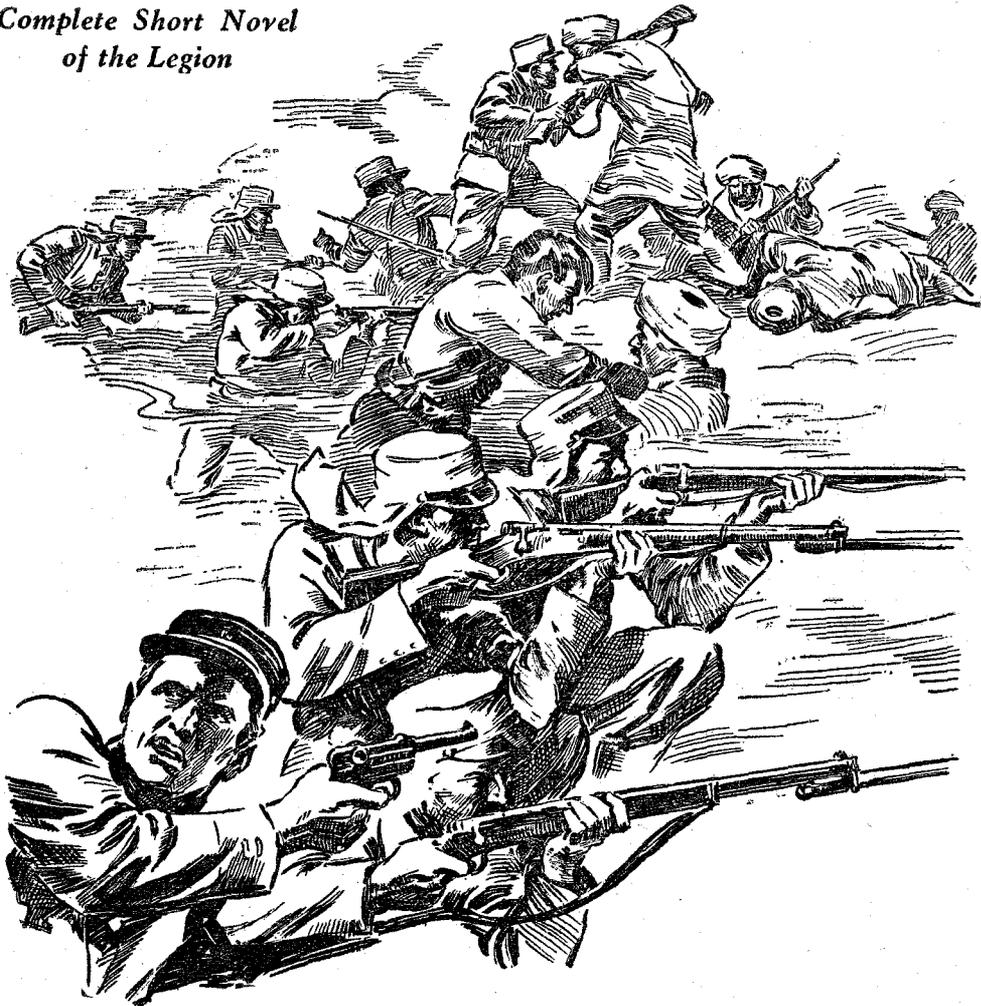


*Complete Short Novel
of the Legion*



All Survivors Report

By GEORGES SURDEZ

Author of "The Blood Call," "A Family Council," etc.

CHAPTER I

DETAIL TO ANGER

"ALL sentries will be doubled and changed ever hour. We shall eat cold rations, and we must light no fires." The lieutenant commanding the mounted detachment was giving the instructions for the night. "There is a prob-

ability that they do not know we are after them and we must not advertise our presence out here."

Raynal watched his friend as he stood before the long lines of Legionnaires. His tall silhouette was trim and athletic in the white uniform, his braid glittered.

The old admiration stirred in him: Dumanoir was big and handsome, with



fine, strong features, a boyish grin and the contrast between his light blond hair and the deep tan. Yes, he was surely very brave, and as certainly too reckless.

Not only was there no probability that the Saharan raiders they were following did not know of their presence, but there was no possibility. Nearly eighty men, more than two scores of mules, and six horses in this detachment.

The mules had brayed, would bray; the horses had neighed, would neigh. In the emptiness of the desert, sounds carry very far, even for European ears.

And a raiding band never failed to leave scouts several hours' journey behind the main body. It was stupid to think that none of those keen-eyed, experienced tribesmen had detected a numerous detachment of Europeans advancing openly on their trail.

But that was Dumanoir: he believed

intensely in anything he wanted to believe. What was odd was that the Legionnaires, among whom were many who had served in the Sahara for years, listened to him with every appearance of trust. Even Sub-lieutenant Vernier, the leathery, matter-of-fact subaltern of thirty-four, appeared to accept what was said.

Odd? Not at all. Raynal had always seen this occur. Dumanoir, a graduate of St. Cyr Military School, had an orator's magnetism. He could convince himself of anything and then convince others. Last night, for instance, he had outlined his plan on the map—touched a pencil's tip here and there:

"We camp there tomorrow night; and the following morning, we catch them loading at the Tizza Wells and knock the spots off them."

Twice in two years, Dumanoir had succeeded in such ventures. Raynal, who had been his classmate at the school, who had

come into the Foreign Legion with him, had had doubts on both occasions. But Dumanoir had bent fate with his strong hands, and they had emerged victorious, to obtain rewards.

The hitching chains were stretched between the stakes, the animals fastened to them. No tents were put up. Night was growing swiftly, and the jagged hills to the west were black fangs against the flaming sky.

There was a breath-taking stillness in the atmosphere. Raynal was almost suffocated by a premonition of disaster. But no one else appeared in the least worried.

Vernier was placing the sentries, two by two, as instructed. Dumanoir, who had lighted a cigarette, watched him, ignoring the lieutenant at his side: Raynal, almost as tall, less compactly built, a dark, long-limbed young man. He was smiling, but the tiny muscles moving on his jaws showed that he was displeased at something, and he was sulking.

"Sentries placed, *mon lieutenant*." The sub-lieutenant returned, saluted: "The sergeants have their schedules for the changes."

Raynal scanned his hard face carefully, for a trace of doubt. But Vernier was hiding nothing. He trusted his chief's word against his own judgment, his common sense.

For Vernier, who had been on several Saharan missions, to Taoudeni, to Kidal, to Timbuktu, must be aware that a raiding band could not be surprised by a European detachment of this size. But like all others he was fascinated by Dumanoir's reputation for success, by the array of ribbons won in twenty-three months of service.

"All right, Vernier. Let's eat," said Dumanoir.

THE orderlies had prepared the sleeping bags of the officers, in the center of the camp. A cold meal was set out on a cloth laid on the sand, cold meats, bread, wine, canned peaches. Dumanoir ate heartily heedless of the gritting under his teeth.

As soon as he had finished, the map reappeared.

"The well is only twenty-one kilometers away. We start off at three, sharp. Maximum speed for three hours, and we are within attacking distance. We drop off the animals under proper guard here"—he indicated the spot—"out of range. We split into two detachments, one approaching at an angle, thus; the other progressing so as to cut off their retreat—"

"There are at least seventy of them," Raynal objected. "They have Mauser rifles. The cartridges we picked up, dropped by their hunters, show that."

"Listen, *mon vieux*"—Dumanoir's face could not be seen in the increasing darkness, but his shrug of impatience was plain—"our scouts picked up two shells dropped by a hunting party. But did it ever occur to you that the men sent out to hunt game would be armed with the best weapons in the outfit?"

"Two empty shells may mean one Mauser as easily as seventy. Suppose they do have Mausers? Does that mean we let them go by? We match them in numbers and we're as good as they are."

"As long as we have water, yes."

"We have enough for thirty-six hours. Long before that, we can refill at the well."

"If we get to the well," Raynal said. "Vernier, what do you think?"

"I?" Vernier was embarrassed by the direct question. "Well—we'll need a bit of luck, at that. But Lieutenant Dumanoir is right; if you looked at the dark side all the time, you'd never try anything."

"You're answered, Paul," Raoul Dumanoir laughed. "Ever since you returned from leave, you've been holding out for the principles of war laid down by the late and lamented Foch. You forget that we are in the Sahara, where the first requisite of a leader is daring. I feel like stretching my legs. Coming, Paul?"

"Yes."

Vernier remained behind. He tactfully avoided intruding himself between the two old friends. They strolled away side by side. Both had changed their laced high

boots for the Saharan sandals, the *nayels*.

It was pleasant to walk on the crunching sand, through the freshening wind, after the dust and heat of the long day.

They circled the sentries' ring. Then Dumanoir halted, rested a big hand on Raynal's shoulder: "No one knows you as well as I do, Paul. Not even your family. So I know you are perturbed about something, uneasy. Are you deflating?"

To deflate, in army slang, meant to lose one's nerve. An association of ideas: A man's character collapsed as he lost his courage just as a balloon collapsed when the gas was released. Raynal grew angry.

"No, Raoul. But I know you had orders to keep to the north, and not to come this far south under any circumstances. The Camel Corps companies are on the alert here, and there must have been some reason for those orders. If things go wrong, we shall be in hot water."

"I shall be, you mean," Dumanoir corrected. "I'm in command. You have nothing to do with it. Things won't go wrong. You know, that's the trouble out here, as a rule: the officers fear responsibility, blame, while native chieftains have only themselves to answer to. So the native chieftains are bolder. In consequence, they get away with a lot of things and get the reputation of being smarter.

"But there is something else on your mind. I've heard rumors."

"Who from? Where?"

"At the post, at Ksar-Nazrain. An army station out here is like a small village." Dumanoir shrugged. "We've been friends for years. You could talk to me."

"Yes, I could."

Raynal hesitated. He was faced with something he dreaded far more than the risks of the combat: an explanation, possibly a quarrel with Dumanoir.

HE HAD been on leave a short time before, across the mountains, in Meknes. Raynal senior, a high official in the Protectorate of Morocco, had given him some advice. And he had picked an old subject, Raynal's admiration for Du-

manoir, which had started during their first year together at St. Cyr.

"Your chief objection, Paul," the old gentleman had said, "is that your friend Raoul would object to a change. I have never denied that he is worthy of admiration. He graduated with high marks and he is a splendid athlete. He is a good friend in that he would certainly die for a friend.

"But would he live for a friend? You do. You intended to enter the flying branch of the service, you have passed examinations for native languages. But you persist in remaining in a spot where your special qualifications do not help you. To be Dumanoir's second. You picked the Legion to remain with him, transferred once to stay with him. You have become his shadow."

"He is a born leader, Father."

"And has the self-esteem of the born leader, and the ruthlessness. You're my son, and I don't particularly relish the idea that you may be killed not only in the line of duty but to get him an additional citation or promotion. You know he is reckless, you know what part luck played in his success. His luck will not always hold out."

"He is the finest man I know."

"Possibly. But you're throwing away your career to promote his. However, it is as you wish."

Raynal had been resentful, then his father's words had taken root. He had taken stock of the past, and had realized that Dumanoir always contrived to make anyone with him, even superior officers, appear to be his seconds.

Just as, now, he was risking eighty lives against orders. This detachment had been sent out to patrol a definite zone, and was now hung in space, communications willfully cut off, some seventy miles too far southward.

YOU'RE a bit embarrassed, aren't you?" Dumanoir resumed, his voice growing harsh. "You did send in an application for transfer." His hand dropped

from Raynal's shoulder. "That means leaving the Legion, you know."

"Of course."

"And implies a long stay in France. It will be years before you get back into living again."

"Living?" Raynal repeated.

"Yes, living. This"—Dumanoir's hand moved in the shadows. "This is what we craved, those last months in school: the Legion, the open, action. To chance a patriotic platitude: serving. Serving as a soldier, not as a sort of station master in some quiet garrison town. You're twenty-four—"

"As you are."

"And you'll plunge right into routine work. You're quitting."

"Opinions might differ on that, Raoul," Raynal replied. "It may be that aviation may have its own risks. In any case, I did not seek the change."

"During a conversation with my father, General Hermes, who is on the Residents staff, found out that I had passed the exams for native languages—no trick at all, as I was reared in North Africa—and that I had a pilot's license, civilian."

