and the chance of being seen forgotten.

When they returned to earth the sun had made an hour's march, they could hear the mules still close by cropping the bushes, and they could hear the wind stirring in the bent grass.

They talked. Actually, since their meeting last night in Sidi, this was the first talk they had had together. Yet they said scarcely anything about the events of the last few weeks.

To Karan, wanderer that she was, her journey from Ragusa to Sidi seemed nothing out of the way. It was easy. She had money. She had all Cavani's savings; not a great amount, but enough for her purpose twice over. And now as they talked, a listener who knew the facts about them might have been astonished at what they left unsaid.

At Beljazi Jean had plans for the future; he would paint, and if he succeeded return to Paris with Karan.

But now, as though the events of the last few months had altered him, or as though his nature, so

reactive to environment had come under dominion of the wander spirit—the gipsyism of the girl lying beside him, he said nothing of the future.

They were going south with Mansour in the track of the Legion, and would return with Mansour to Sidi where the dealer would help them to leave Algeria. After that ?

After that he seemed to have no plans.

The road took a bend there, and no gipsy bothers what lies beyond the bend of the road.

The desire for Art that had flamed up in him during his last days in the Legion seemed to have died down—only for the moment perhaps, but certainly under the influence of the girl beside him—an influence that had been steadily growing ever since that night on the Plain of the Tombs, steadily growing, though hidden at times by the pressure of events.

She had seemed almost forgotten during his flight from Ragusa, almost forgotten at times during his life in the Legion, yet she had brought him back to Sidi, and now in the hot sun, resting exhausted after their passionate embraces, it was as though the welding had been completed. He had joined her tribe at least for a while, taken her colour, become a wanderer like her, without thought for the morrow—at all events, for the moment.

If he ever found his way back to Paris, if he ever found fame, it would be despite all this. His nature would adapt itself again to the streets and to convention, no doubt, under altered circumstances, but now, and until that change came, he was a national of the country of the crows, the country whose roads lead no whither.

He helped her to her feet and they stood for a moment looking about them at the lonely sunlit country. The shadow of a flying marabout passed

over them, and to the south a trace of smoke rose in the windless air, some camp-fire of the Legion.

They came to the cart and, getting in under the shelter of the tilt, lay down, worn out, and fell asleep.

An hour later Mansour coming back, well pleased with the trade he had done, found them, pursed out his lips and, lighting a cigarette, lay down on the ground in the shadow of the cart, having first watered the mules from the water-cask slung beneath the tailboard and tethered them to a post—the last remnant of an old inn that had once stood by the road-side.

He was content to sleep on the ground, leaving the cart to the others. It was all business.

Jean with all that money about him was good business. The only thing that troubled the dealer was the girl. She had played the mischief with this fool of a légionnaire ; she was truly the woman who leads the caravan to leave its bones in the desert—but also she was an impediment to the plucking of Jean.

Women make difficulties. However, sleep was sleep, and there was only four hours, for the Legion would be marching again in five hours or six at the most.