

## CHAPTER XLI

## THE PHANTOM REGIMENT

DAY followed upon day and still the great march continued ; always south-west ; always under the same blue sky, the same sky of leaping stars ; the march of a phantom regiment, viewless, but heard vaguely in bugle calls blown on the wind, marked by the wheel tracks of ammunition wagons, old bottles, cans and papers cast away. A squadron of Spahis had joined up with the Legion as scouts, some in the rear, others fanned out ahead. A scout often passed the mule cart, sometimes with a word to Mansour. They passed Bossuet and Bedeau, and reached El-Aricha. Here road No. 13 ends, giving the choice of two tracks, one almost due west to the Morocco frontier, the other almost due south to Oglat Nadja.

The Legion took the southern track. This is the region of the lonely outposts, of little forts defending artesian wells, of tribes always ready to attack, and of sand-spaces amidst the desolation of rocks flung out from the threatening mountains of Ksour. This was the danger zone.

One day beyond Oglat Nadja Jean, walking by the mules, saw a figure on the skyline to the west—the figure of a man on a camel, motionless, cut against the blue. Then the camel began to move. It was approaching.

He called Mansour's attention, and the dealer stopped the mules whilst the camel rider approached.

He was an Arab, dark and keen-looking, with a

gun slung behind him. And Mansour, leaving the mules, went to meet him. Jean watched them talking together. The conversation lasted five minutes and then the stranger, turning the camel's head, made off due south and at full speed.

"What did that man want?" asked Jean of the other.

"He?" said Mansour. "Only to know who we were and what we were doing—the desert is inquisitive."

Jean said nothing, but he felt that Mansour had lied.

Was he in with the tribes, giving them information about the regiment just ahead, playing the double game of sutler and spy?

Why had that man ridden off full speed, if not to bear some news?

If Mansour was lying there was no use in questioning him.

Another point, the goods were nearly exhausted, the expensive cigarettes, the liqueur brandy; actually there was not enough left to make it worth while to follow the troops any farther. Then why not turn back now?

Here was a question he could ask, and the answer might give him some information on the point that was troubling his mind.

"Mansour," he said, "there is little more for you to trade with. The country gets more difficult every day. Why not return?"

The dealer gave him a dark side glance.

"There is yet work to be done," said he.

Jean flinched inwardly, but showed nothing of his feelings.

"What work?" he asked.

"That," said Mansour, "is my affair, and the affair of la Legion."

The naming of the Legion eased Jean's mind.

Of one thing he felt sure, Mansour had given information to the camel man. Well, what could he have told? Nothing much. The strength of the regiment and its direction of march. But had he in return received news about the tribes.

Was he playing the double game of spy for his people and spy for the Legion?

It was quite possible. If so it was certain that any news he gave to either side would be correct.

He dared not lie to the Legion, his interests were bound up with it at Sidi. He dared not lie to the Tribes.

A strange game played over a volcano, and perhaps for that reason more fascinating to the dark soul of Mansour. A few of the Legion's scouts could be seen far away and then gone.

Then, towards sunset, over the rocks, the sand, the sage bushes, and like a challenge to the blazing west came the notes of a bugle. The regiment was camping.

Right to the west the sand spaces had joined and spread as waters join to form a lake, and away out there Jean's eyes were attracted by a movement on the skyline. Camels and camel riders. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds they seemed, a vast procession streaming south, and soon to be swallowed by the coming night.

Jean plucked Mansour's robe. But the dealer had already seen, and now in a second, by a trick of the desert air, camels and camel riders had vanished as though the sun swiftly falling towards the skyline had washed them away in a burning flood of light.

Then Distance, the magician, who had put the camels in his pocket, began to build a city in the gauze blue of the East.

Away beyond where the Legion was camping there came into the sky the hint of domes and minarets, and a trace of flat-topped houses, all more diaphanous than a cloud, yet seeming in some curious way to reflect the sunset.

"Cairo," said Mansour indifferently, and speaking perhaps with truth, for there is a legend that the mirage country often seen near Mécheria and Oglat Nadja is the city of Cairo, just as there is a legend that the city sometimes seen on the sands of the Frisian coast is Stamboul.

Almost as he spoke it began to fade and vanish, and in its place through the windless blue of the East rose traces of smoke, the camp-fires of the Legion encamped two miles ahead.

They passed the bones of a camel in the sand. Just here runs the old caravan track from Mourzouk to Morocco, and the camel bones told of the fact.

Mansour glanced at them, then, a quarter of a mile further on, he halted the mules and prepared to camp.