"Officers with such requirements are needed, for reconnoitering south of the Atlas Range and on the Rio del Oro border. That region has to be explored, mapped, for civilian flying to the Soudan in the future. It's a big job."

"It means quitting the Legion," Dumanoir insisted.

"That's my sole regret. Foolish, perhaps, as I might remain a subaltern for years. Take Delpech, for example: a graduate of St. Cyr, intelligent, twice wounded, nine years in. Still a lieutenant, with nothing to show beyond his colonial cross."

Dumanoir sneered aloud like a small boy.

"Bahah—we don't work for promotion, decorations, glory, any more than for money. We serve, we are free, we live, with the chance of some excitement now and then. A man's life."

"I'm not losing that. I shall be on active service in Africa after three months of

special training at Istres Flying School."

"What do you think the men will think of you?"

"They'll forget it."

But Raynal was concerned. The Legionnaires would not like his voluntary transfer to another branch. For them the Legion was an end in itself, not a means.

It was home, refuge for them. They could not conceive that any man could wish himself elsewhere, because it had helped them recover a goal in life.

Good men, all of them, warriors. The thick-necked senior-sergeant, a German-Swiss named Leibenroth, with his comic accent; Sergeant Malthos, long and dark, a mysterious fellow, who played the piano very well and was a master at chess—neither of them would approve of the change. And Vernier would be shocked.

"Forget it, will they?" Dumanoir answered. "Never. They've seen it growing as I have—"

"Seen what growing?"

"Your funk, old man, your damnable funk."

"See here, Raoul—"

"You don't like me to call things by their names, do you? Listen, I've been watching you, shaking in your boots. The Sahara scares you, fighting scares you. You've been looking for a way out. I wonder you returned from leave at all, didn't find some way of dodging another patrol down here."

"All your whining about going against orders, when we have the chance of picking up a lot of stuff, perhaps of bagging Milud er Brabi. Mausers, they have Mausers!"

"I forbid you to speak as—"

"You what? Why, you dirty little coward—"

RAYNAL'S fist caught Dumanoir on the chin, and the bigger man fell back a step. "You still have a little guts, Paul. Enough to hit at me. That's surprising."

"Don't worry, there will be no duel. But you'll think things over, and stay with us. You'll feel better after we've

been under fire again, and you've come through."

Raynal nursed his hand. "My application is in, and stays in, Dumanoir. And let me say this: If you saw a chance of getting ahead by leaving the Legion, even if it meant joining the cops, you'd take it. You filled out an application for the Mobile Guard, sixteen months ago, only you found you hadn't put in the required time."

"Spying on me?"

"By chance. Someone spoke about it in Meknes, when your name was mentioned. Not being in the Legion, the chap did not know it amounted to an accusation."

Dumanoir was silent for a long space.

"Let's go back," he said at last. And they strode back to the center of the camp. Vernier joined them. They sat for a few minutes in silence. Around them rose the snores of the tired, sleeping men. The mules rattled their chains monotonously, endlessly, *tick-tingle-tingle-tick-tick* . . .

"You have the first watch, Vernier, haven't you?" Dumanoir asked suddenly.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"All right. We'll turn in." His voice was vibrant with restrained anger. Suddenly, his control seemed to break. "Vernier!"

"Lieutenant?"

"You'll have the circling detachment, I'll take the attacking party. Lieutenant Raynal will command the mule guards. I know it is customary to leave a sergeant, in a detachment of our strength. But the lieutenant is weary and we must give him a chance to rest."

"Listen, Dumanoir—" Raynal started.

"You begrudge the risk. Certainly, I shall do nothing to cut off your career too soon, old man."

"I object to—"

Vernier interrupted gravely: "I wish to listen only to the orders that concern me. I believe it is better for officers to keep such matters private."

He added, in a lower voice: "Some of the men must be awake. You two are close friends, you've had a row. Tomorrow, it will be forgotten. I'm your inferior in

ranking, but your senior in experience. No good comes of open quarreling. What happened between you out there is bad enough—"

"You know?" Dumanoir murmured.

"Already. You forget that the sentries are alert, and that shadows can be distinguished against the sky. No one will talk—where it will harm either of you. But you want to appear friendly, to avoid spreading gossip."

Vernier rose, buckled on his pistol: "Well, first turn of inspection!"

CHAPTER II

BREATHLESS MESSAGE

THE night was ending and the dunes rolled against the dark sky, white as snow under the waning moon, when the Legion detachment halted at the emplacement where the animals would be parked.

They had covered the distance at a fantastic speed for infantry, because of the system in use in the mounted companies: One man in the saddle of a mule, the other hanging on and trotting alongside.

Twice each hour, at a whistled signal, there was a quick change, the man on the mule alighting, refreshed by a comparative rest, the man afoot replacing him on the animal.

"Officers and noncoms—attention."

A circle was formed around Lieutenant Dumanoir, who gave his last instructions in detail, rapidly, confidently.

"Don't answer the first warning shots," he concluded. "That will give us additional time to approach. If we do not return the sentries' fire, there will be a few seconds of indecision among the aroused men. They will remain prone, thinking there might have been a mistake, a guard with a nervous trigger-finger. Even ten seconds count. Understood?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," several voices replied.

"Lieutenant Raynal—"

"*Mon lieutenant?*"

"You will take charge of the guard detachment here. Under no circumstances are

you to move until I send word to come forward. You understand?"

"Perfectly, Lieutenant."

"All right. See you later."

He did not offer to shake hands.

The attacking parties started out, almost as one: forty men behind Dumanoir, thirty with Vernier. They parted some distance away, the sub-lieutenant toward the left, that is progressing south and east to circle the well and head off fugitives from Dumanoir's drive due south.

In five minutes, the long files had slipped beyond the dunes, vanished from sight. And, as if their disappearance had been a signal, the sun bobbed up, the eastern dunes suddenly were crested with fire, long shadows stretched on the soil.

Eleven Legionnaires had remained with Raynal—ten privates and a sergeant. They drove in light stakes, chained the animals in groups of five. The lieutenant examined the location carefully, and did not like it too well.

Of course, the necessity for concealment was great; nevertheless he and his charges were too exposed, on the floor of a shallow valley dominated by crests on all sides.

To the west, the dunes eased upward gently, were perfectly smooth, without cover. But the eastern slope was steeper, strewn with numerous boulders, some very large. That slope was but five or six hundred meters away, and would have answered the purpose of concealment, with the addition of some protection.

But he had orders; and regardless of his attitude toward the orders of his chiefs, Dumanoir expected his orders to be obeyed.

Raynal listened and shrugged. Even his untrained ears could perceive sounds from the Legion parties, the clicking of metal, once or twice muffled voices. What worried him was the complete silence from the well. At this hour, the caravan should have started to pack.

He had a premonition of evil, but fought against it, calling it pre-combat anguish, familiar to men when the nerves grow tense. He found himself hoping that the

raiders had left during the night, to avoid a clash.

Then he wondered whether Dumanoir had not been right: Was he losing his nerve? How else did a normally courageous man explain a growing weakness, save as he explained his, by thinking of danger?

His own plight worried him. If Dumanoir was successful, how would his part appear in official reports? Left to command the mule guards, when Vernier, Leibenroth, Malthos or four or five other sergeants could have been left instead?

He grew furious at the realization of how well Dumanoir had arranged things: If the attack was successful, Raynal would have taken no active part in it. If it failed, he, as second in command, must shoulder part of the blame. For not once had he registered a definite protest against disobedience of orders before witnesses.

HE GLANCED at his watch: The first shots should come soon. He walked about restlessly, halted before Tchanak, the young sergeant left with him, a stocky, dark-skinned chap, with a flashing grin.

"What do you think of it, Tchanak?"

Tchanak's grin did not appear. He brought his heels together, stood at attention to reply, in a crisp voice that fringed insolence: "I do not think, Lieutenant."

"Perhaps you're right," Raynal admitted, walking on.

Tchanak, ordinarily eager to chat with an officer, had retrenched himself behind his inferior rank to refuse conversation. This was evidence that Raynal's quarrel with Dumanoir was known, and that the men sided with the commander.

This attitude was plain in the others, too. They came to attention when Raynal passed them, but did not smile or speak.

"Damn them," Raynal muttered.

Yet he understood them perfectly well. For years, his devotion to Dumanoir had been unswerving; he had been with him against the world.

And he noted another strange fact: His admiration for Dumanoir had started to change when he had learned, quite by

chance, that the big fellow had made a secret application for transfer out of the Legion. And that was the very thing he himself was doing—transferring.

Why was it a sin, almost a crime, to change from the Legion to another outfit? The Legion was simply infantry, superb infantry, but more recent in creation than many regiments in the regular army. Yet the Legion exacted a special, unswerving loyalty.

Very few men, once they had made the grade, been accepted as Legion officers, ever left the corps of their own initiative. It was a matter of common knowledge that colonels had delayed their own promotion because attaining the stars of brigadier general meant leaving the Legion.

It was illogical, crazy—but armies die without such illogical, crazy prides and traditions.

THE sun was perceptibly higher, the heat was starting. By now, the detachments must be very near the well. And still there had been no warning shots, no outcries. Perhaps the raiders had left.

The men had been following their comrades in imagination, as he had; for unconsciously they had stopped talking, faced south, straining their eyes against the blanketing dunes, ears alert for the first sounds. Being Legionnaires, they cursed their own inconspicuous share in the coming action.

Tchanak was rolling a cigarette, in pretended unconcern. But his fingers kept fumbling, and the tobacco crumbled through the burst paper without his thinking of lighting up.

Suddenly, one of the mules lifted its head, about to bray, and a guard leaped and caught it by the nostrils. A second later, all heard the call it had been about to answer, a distant, but unmistakable bray.

"They're there, they're there—"

Raynal checked an impulse to verify the loading of his pistol. A number of his men were not under such control, for they lifted their guns, slid open the bolt, for the

comforting sight of the brass breech in the oiled steel.

Brusquely, there was a ripping, crackling explosion, a solid volley, and not fired by the Legionnaires' Lebel's. It is impossible to define in words the difference between the detonations of various fire-arms, but the trained ear is not deceived.

These shots resounded oddly, less "coppery," more "greasily" than the Government weapons. And that first volley was followed by a rapid, swelling fusillade. Raynal estimated the number of rifles in action at thirty or even more.

Almost at once another discharge crashed out, some distance further, and kept up, as brisk, as strong. Undoubtedly, the flanking force under Vernier had met resistance also.

One fact leaped to mind at once: these solid volleys without preliminary warning shots or challenge, showed that the enemy had not been surprised, but had been waiting, alert.

And from this fact sprang another fact: The natives must believe that they had a strong chance to win, because Saharans never accept a combat that can be avoided—unless they believe the issue of it will be of profit to them.

Tchanak had reached the same conclusions, evidently, for he forgot his hostile attitude. "Sounds bad, Lieutenant. Like an ambush." He lifted his chin to indicate the western slope. "Maybe we better get under cover. They'll sure try to swipe the animals."

Raynal laughed, with a confidence he did not feel.

"Our chaps will clean them up pretty quick. Listen, there goes an automatic—"

The trepidation of the gun crashed through the fusillade. The men knew the peculiarities of all automatic weapons with the detachment, and instantly identified this one: "Number Two—that's Bazan shooting. Two francs that junk jams up on him in three minutes."

The Lebel's wielded by Legionnaires were in action now, individual firing. Other automatics picked up the metallic song

The din assumed the proportions of a pitched combat.

Raynal felt lured by the firing; the groups under Vernier were his own groups, and he felt that he should be at their head. To hang about, idle, waiting, was irritating.

"We might move up a bit closer," Tcharnak suggested. "How about it, Lieutenant?"

"Orders are to stick it here," Raynal told him. "Do you think I like it?"

Tcharnak's even white teeth showed in a grin. Then, although his mouth did not close, his expression changed, a bewildered look grew in his eyes. He lurched forward, and Raynal instinctively caught him.

Then he heard the shot, released the body which fell heavily, looked up toward the sound.

THE crest to the west was flickering pale flame, the air was vibrating. Probably a dozen men were in sight, moving down the side of the dune in long leaps.

Raynal bent, tore the carbine from the dead sergeant's grip, straightened and opened fire. Though a sense of panic shook his frame, his reflexes were accurate. Eye and hands were steady. He did not miss one of the three shots in the clip.

Several others had recovered from their surprise and were firing. In fifteen seconds the attackers melted, some remaining in plain sight, motionless, but seven or eight running back to cover.

Raynal thought rapidly. It would be foolish to remain here, in the open, under plunging fire. These natives might be but a vanguard for a stronger party. Orders or not, ten dead men would be of no help to the detachment.

"Starting with one, alternate men lead the animals toward the boulders," he called. "Others keep with me."

He hesitated, looking down at Tcharnak, who was grinning forever. He lifted him in his arms, draped him over a passing mule. So far as possible, the Legion does not abandon its dead to mutilation.

As the animals were trotted back, Raynal and five men, widely spaced, faced the crest and sniped at the enemies. They had the advantage so far, as the range was somewhat too long for the Berbers to do their best shooting.

"Cartridges!" Raynal called. A man tossed him a few clips. "Two men stay with me; others run back two hundred yards, open fire."

He and the two privates walked slowly backward, their eyes on the crest. There were more men up there than before, judging by the flashes and the increasing spurting of sand around their feet.

"Take it easy, they're not following fast."

Detonations behind him: the three men had covered the two hundred yards, had turned and resumed firing. Raynal and his men turned and sprinted past them. And supported them in turn as they retreated.

The situation was not as yet dangerous. The natives showed no strong desire to follow swiftly. Probably they were waiting for a chieftain to come and give them instructions. Or their actions depended on reports from the other fields.

The firing continued in the distance, near the well. Raynal wondered how many men the natives had. Certainly more than the seventy-odd they had been following.

And, although Dumanoir had laughed at him, those opposite were using rapid fire guns, some Mausers, with a scattering of Winchesters. In any case, weapons too precise to be faced in the open.

Dead guards and dead animals would be of no use, he kept repeating.

Raynal sought to keep his mind on the present problem. Nevertheless, he worried about the situation as a whole. It was bad, any way one figured it. The surprise attack had failed, the enemy was showing up much stronger than expected, and there was no chance of receiving help.

The detachment was now too far south to be seen by the regular aviation patrols, and Dumanoir had taken care not to report his plans, for fear of a counter-order. Dumanoir had gambled everything.

And fate had called him.

There was enough water for thirty-six hours, water for sound men. But there would be wounded, for some of those shots were finding marks. And the nearest well to the north was forty-five miles away. Water, water, water . . .

He walked back as in a dream, paused to fire.

AS THE range increased, the natives became more daring, leaked down the western dune in small knots. They showed the amazing agility of true Saharans. Wiry, tireless men, brave, crafty, without temptation to vain display of courage. Raiding was their profession; they were practical fellows working at an old business.

The lieutenant looked over his shoulder. The animals were screened behind the bigger boulders. Not as completely as one might wish, but much better than in the open. The Legionnaires had hitched them securely, and were firing comfortably, propping their rifles on small parapets scooped up from the sand.

Raynal joined them within a few minutes, and rested in the shadow of a big rock.

Widely scattered, cautious, but persistent, the Berbers were creeping across the open ground.

The dead sergeant had been laid on the ground, a handkerchief over his face. After taking breath, Raynal passed from man to man, exchanging a few words, correcting the rear sights in some cases.

Unconsciously, his voice had the tone he used at drill; and this was comforting to him and to the men.

"How do you think it's going over there, Lieutenant?" one of the Legionnaires asked. "Sound like there are a lot of them around here."

"Everything will be all right. The lieutenant knows his job."

"That's true, Lieutenant."

Raynal crouched, and counted the enemy with care. He estimated his foes at between thirty and forty, not quite

enough for a rush on ten soldiers firing from cover. There would be no rush for a while.

He scribbled a message on a page of his note-book. He glanced at his watch, wrote down the time:

Attacked by fairly numerous band. Have retreated behind boulders, east slope. One killed, no wounded. Raynal, Lt. 7.22.

Then he called: "Mesnil!"

A rangy young soldier approached.

"Duck over the ridge and get this to Lieutenant Dumanoir. Think you can find him?"

"Sure, Lieutenant. If I don't, nobody'll bawl me out."

He took the slip and started up the slope. The Berbers tried a few long shots at him, but he got away safely.

His messenger gone, Raynal listened to the shooting. What was happening? Who was winning? There was no answer in the blazing sun, in the hot sand. The exchange of shots with the enemy continued.

Then a shout attracted his attention; several men pointed out a running figure. The man was bounding down the incline in enormous strides. Soon he slid flat beside the officer. But he was so winded that he could not talk at first; merely opened and closed his mouth.

Raynal asked him for his paper, and he shook his head.

"Take it easy, easy," Raynal advised. The chap was from Vernier's party.

"No—time to—write. Walked—into it. Six killed—right off. First volley—we—we were—flanked—ambushed! The sub-lieutenant—said—you stay—here and he—comes back here—can't—can't go—go ahead. Too many. Lieutenant Du—Dumanoir—also stopped—could see—he's hit—pretty badly—guys carrying him along—coming this way."

"How many are they?" Raynal asked.

"Don't—know. Seems like thousands." The runner was recovering his breath. "Oh, they cut us up pretty, all right! Lying in wait—never saw anything until they shot. Lots of big fellows in the bunch I saw. Sub-lieutenant, who's been around,

says they're Rekabats. We must have dropped fifteen their first rush, but a lot are left . . ."

CHAPTER III

WE MARCH WITH DEATH

THE following hours formed a frantic, fantastic series of disconnected scenes. For long afterward, Raynal could not be sure whether he recalled the episodes in their proper sequence, so confused had he become.

Soon after the runner arrived with news that Dumanoir was wounded and Vernier beating a retreat, the natives opposite his position made a determined attack. Their numbers had swelled from two scores to sixty or more; and they raced across the valley, lean-limbed, naked men, howling.

Checked once, then again, they were about to try a third time when a number of Legionnaires spilled into the depression; Dumanoir's groups falling back before other foes.

Within five minutes, the men under Vernier came in sight, in another place, pushed back by another band of warriors. For better than two hours, the three separated segments of the Legion detachment fought to unite, to form a whole.

There were a hundred small scenes, acts of heroism forever forgotten. As always, the Legionnaires sought to carry off their dead. When it became plain that it was impossible, the bodies had to be stripped of arms and ammunition.

Legionnaires had to fight, retreat and carry wounded men along.

At one time the desperate situation nevertheless approached comedy, when European soldiers and native raiders were so mixed that all firing would cease for seconds.

For instance, Dumanoir's groups were caught between enemies on the western dune and others in the valley, the natives in the valley in turn were caught between the lieutenant commanding's riflemen and the guns of the Legionnaires of the mule guard, under Raynal.

The sun beat down in true Saharan fashion; the sand was hot as a stove lid. To make matters worse, a strong searing wind started, that whipped sand particles about like spume lashed from combers.

This ultimately worked out to the advantage of the Legionnaires, disciplined soldiers, provided with a code of whistle signals. The native chieftains had no method of conveying to widely scattered groups the orders needed.

Raynal and his men served as a rallying center for the others, naturally, being provided with a position somewhat easier to hold. As soon as a bunch of Legionnaires reached the line of boulders, it would drop its load of wounded and salvaged weapons and cartridges, and join the organized defense.

"This way—this way—"

The pharmacist corporal, who had been with Vernier's men, found his stuff on a pack mule, and started to work, working under horrible sanitary conditions, without sterilized water, in the blowing sand dust, using iodine profusely.

Raynal, who occasionally assisted him, grew sick, for he knew that many of the wounds would be tetanic in short order. There was a supply of serum somewhere in the medical stores, but—where?

The hastily unpacked supplies scattered, as men knocked things aside in their rushes to and from endangered spots. The primordial necessity was the immediate defense.

Vernier was led in by another wounded man. He appeared to have been blinded; his whole face was a mass of caking blood and sand, leaking in thick gout at the chin. He had caught a slug in the head, high, and the flesh was so torn, so sensitive, that it was impossible under such conditions to ascertain the extent of the damage.

He recognized Raynal's voice, choked off his cursing and laughed.

"The joke's on me, Raynal: This was meant for you."

Then he added: "Leave me alone—can't do a thing for me now. And I suppose you're the only officer able to walk."

THE automatic rifles had jammed because of the sand. The riflemen, as soon as they reached comparative safety, started to clean them. Reserve magazines were taken from the ammunition mules.

And Raynal ordered grenades distributed. The explosions added an acrid odor to the smells inevitable on a battlefield, the stench of human sweat and drying blood.

The mules—good, sensible animals—did not try to break away: they knew where the water was. But they expressed their distaste for what was going on by kicking out at random.

Raynal ran from one spot to another, tried to bolster up the line by careful placing of the automatics as soon as they were reported in condition to work.

Through his own perturbation, he found time to admire the men he commanded. There was no panic, no despair. Of course, there was nowhere to run, no direction a man could take to feel safe.

But what astonished him afresh was the casual good nature of all of them. Not once but ten times, he heard comments on how superbly the natives had trapped them.

"Eh, they got us leaning over, didn't they?"

"Nothing the matter with those guys, what?"

"They ought to hire whoever fixed this up for us to teach at Polytechnic School."

"What's that stink?"

"Stink? I had a pint of pernod in my hip pocket and it's busted. It's a grand feeling; try it sometime."

A man gestured, pointed: "There's the lieutenant. Must have tripped over something!"

Two Legionnaires were dragging Dumanoir between them; several others formed a screen behind the group, firing and swinging rifle butts to keep away dogged pursuers. An officer's head is a fine collector's piece in the Sahara.

Raynal ran to meet his old friend. Dumanoir, bareheaded and blood-stained, moaned as his hand was grasped. Like Vernier, he had a head wound. In addition,

blood showed through the cloth of his uniform on the flank and on the right leg.

He mumbled something unintelligible, and it was clear that he was but half-conscious.

Behind him came the rest of the stragglers.

Raynal waited a few seconds, scanning the swarm of Berbers, to spot a khaki uniform, or a white tunic, then he gave the signal for the automatics to resume fire at will.

Automatically, he looked at his watch, to check the time. And the words shaped themselves in his head as he would write them down in his report!

Eight-fifty-five: All survivors appear to be in.

SENIOR-SERGEANT Leibenroth, slightly wounded in the shoulder, nevertheless had thought to take a small group up to the crest, to guard against a circling movement and an attack from that quarter.

Raynal saw Vernier, seated with his back against a stone, his hands loose on his lap. His head was bandaged so that it resembled an enormous ball of stained white linen.

"How do you feel?" Raynal asked him.

"Like a damn fool," came the muffled reply. "Everything was too quiet; I should have suspected something."

Sergeant Malthos and the pharmacist were tending to Lieutenant Dumanoir. That officer with the resounding, theatrical name, was a pathetic sight. One of the men was washing his head wound, a hole near the cheekbone, with a swab of cotton dipped in a basin in which permanganate tablets had been dissolved in less than a pint of water. The leg of his breeches had been cut open, his thigh wound bandaged.

Raynal knelt at his side.

"You'll be all right, Raoul. None of them are bad."

"Must get out—must get us out," Dumanoir mumbled.

"Sure thing. But we must get things organized. Listen, can we possibly get to the well? How many are there—"

But Dumanoir closed his eyes wearily, seemed to faint. It was Sergeant Malthos who answered: "About two hundred and fifty, I should say, Lieutenant. They seem to belong to two, perhaps three different gangs."

"The guys we followed down here are Drawi, as we expected, probably led by Milud er Brabi. But they've been joined by others, Rekabats. Can't mistake their blue clothing. Pretty well fitted out for guns, too. Only a few Gras rifles in the whole lot—all the rest magazine weapons."

"Think we'd have a chance to make the well?"

"No, Lieutenant. They won't quit easy, as they have a lot of animals there, a lot of loot. They'll fight hard for that."

"That means—" Raynal started.

"Retreating, Lieutenant. I don't think they'll hang on too long, though. We knocked off plenty of them, when we got going."

Malthos was right to some extent. The natives had dispersed, run back to the western dunes for cover. The shots exchanged at twelve to fourteen hundred meters were not very dangerous.