He had watered them at the last well, filling up at the same time the cask and the two water-bottles. He fed them also from a bale of fodder procured at El Teb, the little post just south of Oglat Nadja.

Then as he prepared some food, he spoke definitely and for the first time of their return.

"You spoke about our coming back," said he. "Look at the mules. They will tell you about our return. Here there is nothing for them to eat, and their food will not last them beyond the day after to-morrow. We shall turn back to El Teb to-morrow, the more so as there will be a battle to-morrow. When I have given the Legion the news that I have in my mind, to-night my work will be done."

Jean knew that he was speaking of the host they had seen on the skyline, and of what he had gathered from the scout.

Yes, there would be a battle on the morrow, if not the day after. The very air seemed to hold the warning of the coming fight, and like an omen in the sky now sprinkled with stars, the scimitar of the new moon showed shining with the cold brilliancy of ice.

Mansour, as he ate, seemed disturbed in his mind. Sometimes he rose up and stood, a white figure beneath the stars. He seemed listening. But there was nothing to be heard. Nothing but the wind of the desert that had risen with the night, blowing from the Ksour Mountains.

When the meal was over he lit a cigarette. Karan had laid herself down on the warm earth and was resting, head on arm. The dealer, seated, was silent.

Then, the cigarette finished, he rose up.

"I am going on my business," said he. "You will look to the mules and the cart. There is no danger, all our men are to the south."

He turned and walked off in the direction of the camp. He did not know that the Beni Hassan tribe were not to the south, but to the west. A thousand strong, coming up with the silence of blown sand beneath the scimitar of the new moon, a hinge of the great trap that El Kreider, the strategist of the desert, had prepared for la Legion. And the Beni Hassan had no respect, where loot was concerned, for friend or foe. The Beni Hassan, who would have gobbled their ally, Satan, had they met him, when the war and loot fever was upon them. And they knew nothing of Mansour, these sand devils fetched up from far beyond Ghardaia, nothing of his usefulness as the other tribesmen did.

In this ignorance Mansour strode on beneath the night till he reached sight of the camp-fire. Ignorant he was too, that the scouts thrown out to the west were coming in full speed as were those to the south.

He reached the zone of sentries, was challenged, halted and declared himself. But he found no camp. Though fires were lit and though soupe had been served not a little tent showed beneath the stars.

The field telegraph had brought news that the farthest flung scouts were now supplementing. The Legion was standing to arms, the ammunition carts uncovered. The Legion was fulfilling its chief function, which was that of a great magnet.

Men on foot cannot chase and bring to battle men on horses or camels, but they can draw them to attack—and annihilation.

The Legion marches into the desert and puts itself on offer, and now the bidders were coming. Burbling camels, spume flinging horses, guns, swords of Damascus, green banners, spears, a moving sea of warriors flooding from west, south and east—a tragic host lit by the stars towards the great camp silent as death, and the waiting Lebel rifles. But they were still far off, and at least two hours must pass before they were close enough to form for attack—and then they would wait for dawn.

Mansour was passed along to a group of officers where the colonel of the regiment was standing with, beside him, a tall old man on whose breast glittered a star—the star of the Grand Cross. It was the Commandant-General of Algeria. The horses of these officers, held in a group by a couple of orderlies, stood waiting for their riders.

Mansour, his hands crossed on his breast, salaamed to the commandant-general, then to the others.

Then he gave his information about the coming advance from the south.

"And the west?" asked the colonel.

"There is no danger to the west," said Mansour.

The colonel laughed. He was a hard man. He was also used to Arabs. Though he had used the dealer as a gatherer of information that always turned out right, he had not the slightest doubt that Mansour was also a gatherer of information for the other side. Indeed, he had once laughingly taxed him with it. What did it matter.

The stuff Mansour had to give away was valueless, whereas he had more than once, both at Sidi and on service, given worthwhile information about the other side.

Here, however, was a serious blunder, or was it a blunder?

"You are wrong," said the colonel; "or perhaps our information just come in is wrong. However, you must wait and see."

He ordered Mansour to be detained.

## CHAPTER XLII

"DO YOU HEAR ANYTHING?"

WHEN the dealer went off leaving Jean and Karan alone the girl, who had been lying on her side, raised herself on her elbow. She seemed listening.

"Do you hear anything?" asked Jean.

"Nothing," said Karan; "and yet—no—it is only, perhaps, the wind."

She rose up, and he rose also and stood beside her.

The new moon was getting down into the west,