Raynal had the roll called, and was appalled by the result. Twenty-two Legionnaires—sergeant, corporals and privates—were missing; and Tcharnak made twenty-three fatalities. There were nine men hit so badly that they could not walk, eight more with such wounds as partially incapacitated them, two officers out of three completely out of action.

Fifty percent casualties in a couple of hours. And that did not count those lightly wounded, men weakened by surface slashes, tears and bruises.

"How's the water?" he asked the corporal in charge.

"Going fast, Lieutenant."

Raynal gave the usual instructions, among them that cloth should be dipped in water and given the wounded to suck. Men who have lost blood become very thirsty anywhere; and in the Saharan heat, thirst soon becomes a torture.

There was one cheerful item of news:

only four of the animals had been killed or injured enough to be disposed of as useless.

THE combat was at a standstill; very few shots were being fired. There was hope that the enemy did not know that the detachment had run short of water.

Nevertheless, some of them would cling, to glean loot. A Lebel rifle or carbine was worth at least four thousand francs in the desert market, cartridges five or six francs each, mules from five thousand upward.

Everything was valuable to the semi-primitive warriors; leather work, tin pots, cooking dixies, steel hitching chains, canned goods, flour. A crippled detachment of European troops was an ambulating gold mine to the raiders.

Raynal took advantage of the lull to visit Dumanoir, found him stretched in the shady lee of a boulder. He moaned, and only spoke in mumbling words. Sergeant Malthos led Raynal aside.

"He doesn't know much of what's going on, Lieutenant. That crack in the face was pretty bad. Knocked out some of his teeth. The one in the side is nothing much—flesh wound along the ribs. But his leg has a hole you can shove your fist into—hammered slug, probably from a Gras rifle."

That meant that Raynal was in full charge. He was left with a handsome task on his hands, salvaging the detachment, getting it back to the station.

Vernier, squatting not far away, had managed to push the stem of his pipe through the bandages wound about his head, and he was smoking.

That man appeared to be made of forged steel, body and soul. For all he or anyone else knew, his sight was gone. Moreover, his suffering must have been intense. But the bowl jutting from the ball of bloody cloth glowed, smoke drifted out casually.

"What to do? What to do?" He gestured with his pipe. "Hard to tell. We can't travel in the midday heat, the way we're fixed. We can start late in the after-

noon, knock off maybe twelve, fifteen miles before darkness, then rest until the moon comes out. We should make the well by dawn, if we shake a leg.

"I should say we don't have to worry about their attacking seriously. They'll hang on, sure, but they'll wait for us to drop."

He stopped and puffed smoke.

"We don't even know how many they are," Raynal said.

"We can find out. Some of them followed us pretty close to here, and some of the wounded must be hiding near. Find one, and if he is too discreet, have Leibenroth take him for a walk to the crest. That guy can make natives talkative."

RAYNAL would always remember the journey to the well, started late in the afternoon, as a period of sheer hot or.

The water had dwindled with amazing speed, sparingly though it was used. The wounded, patched in gritty, dry bandages, were shaken up by the hard trot of the hurrying mules. They moaned, a few screamed when pain broke down their pride.

The sound men had hardly touched fluid since early morning. Before long, the tongue grew hard, felt horny inside the mouth, rasped against the palate, while the skin of the lips crackled and stung.

Vernier was an example for all. Rather than endure the jolting in his saddle, which set his head to throbbing, he hung on to the pack of a mule and stumbled along on foot. The man leading the animal would call out obstacles.

The raiders followed, but very wide of the detachment, in widely scattered groups, to avoid the fire of the automatics, now in working order. They fired at very long range, the Legionnaires returned the shots, the detachment progressed in a constant rattle of gunfire.

Very few of the bullets, however, caused damage, and only two animals were struck.

Raynal had given up his mount to one of the wounded. He walked beside a lanky

fellow in a blue *gandoura*, who, with his thick, matted hair, as large and as compact as a Cossack's astrakan bonnet, with his long beard and Semitic features, resembled a prophet of Biblical days more than the ruthless ruffian he really was.

Moha u Beshar had been found hiding in a depression of sand, not a hundred yards from the Legion's line. He had a bullet hole through the right shoulder, his left forearm had been broken by a butt blow. But he chatted and laughed, showed the endurance and the resistance to physical pain proverbial in Saharan tribesmen. Although he hotly denied the status of Saharan: he was a Trekni, a Moor from the Sahel.

As soon as he had realized that he was not to be finished off, he had elected Lieutenant Raynal as a pal. He was not merely willing to talk, but eager.

No, he did not belong to Milud er Brabi's band, but to another, almost twice as strong, led by a Mauritanian chieftain, Moktar. They had intended to raid into the central desert of Touati, but they had been driven back by the Camel Corps squadron from Adrar.

They had joined forces with Milud, although they did not like him, because there was an opportunity for the combined bands to wipe out the entire Legion detachment.

Oh, indeed yes, Milud had know the detachment was on his tracks. He had known, even that its commander was disobeying orders, as the French wished to keep that zone clear in an effort to trap him, Milud, between the Adrar camel soldiers coming from the south and the Tabelbala Camel Company, coming due east.

Yes, Milud was very well informed.

"He knows thy name, *sidi lieutenant*, the names of the wounded chiefs. He always learns all he can about French officers who come to the desert: because, you understand, some officers are much smarter than others."

Moha said this with apparent innocence, but Raynal thought there was a gleam of humor in his eyes as he spoke. Neither

Dumanoir nor himself could rank very high in natives' estimation. They had been lured south, trapped, tricked like small children.

Moha said he was resigned to his fate, and suggested that his new friend, the lieutenant, should try to get him accepted in the *Meharistes*.

Raynal agreed to do what he could: Moha would make a fine Camel Corps soldier. And his presence there would not be unusual, for nine out of ten *Meharistes* had been raiders.

At the night halt, he gorged on canned beef, then stretched out to sleep. But when the moon appeared and the order to march on was given, he was nowhere to be found in the camp.

Moha had contrived to escape undetected, with his wounded shoulder, his broken arm, and the steel chain which Raynal, who was not too much of a fool, had ordered locked about his ankles.

Vernier laughed when he was told and quoted: "Keep water in a sieve and a Saharan in chains."

THE long night march was a fearful ordeal for all. There was no water remaining, not a drop. The animals had to be driven hard; delirious men howled their pain. Flickers of flame stabbed the night on remote crests, bullets whined overhead, or thudded into the sand.

Raynal had moments when he was not aware of what was he was doing, when he tried to tighten his belt to ease the ache of thirst.

The noncoms, themselves staggering and near the end of their endurance, punched privates to keep them going, kicked fallen men erect again. They received blows in exchange; altercations broke out everywhere over the slightest pretext. Those dying men threatened murder with every breath.

Raynal felt his authority slipping fast. Thirst was cracking discipline.

At dawn, by a miracle of energy, the detachment reached the well. The map was consulted; all landmarks were there,

the twin dunes, the peculiarly shaped boulders. But the hole itself was completely invisible.

There was a period of panic, a search. Then the plank shoring was located under a drift of sand. The well was partly filled, probably by a storm.

There was no thought of trying to reach another well. Raynal detailed the men to dig, using trenching tools, hauling sand out in canvas buckets.

Day broke, the broiling heat started, the flies grew active once more. And the enemy had to be held at bay.

It was mid-morning before the buckets were hoisted filled with damp sand. Men had to be restrained from putting the stuff in their mouths. At last, a sort of thin mud came up, and the men working below, stark naked, called up that water was showing. That mud was placed in cloth, filtered into tin cups. It stank.

Three of the wounded men had died by noon, when the buckets came up at last filled with clear, cool water. For an hour, every drop was used for drinking.

Then, with fluid swishing in their bellies, the wounded received new dressings. But the intense heat had caused many infections, there would be a number of amputations as soon as a surgeon could be reached.

The pursuers had settled at a distance, standing by. Despite the water supply, they knew the Legionnaires were growing weaker. They were not numerous now, fifty or less, as the majority had remained south with the loot. But their sniping proved annoying.

"We stick here," Raynal told Vernier. "Our absence is known, a plane will locate us within a short time. Can't take a chance to march on."

He indicated the miserable encampment, forgetting that the other could not see: "I can't ask those chaps to march a hundred and fifty kilometers in that condition. Dumanoir's lost consciousness."

Vernier released a stream of smoke thoughtfully.

"He's always lucky," he concluded.

CHAPTER IV

THE SERVICE REMEMBERS

BITTER as were the hours spent at the well until the aviation reported them, Raynal almost regretted them a few days later. For he found himself under arrest, in his own quarters at Ksar-Nazrain. A Legionnaire wearing side-arms was at his door, and he could not leave for any purpose without an escort.

Forty-eight hours after his return to the post, Captain Fourgues, commanding the Legion depot companies, summoned him to the office. The captain was a thick-necked, matter-of-fact officer with a blunt manner.

"Read this," he said.

It was an order from Midelt that Lieutenant Raynal should be placed under strict supervision, that his mail should be censored, everything connected with the unlucky expedition struck out.

"What does this mean? What are the charges?" Raynal asked.

"None that I know of." Fourgues shrugged. "I suppose I was presumed to do this quietly, without warning you."

He grinned: "But I shall misunderstand them: you're under arrest. Now don't get worried; I'll explain in a few words.

"There's always some hysteria in certain places when a catastrophe occurs down here. There are reporters on the way, and some people are interested in keeping you from speaking with them. They're afraid you'll talk too much to some guy connected with a political sheet, who will use the stuff to attack the administration in Morocco.

"They want to make up their own version of what happened, to save face. After all, it's pretty hard to explain away thirty-odd killed."

"Still, Captain, I don't see why—"

"You don't see how you were to blame. Neither do I. You were under Dumanoir's orders, had to obey without protest. Regulations are that your sole motive for disobeying would have been a belief, sup-

ported by other subordinates, that Dumanoir was mad.

"There's no disgrace, just a foolish formality. Look here, don't feel like a criminal: I shake hands with you."

Raynal laughed and grasped the hand offered.

"Thank you, Captain."

"If they try to get too rough with you, I'll step in. Don't worry about anything. Not a thing, *hein?*"

The wounded had been taken north in ambulance planes. News of them came very soon. Vernier would recover his sight. The missile had chipped the frontal bone, come through the flesh near the nose. The eyes had swollen shut from the tremendous shock.

Dumanoir was in the main hospital at Casablanca. He also was expected to be returned to duty in a few months.

Raynal, scanning the newspapers—he was allowed to receive uncensored papers—saw nothing to indicate that either Dumanoir or Vernier was under watch. Then he received a letter from his father, who had many friends in military circles.

"So far as I can find out, there are no charges against you. A judicial commission has been formed, and is going around asking questions."

THE "rogatory committee," or judicial commission, reached Ksar-Nazrain after nine days. It was composed of five officers, not one of them a Legionnaire.

Raynal was called into the cavalry mess-room, temporarily transformed into a tribunal. Captain Fourgues, despite his protests, was kept out of the debates. And out of the room.

The colonel-presiding, an *officier d'administration de l'Armée*, was young for a man of his rank in French service, with a round, sleek, very intelligent face. Obviously, he was more of a politician than a soldier, and Raynal immediately nicknamed him, mentally, a "dwarf Riche-lieu": for he had the soft manner and dignity of a prelate.

"Sit down, Lieutenant Raynal. You are

not on trial!" The colonel rested a carefully-manicured, plump hand on a sheaf of paper.

"Have you anything to add to your report? No? You write very well, and the fine things you have to say about the courage and skill of the aviators who located you will be acted upon.

"Now, myself and my colleagues all realize that it is useless to question Legionnaires officially, for they will refuse to speak on certain subjects, through *esprit de corps*.

"Nevertheless, a number of them, including wounded, have talked unofficially, and we have heard rumors that must be cleared up before full judgment can be passed on the sad affair we are investigating. I naturally must inform you that if necessary we could trace those rumors to their sources and compel an answer. But we do not wish to have to do that. Are they true?"

Raynal smiled. "If *mon colonel* would be so kind as to inform me of the nature of the rumors, perhaps I would be better able to give the required answers."

"Of course, of course. There was a quarrel between Lieutenant Dumanoir and yourself on the evening preceding the unfortunate venture of the mounted detachment."

"Yes, Colonel."

"What was its motive, may we ask?"

"A private matter, Colonel."

"A matter not connected with the service?"

"Not directly, Colonel."

"Ah? We may return to this later. Lieutenant Raynal, did you strike Lieutenant Dumanoir during the argument?"

Raynal hesitated.

"Yes, Colonel."

"What did Lieutenant Dumanoir do about it?"

"Nothing. I am sure that he realized at once that he had given me reason to lose my temper. His words had called for such a reply."

"You struck him. In the face. He accepted the blow?"

"Colonel, you will understand better when you learn that Lieutenant Dumanoir and I were schoolmates at St. Cyr, that we knew each other even before. That, before we had attained manhood and the status of officers, we had had quarrels, as normal between boys and young men. We had exchanged blows before.

"I am sure that Dumanoir employed the language he did only because of that close association of years, and I struck out for the same reason."

"Did you quarrel because you wished to abandon the unauthorized expedition against the raiders?"

"No, Colonel."

"A protest might count in your favor, remember."

"The answer is no, Colonel."

"I am certain no one here questions your sincerity."

"Thank you, Colonel."

"Don't mention it, Lieutenant."

THE colonel's voice became slightly less bland. "Now, Lieutenant Raynal, in your opinion, did the quarrel and the blow occasion a change in plans for the attack? I mean did Lieutenant Dumanoir alter his dispositions in any way because of them?"

"My answer would be speculation, Colonel."

"A certain amount of speculation is good, Lieutenant." The smooth face beamed. "Speculate."

"In my opinion, they did. I mean influence orders. I was to be in command of the circling detachment. Instead, I was assigned to the mule guards. Certainly the lieutenant changed his mind about giving me command of the circling detachment during the night; and quite possibly our argument influenced him. He alone knows the truth of that."

"You resented the change, the inconspicuous part given you, didn't you? Oh, quite normal that you should. It was humiliating. Now, Lieutenant Raynal, we come to ground that will be harder to cover."

The colonel half-smiled as he glanced at his companions: Lieutenant Raynal had answered readily so far, on matters that could not be concealed.

He turned to the young officer again. "You changed your position the morning of the attack, although you had strict orders not to."

"I did, Colonel."

"Did your natural resentment prompt you in any degree?"

"No, Colonel—" Raynal started forward.

"Please, please. We are all trying for the truth. Why did you abandon the emplacement originally assigned you with the animals?"

"My report goes into that at considerable length, Colonel. Briefly: We were in the open, exposed to plunging fire from dominating crests, assailed by an undetermined number of enemies. As proved by later events, keeping the animals safe and sound was most important. Even had we escaped massacre, we would have suffered very heavily.

"I believed it was a case, Colonel, in which a mild show of intelligence, let alone initiative, would not be out of place."

The colonel nodded, consulted notes.

"Did you report your shift in positions?"

"As soon as possible, Colonel. I wrote a note and sent it to Lieutenant Dumanoir."

"Whom did you send?"

"Second-class Legionnaire Mesnil, Alfred."

"Where is he at present?"

"Died of his wounds, Colonel."

"Have you that note, with an acknowledgement?"

"No, Colonel."

"Do you believe Lieutenant Dumanoir received it?"

"I do, Colonel."

"Explain."

"Legionnaire Mesnil returned with Lieutenant Dumanoir's groups. He was wounded in the lung. While I did not ques-

tion him, it was probable that having reached his destination he had fulfilled his mission. I told him I would cite him."

"He did not protest the citation?"

"He was dying, Colonel. Dying and thirsty. Legionnaire Mesnil needed all his strength to keep from crying for water. There was none to give him."

THE colonel eyed Raynal dryly. "We are familiar with the details of your sufferings. And no one here doubts the heroism of Legionnaires. It is your belief that if Mesnil had not delivered the message, he would have told you so?"

"How do I know, Colonel?" Raynal grew red, then white.

"You would have to speculate again. But your opinion is that Lieutenant Dumanoir knew that you had made a change?"

"Naturally I believe that, Colonel. It stands to reason that Legionnaire Mesnil, even had he lost the paper or failed to deliver it, would have told someone that we had moved to cover."

"So that Lieutenant Dumanoir had no reason to think that he could retreat to the exact spot where he had left you, and therefore allow the use of ammunition, figuring that it could be replaced some five hundred meters sooner than proved the case?"

"I don't know surely, Colonel."

"In your opinion, was Lieutenant Dumanoir's detachment short of ammunition when it reached the small valley at the spot where you had been left?"

"How do I know, Colonel? The groups were not firing as before, but I did not then think it was from lack of ammunition. The automatics had jammed. And the mixup was so confused down there that the men might have been afraid to fire for fear of striking members of Lieutenant Vernier's groups, which had appeared not far distant. I heard nothing about ammunition being lacking at any time."

The colonel made several notes, looked at the reports on the table before him.

He nodded. "There is no mention of a shortage by anyone, in fact. Now, Lieutenant Raynal—"

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Who knew that the detachment was surpassing its orders by striking southward so far?"

"I can answer only for myself, Colonel."

"You knew?"

"I knew."

"Did you protest to Lieutenant Dumanoir?"

"I mentioned it. I can't say I made an issue of it."

"In your opinion, did Sub-lieutenant Vernier, Sergeant Leibenroth, other non-coms, know that you were exceeding your orders?"

Raynal hesitated. Of course, they had known. They were intelligent, experienced soldiers, had been told the probable route of the detachment in advance. He had overheard some talk about the shift in directions. He avoided the direct answer.

"They did not speak to me, or to Lieutenant Dumanoir within my hearing, about it. They may have realized it, but as there was nothing they could do about it, they did not broach the subject."

"All right, Lieutenant." The colonel smiled. "Now, forgive me for insisting. But you can give me your word of honor that the quarrel that led to the blow was not concerned with military matters—with the army, the Legion?"

Raynal's forehead grew a bit moist.

"I cannot give my word, Colonel."

"No?" The investigator consulted a type-written paper taken from a green folder. "Did you say something to the effect that the risks involved in serving with the Foreign Legion were a bit too great for the rewards?"

Raynal made a quick gesture.

"I may have, Colonel; but I meant—"

"Oh, we understand, we understand—" the colonel smiled on the angry young man patiently: "Tedium, boredom, a bit of mental depression, what your men term *cafard*, I believe; your conduct the next day shows what you are worth. But Lieu-

tenant Dumanoir then accused you of cowardice."

"Possibly."

"Which explains the blow, of course. And also explains why the lieutenant in charge decided to give you a less conspicuous place. If he believed you were doubtful of success—you see?"

"Quite, Colonel."

"Now, we shall speak to you as we spoke to Lieutenant Dumanoir: We cannot ask you to be friendly, but we wish the matter to end where it is. The information will go no further than this court of inquiry."

"We have taken into account the situation, the nervousness, the fatigue you both were under, and your long acquaintance. There is no question of honor as officers involved. Lieutenant Dumanoir has given us his word that he will drop all thought of a reparation by arms if you will."

"A duel?" Raynal laughed nervously. "Never thought of it."

"And yet"—the colonel shrugged—"other times, other customs. We understand that you have applied for transfer to the aviation. I can assure you that transfer shall be granted."

"We ask you, Lieutenant, to adhere to the official version of the affair which will be published soon, and, both here and in France, to avoid too free conversation about it. There are those who do not comprehend that young officers are hot-blooded, perhaps ambitious, and that punishing them severely for daring initiative would be discouraging to others."

"There will be no court-martial, no further judicial proceedings. Lieutenant Dumanoir will be maintained in his present rank, with an official blame."

Raynal leaned forward.

"And I, Colonel?"

"You atoned for whatever disobedience you showed by the manner in which you extricated a badly mangled detachment." The colonel extended his hand. Then the others.

"Do as well in the aviation, and all will be well."

CHAPTER V

COCKROACH!

SIX months later, Raynal reached Meknes with a party of friends, civilian pilots from a commercial line. It was after midnight when their powerful car came to a heart-shaking stop before *Chez Alice*, an establishment in the native quarter.

The driver, Bercolet, an internationally famous airman, had seemed determined to move in three dimensions even on the ground; his turns had been more flying than driving.

The party had started much earlier in the day, at an official luncheon to which Raynal had been invited.

Alice, the owner, greeted them with joy, mobilized her entire staff of hostesses. She was a colossal female, tall, broad and thick—with, as Bercolet proclaimed, "more peaks than the whole Atlas range."

She was fond of the flyers; but she remembered Raynal from his sojourn in the city, during his early days with the Foreign Legion, and clasped him to her bosom. It was very much like being stifled in a perfumed rubber mattress.

"Paul, my little rabbit!" she greeted him. "I like to see my boys come back. I treat you to champagne, and from my own stock. No sucker juice for you!"

Raynal enjoyed a moment of triumph. He was showing his civilian friends that the military also hit the high spots on occasions.

"So you're in the aviation now, eh?" Between puffs at the Havana cigar she smoked, Alice spoke of old times. "How do you like it? Read something about you in the papers, didn't I?"

Raynal nodded. He, with a number of other army pilots, had participated in the search for a civilian machine which had crashed in the Sahara. It had been his good luck to spot the wreck and contribute to the rescue of the survivors.

"By the way, your pal, the handsome guy—what's his name? Like something out of a Paul Bourget novel—Dumas?

Dunois? No, Dumanoir—well, you just missed him. Went back to the hills day before yesterday. Say, what's the matter with him?"

"Haven't seen him in some time," Raynal said evasively.

"Hardly talks, regular wet blanket. If you ask me, he's deflated, completely deflated. I can tell, because I know men. Oh, it's not that crack on the mug. They've stitched that up so you can hardly notice it. It's just that he ain't so sure now that everything always comes out just right."

"He's had troubles," Raynal said. "Badly wounded—"

"Just told you it wasn't that," Alice insisted. "It's something cracked up all right, but inside of him, not outside. He's like an old guy. Mopes. I heard you two had a row. But you should write him, Paul."

"Write him?"

Raynal started to brood, despite the flow of champagne and the weird mixtures the aviators concocted with it, using brandy, Pernod, anything and everything. The civilian pilots, who led very dangerous lives themselves, understood his mood and respected it. They pretended not to notice.

As the corks popped, as a half-nude Hungarian girl performed an African dance far better than any native, as the hues of the spotlights shifted, Raynal relived the past.

The detachment, he knew, was together again, all survivors included except himself. Dumanoir, beyond an official blame, had not been punished. But, because the attack had been unauthorized, no one had received citations or promotion—no one except the dead, granted posthumous colonial crosses.

That was not quite just. Vernier, for instance, had deserved something. His severe wound should have counted. He had been waiting several years for the award of the Legion of Honor. As he had done his duty, obeyed orders, he should have got it.

All of them should have received something. Raynal relived the scenes of the combat: Tcharnak's last grin, Mesnil's cheerful smile as he had taken the message, Dumanoir being carried in, his handsome face shattered and bleeding. And the massive shoulders of Vernier, surmounted by that enormous ball of bandages, with the smoke drifting out.

The retreat, the long wait for the planes, then the arrival of the big ambulance machines, all the alternatives of hope and of despair.

HIS glance drifted sightlessly through the smoke-filled glare, rested on a face straight across the room. A round, tanned face, with a short, clipped mustache beneath a blunt nose, fierce eyes overscored by a white welt.

He had seen that face somewhere; he knew the man.

Of course: it was Vernier.

He was amazed. Then he understood how normal it was for Vernier to be here. The troops were resting at this season, Dumanoir had just gone back to duty from leave. Naturally, Vernier had then come on leave in his turn, and to Meknes, as Meknes was the headquarters for the regiment.

No, Raynal corrected himself, no longer *the* regiment, but *his* regiment.

Had Vernier seen him?

Raynal was not sure. The sub-lieutenant was seated with two other Legion officers of his rank, men whom Raynal had never met. It was evident that they were like Vernier, men up from the ranks, not school officers. Serious, solid, sunburnt fellows with square shoulders, tough hands and massive jaws.

Each of them had a girl at his side, but they kept the conversation among themselves. It was not hard to guess what they were talking about: Legion concerns, Legion business, transfers, promotions, the real worth of the new automatic rifle, the quality of the recruits now entering the corps.

Raynal envied them, was hungry to

hear such talk. It was none of his business now; he was an outsider. But that talk had been his talk for years.

He waited a few minutes. Vernier's eyes met his, turned away. Raynal was hurt, then thought that Vernier was probably being tactful, that he was waiting for him, Raynal, his superior in rank, to recognize him.

Vernier, he wished to believe, did not wish to intrude. And Raynal smiled at his hesitation. He had not seen Vernier since the man had been helped, sightless, into the cabin of the ambulance plane.

"I see a friend," he muttered.

He rose and circled the table. He felt at once that he must have drunk much more than he had realized, for his legs were not steady. His heart pounded hard inside his chest. He dodged through the couples hopping on the dance floor, came to a halt near the Legionnaires' table. The sub-lieutenant went on speaking.

"—so there I was, transferred to the Colonials! I went to see the Colonel and told him right out: 'Colonel, if I am that lousy an officer—'"

"Hello, Vernier," Raynal said, loudly.

"—that lousy an officer"—Vernier glanced up a second, deliberately looked away, and continued—"then take away my commission and put me back in the ranks. But in the Legion.' So he said: 'Vernier, you ass—'"

Vernier ceased speaking, changed color. The scar on his forehead now appeared purplish. But he ignored the hand stretched to him. One of his comrades pushed back his chair and rose. He spoke in a very soft voice.

"I beg your pardon, Lieutenant. But this table is for Legionnaires."

"Well"—Raynal laughed—"I used to be in the Legion."

"We know that," the other replied, calmly. But he was embarrassed, growing red. His comrades looked into space.

RAYNAL knew that the reasonable course for him was to turn around and drop the matter. They knew who

he was and did not wish to talk to him. That was their right. But he resented their attitude. What was he, a leper, that they should shun him?

"What's the matter with you, Vernier?" he said, leaning over the table. "When I am polite enough to speak to you, you might answer."

This time the sub-lieutenant's glance rested steadily on Raynal.

"You might not like my answer."

"Why not?"

"Go back to your pals."

"Listen"—Raynal grew annoyed—"I left the Legion, but—"

"Better go away, Lieutenant," the other Legionnaire said.

"No, maybe I'd better answer him," Vernier declared. "You left the Legion, and that was all right. But you spilled all that could hurt us. Leibénroth, Malthos, myself—"

His voice grew hoarse, tense: "When you saw you were going to get nothing out of the show, you took care that no one else did. You spilled your dirt, then went where you could get yours. But we're not pretty boys with influential friends, who can transfer at will and wear fancy pants. We're plain soldiers, ordinary Legionnaires."

"And what am I?" Raynal protested.

"Want to know? You're a disgusting little swine who couldn't keep his mouth shut. That stink you brought out about your row with the lieutenant put the whole show in a rotten light. They canceled all citations—except those you put in."

"Posthumous citations. Listen—"

"Listen to you, eh?" Vernier struggled to rise, and both his friend and his girl held him back. "Get away before I put my foot on you, cockroach!"

"What's that?"

"Cockroach!"

Raynal started forward; but a meaty, thick white arm caught him under the chin, checked his plunge effectively. Alice was on the job, massive, truculent.

None of that, or you all go out on your ear, officers or not!"

"Say that again," Raynal challenged. "What did you say?"

"You miserable cockroach!"

"I forbid you, Vernier, to—"

"You forbid me? You get your name in the newspaper, so what? You didn't have the guts to stay in the Legion and do your job like everybody else. Too much risk for too little credit!"

Vernier was shouting now: "Go on and fly your damn machines! You may be good at that. But when it comes to taking a platoon of Legion to the circus, you just aren't there! Takes a man to do that."

"I've done it, I've done it!" Raynal shouted back.

"Just enough to find out what it was like. Then you got sick of it and got out."

"I got sick of it?"

"You deflated."

"I—I deflated?"

He struggled to leap forward; but even in his rage he could not juggle Alice's mighty bulk and loosen the grip of his friends. He wanted to drive his fists into Vernier's face. Why, but for him the man would be dead. He, Raynal, had taken the detachment to safety, had handled everything—all alone.

"Come away, Paul."

"Let me go. I'll—"

Alice started toward the door, Raynal became the center of a milling group. The Legionnaires were out of sight. There was another altercation at the gate, the rustling of bills as someone paid for the checks.

Then the fresh air of the night struck his face, sobered him up somewhat. "I just want to talk to that guy," he protested. "I won't fight. I'll just explain—"

"No use. They're soreheads, old man," Bercolet said. "Jealous."

Raynal was hurt by this accusation against Legionnaires.

"No. They're all right. They just don't know what—"

He was aghast, sick with humiliation. Those fellows, the sub-lieutenants, would spread the story throughout the regiment—the regiment. Throughout the Legion.

They would say that Vernier had told him off; had told him that he could not take a platoon into action because he lacked the guts. Had told him to his face that he was deflated—after what he had done!

Bercolet was walking him along the street.

"You can't afford to fight. Your name's been in the papers, and anything you do now will go in, too. We know what that is."

"But you heard him. He said that I don't have the guts to—"

"What do you care? He's a sorehead, his opinion can't count." Bercolet added sensibly: "Don't be sore at him or at the others. They're in the Legion. It's the only racket they know, so they've got to make it important. Just as we fellows feel about flying. You know: if a guy can't handle a stick, he just doesn't exist!"

"But I can—I can do anything they can do."

"Sure. Let's go and have a drink somewhere."

The party dragged Raynal to the nearest bar.

Within a few minutes, all were as gay as ever. Except Raynal. He drank mechanically, without joy. The words spoken by Vernier ached in his brain. He had to blink to keep from shedding the tears that welled to his eyes.

Cockroach—deflated—

CHAPTER VI

HERE WAS A COMRADE

IN THE months that followed, Raynal discovered that he was not welcome in Legion gatherings. He won success in his new branch of the service, was awarded the Legion of Honor. But nothing done outside the Legion counts really—for Legionnaires.

Even among his friends in the aviation, he was not wholly trusted. Why? Because his courage had been questioned publicly, and a soldier's **courage** is like a woman's

virtue: the slightest breath tarnishes it.

Then he was assigned to the field at Agadir, for mapping excursions over the Anti-Atlas mountains. The commercial line had a stopover there, and many of its pilots were his friends. Army scandal and gossip never disturbed them.

Bercolet arrived with a new machine being tested by the line for long-distance trips. At the seaport of Agadir, he was finishing the first leg of a huge triangle. He had come over southern France, Spain and Morocco from Toulouse, without stop. He was to fly to Tunis across Morocco and Algeria. Then from Tunis back to Toulouse.

"Get a week's leave," Bercolet suggested. "Come with us. Plenty of room; that bus can carry eight passengers. You make Agadir-Tunis-Toulouse with us, and I'll get you a seat on a machine coming back here. I'll fix it up with your superiors. You can be semi-official, a sort of Government inspector."

"I'd like to." Raynal shook his head gloomily. "But this isn't the time for it. It's a test flight, the newspapers will have reporters meet the plane. I'd get mentioned, my picture would get in the magazines. How would that go with this, after all the gossip that's been floating around about me anyway?"

And he showed a fat headline on a Casablanca newspaper:

MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE FAR SOUTH

"What's that got to do with you?"

"Read it."

The military operations in the Moroccan South, on the far side of the Atlas, were progressing rapidly. Two mobile groups, composed of Legion, native infantry and auxiliary troops, were closing like the jaws of pincers on numerous native elements commanded by the famous chieftain, Miloud er Brabi.

However, concern was felt over the safety of a field detachment of the mounted company of the Nth Foreign Infantry, which had advanced too far

and was cut off from communications with the main body. Planes had contrived to drop some ammunition and food, but the situation was grave.

"That your old outfit?" Bercolet asked.

"Yes. It explains further that it's the same detachment that got mopped up before. That all survivors are there, in danger again. Dumanoir's in command, Vernier's his second. But everyone who knows anything about it knows that there's one survivor missing. Me.

"Suppose—well, suppose they don't break through, and can't be helped in time. To have my name as arriving in Tunis in a de luxe passenger plane, appear on the same page as their casualty list would be too much."

"Maybe it's just newspaper gab."

"No. The staff here is keeping in touch by wireless. The detachment is cut off, all right. They're saying Dumanoir was rash again. It may look that way, but I don't think so. The natives seemed to be on the run, and he pursued, as ordered. Suddenly, the slobs counter-attacked, occupied a wide ravine, and left him hung up on a sort of plateau, five or six miles inside their lines."

As he spoke, he had drawn a sketch on the margin of the paper. His face twisted with emotion. "I'm here, doing nothing. You can't know what it means. I lived with those fellows for two years. And they're getting killed—killed. I feel my place is with them."

Bercolet lighted a cigarette.

"I know the feeling. I've waited for radio reports when some guys I'd known years were lost in the fog. And I had to sit still, doing nothing. That's the trade. You must learn to take that, too. Come on; the mail plane is landing. We'll get hold of the pilot and have a drink."

They walked over to the machine, across the field. They had a drink with the pilot before he started out again, down the desolate coast of the Atlantic, toward Juby, Cisneros, Etienne and Dakar in Senegal—thousands of miles of sand.

As Raynal returned to his quarters to change for dinner, his Arab orderly handed him his mail, come a few minutes before.

Only one letter held his attention.

IT BORE no postage stamps, simply the notice: *Army Post*. The address was typed, addressed to his apartment in Casablanca, readdressed to him at Agadir. A small oblong of crumpled, soiled paper.

Dear Old Chap

He identified Dumanoir's writing at once.

You have no reason to like me. I don't know when I shall mail this, except that it will be before going into action. This is a farewell, possibly. Vernier has told me what he called you in Meknes. You know what an honest guy he is, so I didn't have the courage to tell him that he misdirected his reproaches.

I suppose that I have always had a selfish streak, a weakness for my own faults. I could not tell him that if you replied to questions about a row between us, and the punch on the jaw, it was because the investigators had already learned from me, when I was trying to cover myself.

I was wounded and weak, if that's any excuse. You were not to blame, of course, and even those dopes on the Staff, despite my lies, saw the truth and did not blame you.

My only excuse for bawling you out and humiliating you that night was that I was afraid of losing you. I knew that I could count on you more than on anyone else. And I was afraid of facing command without you. I had grown accustomed to your help.

I know you would understand and forgive me, as many times before. You were the best and most devoted of friends—as long as friendship did not become sheer stupidity for you. For

your own future, you had to break from me.

But what worries me is the thought of the men who were killed needlessly. When the roll is called and one of the oldtimers still with us answers—I remember the name that should follow, but for me. So when a new man answers the call, it is like a shout of reproach.

There was much more in this vein, reminding Raynal of the oldtimers—Tcharnak, and Colloux, a hard-drinking kid, Mesnil and others.

The letter continued:

You understand what I am trying to say. At the first opportunity, I'll get myself killed decently. After that, use this letter to clear yourself and get what is coming to you all—Vernier, Leibenroth and the rest.

Having sent this letter, which amounts to a confession, I hope that it will give me the courage to carry it through. I need some sort of a menace to shove me ahead; my nerve is gone. Knowing this is written will serve.

Don't pity me for dying. You were a good friend—the best of friends.

Raynal read the letter four times, with a growing feeling of satisfaction. It would clear him. It would end the gnawing thought that many considered him a coward.

Then he felt sorry for Dumanoir; his former friendship, his young man's love for the fellow returned. There was something great in Raoul; he was a man.

In a moment, another thought occurred: Dumanoir had led a detachment into battle against orders—but even the military authorities had gone easy on him, had understood and condoned the ambition and ardor of a young lieutenant. A real soldier's instinct was to attack.

Raynal could not accept public rehabilitation at such a price. It would be a scandal, a scandal for the regiment, for

the whole Legion. With the wings of the aviation on his breast, Raynal thought first of his former corps, his real corps.

He must get word to Dumanoir not to talk. He set a match to the letter, burned it. Then a new concern started: Dumanoir, after all, had sacrificed the detachment to his own problems. His weakness was so great that he had needed the spur of a confession in another man's hands to find courage to lead! Even his physical courage had waned.

There were men out there, led by a chap half-crazed from an assortment of fears—fears of the body, of the mind.

An idea, a mad idea, came to him unbidden. He tried to dismiss it, but it returned. At last he drove over to the staff building, up the hill, saw the man in charge of correlating all information concerning the operations.

On an immense map occupying an entire wall, the staff captain indicated the various positions: "That's where Dumanoir's bunch is located. The Chleuh occupy one end of that small plateau. The Legionnaires are there, protected in back by a sheer drop. Good enough defense position.

"Yes, I can find you a duplicate map. Interested, eh? Oh, that's right—you were in the Legion once."

"Could a message be dropped to Dumanoir?"

"I suppose so. The supply planes have been pretty successful in dropping him stuff."

"Thanks."

RAYNAL did not go to his mess to dine, but joined Bercolet and the civilian pilots in the plank restaurant erected near the field.

Bercolet was boasting about the qualities of his new bus: "Closed cabin, you know. Can climb to sixteen thousand easily. If you load her at maximum, she'll go five thousand kilometers."

"When are you starting for Tunis?" Raynal asked.

"Dawn, tomorrow."

"Could you fly it at night?"

"I wouldn't like to try it, but I suppose I could," Bercolet said. "When I was serving my army time, I was trained for night bombardment. Naturally, I know how to lay a compass course, keep track of lapsed time, of wind."

He jerked his thumb at a quiet, tall, slender young man. "There is the guy who knows all about that stuff, though. Expert navigator, you know, trained for the merchant marine. Eh, Noirtier?"

The other nodded. Raynal drew a rough map on the back of an envelope, jotted down distances. "How much time would you lose making a hook down that way—and straightening out again?"

The others looked at the sketch.

"An hour at most," Bercolet said. Then he looked up at Raynal: "But—listen, that's over unpacified territory. We'd get into a row with the military authorities. And a forced landing would be finish."

"You fellows fly over Rio del Oro. Is it any more pacified?"

"That's in the line of duty."

"You talk like army flyers," Raynal said with a smile. "If what you claim about that new machine is true, there's no chance of a crash. There isn't a single high peak between Agadir and the place, following this line." He indicated with a stroke of the pencil.

"All the handicap is in something imaginary: pacified zone, unpacified zone. What difference does that make in Morocco? If you crash away from an army post, it's all the same."

Bercolet challenged Raynal with a glance.

"What have you in mind? Spill it."

"It would have to be kept quiet until we were off."

"We'll keep it quiet, my little lieutenant! Go on."

"Well, here's the main idea. . . ."

Raynal spoke for several minutes without interruption. The civilian aviators nodded, Noirtier started to take notes.

"I realize that if anything goes wrong, you'll be in trouble," the officer con-

cluded. "Your lives are your own, but you have about a million in material that belongs to your company. It all depends," he concluded with some craftiness, "how much you trust that bus of yours."

"Nervy idea," Bercolet said, after a look at Noirtier.

"Would be too bad not to try it," the navigator agreed. "Sure of your locations? All right, you're on."

CHAPTER VII

DESCENT INTO BLACKNESS

IN THE pit of darkness below, the green fire had died out. Bercolet turned the controls over to Dalbin, his co-pilot, and came into the cabin.

As the plane banked in one of its giant circles, Raynal looked out of the window. He could distinguish earth from sky, but that was about all. Noirtier was checking figures in the notebook, going over his explanations again.

"See, we've located them all right. Now if it were a question of landing in a clearing, for instance, or in a very limited space, I'd say no. But, mathematically, it can be done."

"See here, Raynal," Bercolet said brusquely, "You know the three of us. Not a peep out of us. The idea sounded pretty good back there in Agadir. Out here, over the mountains, it seems different. If you want to change your mind, no false pride, eh?"

"I'm all right."

Raynal clenched his jaws, because he feared his chin might quiver. His whole frame was agitated by a tremor not wholly that of the powerful motor pulling them through the thin air high over the Southern Atlas. Yes, eight thousand feet above the plateau, in the velvety black, the idea did appear fantastic—impossible.

"In any case, we better ask them to set off another flare, to check up," Bercolet suggested.

"No," Noirtier snapped. He added: "I got the bearings the first time. No use arousing the natives with a lot of unusual

stuff. As it is, they probably think we are a belated supply machine trying to dump some stuff. Just keep circling, allowing for the drift as I wrote down."

"Eh, Gugust!" Dalbin called. The pilot went front and took over. Dalbin was doubling as wireless operator tonight. "You know, the general and his pals are getting very sore down below. Say they asked the isolated detachment to light that flare, as we asked, and what do we want? Why are we hanging around? Don't we know it's dangerous, against regulations, illegal for us to be here? We're asked to leave at once."

"Tell them we dropped a monkey wrench and that we're looking for it," Bercolet snapped. His face was drawn and sweaty.

Despite his nervousness, perhaps because of it, Raynal laughed loudly at the thought of the perturbation they were causing down below. The mobile group must be wondering at this mysterious performance.

Of course, all must know the identity of the machine. The radio at Agadir had reported their departure, and the commercial line's officials were clamoring for news of their progress toward Tunis.

"Not bad!" Dalbin laughed. "The guy says we can go away, that they'll find our tool in the morning and send it along."

"Eh, did you put that crack through?"

"Why not?" Dalbin grinned. "What's the harm in a little kidding? If they can make any trouble for us over this business, they will anyway. So what—" As the plane banked, he broke off to exclaim: "Look at the fireflies!"

"Shots."

"Don't tell me! All right . . ." Dalbin took the controls again.

"Will you be warm enough in those clothes?" Bercolet asked, in the cabin. Raynal was dressed in a woolen Legion uniform. "We must be at eleven thousand."

"He'll be in warmer air in ten seconds," Noirtier said.

"But—"

"I may have to do a little running after I land," Raynal explained. "I don't dare try to land too close to the detachment, for fear of overshooting and going over that cliff at the far end."

He checked the loading of the heavy automatic pistol strapped at his belt. He had to use will power to control his hands. They felt weak, and fumbled.

"Listen, Paul," Bercolet started again, "drop the idea—"

"Leave him alone," Noirtier said quietly. "We said all of that at the start. But it's something he feels he must do. So he'd better get it done, no matter what."

"Right," Raynal agreed, smiling.

NEVERTHELESS, he felt like a man waiting to ascend to the gallows. Unpleasant features of his plan kept looming in his mind. If he succeeded, he might be accused of showmanship, of parading courage. If he failed, he would receive scant sympathy as a fool meeting his proper end.

"Remember, you must take the wind into account," Noirtier resumed. "Six slow counts, not three."

"Yes, yes."

Raynal had made a number of jumps before, but always over a flying field, in daylight. Never at night, from this height, or with the wind nearly as strong.

"Get back there, Bercolet," Noirtier suggested.

The pilot clutched Raynal's shoulders with both hands, pressed hard and turned away without another word.

The plane banked, Noirtier looked down through the window. Raynal kept his eyes fastened on the enameled panel before him. He trusted Noirtier, yet wondered how the man could spot landmarks in the obscurity below.

How could anyone discern anything, know anything, with that black pit beneath them? How could a man's most careful calculations as to gravitation, wind, drift, work out perfectly.

"Deflating," Raynal thought, stiffening.

There were three men here whom he had talked into a foolish stunt, who risked their professional reputation, their living. They faced serious blame at least, possibly dismissal. Out of friendship for him. No, he could not make the whole excursion ridiculous by quitting at this time.

"I'll brace the door and you stand ready," Noirtier called sharply. "We're almost right. When I tap you, jump. Six counts."

"Understood."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Raynal fingered the harness of the parachute, then the scarf that held the kepi snug to his head. It would never do to report to the detachment bareheaded. To have full effect, the stunt must be complete.

It was insane, crazy, cockeyed, incredible; but all Legionnaires, past, present and future, would understand and appreciate it.

Raynal would plunge into that dark void, flickering with rifle fire, to rescue something within himself. It was a sublime moment for him, the culmination and revenge for a year of humiliation.

The door opened, he felt the rush of air, forced himself forward. Noirtier had timed things well, gave him no time for the slight change to shake his courage. The tap came at once.

"So long," Raynal shouted, without looking back.

He leaped.

THE wind struck him, tore at his mouth, at the visor of the kepi, then he seemed to pass from a strong gale into quiet air. For an instant, there was an odor of burnt gasoline, a reek of oil, then nothing. Nothing but the crisp, cold air blowing into his nostrils, into his mouth.

Pinpoints of light spun all about him

as he tumbled downward. Stars, and shots, and camp fires—and stars again. . . .

"And five—and six—"

He reached across his chest, pulled the rip cord.

The chute caught, he felt a jerk, but not the hardest he had experienced. Immediately, his eyes sought for the plane, and he noticed that Bercolet had switched on the lights. They had decided upon doing this in advance, knowing that the appearance of the riding lights would draw all eyes to the machine and away from the sector of the sky through which Raynal would be falling.

Five miles to go.

Noirtier had calculated the speed of the night wind at this level, and at varying altitudes. The night wind out here blew almost on schedule, he claimed. Always inland from the sea, predictable under normal conditions according to seasons.

And Noirtier knew what he was about, was an expert on climatic conditions, for he had flown from southern France to various points of North Africa for five or six years.

He had stated that the attempt could be made almost sure of success, provided Raynal kept his calm. The greatest peril would be in the jumper's imagination, fevered by darkness and strange surroundings. All that was required, after all, as he had pointed out, was to land anywhere within an area several miles square.

The natives hemming in the Legion detachment, as indicated clearly by their campfires, were almost a full kilometer from the soldier's encampment, scattered in groups along a front three or four kilometers long. It would be only by the worst possible luck that Raynal would land squarely in one of the watched spaces.

Raynal could now discern some of the crests; the ground beneath him was patched with grayer blotches. He could see very plainly the ridges which indicated his general line of direction.

He was dropping fast, but progressing toward his goal as rapidly. He was al-

most directly over the positions occupied by the mobile group, where several regiments were camped. He could spot them by the embers of fires arranged in regular rows.

It was odd that the people on earth saw nothing but the thick darkness, when he could see everything so plainly. Thus far in Morocco, campfires were screened only from land observation.

As he drifted down and on, one of his great worries was vanishing, the dread of being riddled while hung suspended high in the air. He could now hear faint reports, occasional flashes streaked the night, but no one was shooting at him. The outposts were driving off prowling snipers.

No one had thought to look up, so he remained undiscovered. Fortunately for him, weary fighting men are seldom given to sentimental star-gazing. Noirtier had foreseen this, adding that even if anyone chanced to look up, he would be invisible from below until quite near the ground, when the movement of the big parachute against the stars might be suspected.

But even then, he had claimed, locating the chute exactly enough for straight shooting would be difficult.

Raynal thought that should he accelerate the descent, he would drop inside the French positions, or very close to them. No one would blame him for that; no one could say that he had not miscalculated. He would be safe. The really dangerous part of his journey was still ahead, floating over the natives' positions.

Moroccans of the dissident tribes have no special hatred for aviators, but as aviators are somewhat rarer than other men, they rate special attentions when captured alive. The number of combinations that elderly Berber women can invent for an enemy's flesh and red-hot sickle blades is said to be amazing. Having one's teeth pulled out of the jaws and hammered back into one's skull, as has been reported, is not alluring.

Raynal had determined, should he land too far from the detachment or injured himself when he struck the ground, to cut matters short by turning the pistol on himself.

Death would be sweeter without a prolonged interview with savage captors. If he dropped inside the French camp, however, there would be no death—

Too late.

HE HAD forgotten how swiftly he was moving. The instant had passed, the opportunity was gone, for the French lines were behind him already, up-wind. Those dimmer lights far below were the fires of natives in the deep ravine.

They started to spin, those fires.

Raynal was seized by a sensation of nausea. The muscles tightened beneath his ribs, he felt dizzy. Then he realized what was happening. The air had grown very rough over the ravine; he was oscillating at the end of the shrouds.

He caught at them, to ease those tremendous pendulum swings; then stopped, dreading that if he spilled too much air he would go down rapidly, far short of his goal. This was something that Noirtier had not figured upon!

For long seconds, he wandered across the sky as if flung by a gigantic sling. Then he hung in relative comfort again, knew that he had passed the ravine and was drifting over the long slope leading to the plateau.

He steered himself back into the proper line of direction. When this was done, he had time to look down, and was startled to see a fire very near, so near that he could count the figures huddled around it. He was not more than three hundred feet above.

He restrained a childish impulse to shout down and scare them. He knew too well how rapidly those people recovered from a start, how quickly they could shoot. And why spoil luck that he had not imagined in his most optimistic provisions—coming so close without being detected.

Yet, when one gave it thought, it was reasonable: The men who were awake at this time were on guard duty. And a sentry in Morocco who looked too often at the sky would not enjoy a long life.

Two or three times, he had to guide the chute back into line. Direction was growing very important now. And every time he hauled on the shrouds, he lost altitude.

Suddenly, what he had expected happened; there was a loud booming above him, a giant rustling. For a second he believed that the chute was collapsing, that he would drop like a stone.

He felt the support of the harness again. But a fifth of a second after, the first shot cracked out from below. Then two, three, six—a dozen more.

Raynal forced himself to calm. Those chaps were not aiming at him, whom they could not see, but at the vague bulk of the parachute sliding across the stars. They were born hunters, skilled marksmen, and unlikely to miss their target by wide enough a margin as to hit him by chance.

Of course, some of those chaps had seen parachutes before. The mountaineers from the rebel zone often went down into pacified Morocco to work as laborers, to earn enough money to purchase cartridges and guns for the fighting season. But it was unlikely that any one of them would think of a parachute quickly enough to decide to shoot below the visible target.

The shots were answered by the Lebels of the Legion sentries. Raynal was startled: the ashes were remote, several hundred yards away. And there was nothing he could do now to rise again.

Then his feet struck the ground, very hard, half-stunning him. He bobbed up once or twice, then plunged forward, knees, toes and palms rasping on the rough soil. He contrived to turn over, worked with frantic haste, his fingers groping for the hooks, unfastening them, as he was being dragged. Then he stood clear, fell down and rolled about, panting for breath.

I've got to get away, he thought.

HE DREW himself erect. His left leg pained him severely. He bit his lips and hobbled off. He went in the direction opposite to that taken by the chute. When he paused for breath, he heard the sound of men running, the slap-slapping of hard bare soles: natives.

They did not spot him, headed for the vague, monstrous shape of the chute collapsing on the ground. They had not understood yet, evidently, were not seeking a passenger so far from his means of travel. He heard the guttural cries of surprise as they reached the silken billows.

Then the slow, methodical fire of an automatic rifle opened from the Legion's lines, and the natives scattered hastily. Raynal, who guessed what would follow, dropped to the ground, crawled into a shallow rut.

A flare arched across the night, bloomed into bluish light.

When darkness returned, Raynal heard the rustling of the cloth as the natives courageously floundered into it, searching, searching. They naturally believed that—passenger or cargo—what they sought was buried somewhere in that unwieldy mass.

For many minutes, Raynal heard their excited whisperings. Several of them passed four or five feet from his hiding place. The pistol butt in his hand grew slippery with sweat.

After an hour, he felt that it was safe to stand.

The pain in his leg had abated, He was sore all over, bruised, but not seriously hurt. He unwound the scarf from about his chin and kepi, knotted it around his neck. Standing in the darkness, he adjusted his kepi at the correct angle for an officer in the mounted company.

His heart was pounding hard, a fierce jubilation gripped him. This was the moment he had waited for, hoped for.

He would walk toward the Legion outposts, attract attention. Then he would walk in, announce himself: "Lieutenant Raynal, coming for his platoon!"

He could identify himself at a distance, by whistling the prelude to the Legion's

March. He got his bearings, started out. For a hundred yards, two hundred, all went well.

Then, without preliminary challenge, without warning, an automatic burst out furiously. He threw himself to the ground again. The bullets spattered viciously, not very far ahead, on the right.

And, from several points along the line, some of them too near Raynal for comfort, answering flashes slashed the night. The natives had scouts within a short distance of the French position! It would be suicide to try to get further in the darkness.

By dawn, he figured, the snipers would have crawled back to the camps at the other end of the plateau. He could then attract attention by shouting in French, and contrive to walk in. It would be an anti-climax, but it was preferable to being killed like a stray dog, in the night.

He investigated a dark mass nearby, a boulder. No one was there. He crept against the base of it, stretched out. It was a poor ending to his successful jump.

And, as he lay there, he kept thinking that a man hiding and a cobra on its legitimate errands would both seek the same spots—which did not add to his ease of mind or cheerfulness.

CHAPTER VIII

FIX BAYONETS!

RAYNAL was awakened by a distant rumbling. For several seconds, he could not recall where he was; his first thought was that he had been a fool to go to sleep. But how could he have spent his time better?

He felt an intense thirst, multiplied aches throughout his body. Then he examined his surroundings.

He was prone on his side in a sort of shallow ditch under an overhang of gray rock, wedged in very close, screened from the outside by a tangle of grass and brush.

The light was weak, the air cool, so dawn had just broken. The rumbling

started again, and Raynal believed it was thunder, for electric storms were not rare in the hills at the season. But in that case, the sky would have been dark, lightning would have flashed.

He grinned as he guessed the simple answer: cannon. The field batteries with the mobile group had opened fire.

He shifted his body until he could peer out through the grass, saw a couple of hundred yards of sloping ground, sparsely tufted, strewn with boulders such as the one under which he had taken cover. Here and there, a runted, twisted tree sprouted from the pebbly soil.

From his position, a slight rise of ground was enough to shut off the Legion's positions. But he figured that it could not be very far off, five, six hundred yards.

He picked up his pistol, examined it. A good thing that he had not fired it! Somewhere, somehow, the muzzle had been plugged with earth. The barrel might have burst in his face. As he had no cleaning rod, he broke off a twig to knock out the plug.

He was about to crawl out and reconnoiter when rifle fire broke out very near. Forty to fifty rifles were in action; yet, for some minutes, he could see no one.

It was one of the strangest sensations in his life. He was squatted between two lines of combatants, having dropped from the sky. No one knew of his presence here. If a stray bullet killed him, it would be years, probably, before some native shepherd discovered his bones under the stone.

At about this time, Bercolet and his companions were nearing Tunis. He might have been with them. Or, in the normal course of things, he would have been on the field, at Agadir, with the roar of the warming motors in his ears, waiting to take off for the southwest. A man was sometimes a fool to trifle with his destiny.

A number of men came over the low ridge, natives. They came fast, on the run, then stopped in the lee of the rise of soil, gathered and talked a moment. Most of

them were grown warriors, bearded, rangy chaps, very matter of fact.

Several were young boys. One, who could not have been more than twelve, was handling an old flintlock taller than himself.

One of them bandaged a bleeding wound in his thigh, while the others stood about, joking and laughing. The wounded man himself, as he worked, grinned, solid teeth showing in his beard. They were tough people, manifestly they were enjoying this fight.

Suddenly they scattered in different directions. One of them appeared to be headed straight for the lieutenant, who lifted his pistol. At the last moment the fellow veered, skirted to his right, vanishing from sight.

Five seconds later, kepis bobbed into sight, a skirmish line of Legionnaires came over the ridge, advancing, crouching low. Raynal almost shouted when he recognized Sergeant Malthos at the head of the leading group.

THE noncom peered about—swinging his head like a watchful bear, Raynal thought. Other combat groups trickled into view over the ridge at other spots. Raynal recognized many familiar silhouettes, even after a year.

They came on steadily, "oozily." Then there was a shot.

All of them pitched forward headlong. Raynal appreciated the men's skill at taking cover. Only here and there could he detect the crest of a kepi, the white of a hunched shoulder. A flickering of short flames kindled directly opposite him, accompanied by the hammering of an automatic rifle.

The bullets struck the stone, a few feet above Raynal, and the air was alive with screaming mangled metal and chips of rock. Two or three minutes of this, and the Legionnaires rose and lumbered forward. Soon Raynal would be able to signal to them.

Then a report cracked out, not a yard away, and he smelled burnt powder.

Again the soldiers fell prone, vanished. Raynal had understood what was happening. The chap who had come in his direction had taken cover on the flank of the boulder. He looked toward the spot just in time to see a metal muzzle protruding three or four inches.

It wavered up and down slightly, steadied and spurted flame.

Raynal crawled nearer to it. He wondered whether he should grab the gun barrel and yank the man into sight, or merely push his hand around the stone and fire his pistol at random. He reasoned that if he leveled the barrel of his gun with that of the rifle, he could not miss the marksman's head.

The muzzle reappeared, fired, vanished before Raynal could move. He was within less than a yard of an enemy who was completely unaware of his presence. The combat, for the lieutenant, had focussed to this tiny spot.

The muzzle pushed into sight again, quivered as the fellow took careful aim. Raynal rose to his knees, pushed the pistol around the rock, fired. Because of the awkward position, the recoil was painful.

But he had scored a hit; for the sniper rolled into view, clutching at his head with both hands. As he staggered to his feet, he was knocked down again by a dozen shots from the Legionnaires.

They were racing up with the automatic, which they set up again in the lee of the boulder, working with feverish haste. The back of number three, a loader, was not three feet from Raynal. The officer started to speak, but the discharge of the gun covered his voice. He reached out and touched the man's shoulder.

WHAT followed was ludicrous. The Legionnaire turned a sweaty, startled face toward the rock, saw Raynal with his head popping out of the grass within a few inches of his nose, recognized him. The next instant, forgetting the enemy's bullets, he was hopping away.

The gunner, who had been nursing the stock comfortably, spotted his former of-

ficer, ceased firing, remained stretched with his mouth agape.

The lieutenant's unexpected appearance had silenced the automatic as effectively as a hand grenade explosion. Malthos, the sergeant, came to investigate, running in long strides, pistol ready. He saw Raynal, was startled, but shoved the gun crew back to work before speaking.

"Hello, Malthos."

"Hello, Lieutenant. How did you get here?" The materialization of the lieutenant in the midst of the combat, on this isolated plateau where the detachment had sweltered for three days, smacked of the miraculous.

"Plane and chute, Malthos."

"Late last night. We heard the plane and wondered."

"Where's Lieutenant Dumanoir?"

"Back somewhere—to the left, Lieutenant." Malthos called out instructions to his men, appeared to avoid Raynal's eyes. "Might as well tell you. There's been a little trouble. Mobile group signaled this morning that they would attack hard and clear the ravine, that on our side we were to start to meet them as soon as the artillery opened up. That's what we did, as you see."

Malthos hesitated. "Well, you'll hear about it anyway. Lieutenant Dumanoir had a idea. Wanted to go down the path along the cliff. That meant leaving the mules behind. Lieutenant Vernier doesn't want to leave anything."

Raynal nodded approval of this. A mounted detachment of Legion had *never* abandoned a live mule or a useful piece of material to any enemy—not with the formation unbroken. Knowing Dumanoir fondness for display of originality, it was easy to understand what he was seeking: a spectacular escape.

"Where is he, did you say?"

"Back there, somewhere over the ridge—Lieutenant."

Raynal rose and started to run. The danger was not too great, as he could pick his terrain and the natives were busy fighting the first line. As he surmounted the low crest, he saw Vernier trotting toward the

front, but the sub-lieutenant did not see him. Raynal headed down the slope, where the mules were halted in two lines.

News of Raynal's arrival had probably been spread already, for Senior-sergeant Leibenroth saluted him without a show of surprise.

"Lieutenant Dumanoir?"

"The lieutenant has been wounded, Lieutenant." Leibenroth's face was set, hard. "He's over there."

Dumanoir had been laid on the ground, and a brace of Legionnaires were bending over him. The officer had become very thin, appeared very old. The disfiguring scar showed plainly through the bristles of his unshaven cheeks. Raynal knelt beside him, clasped his hand.

"Raoul! How are you?"

"Fine, except that I am dying." Dumanoir smiled faintly.

"What happened?"

"Vernier didn't understand. I didn't want any more dead—dead—"

Leibenroth loomed above the group.

"The lieutenant was hit a while back," he said.

There was a tunic on the ground, a few feet away, with the double stripes of gold fastened to the cuffs: Dumanoir's tunic. For an unreal, fleeting moment, Raynal looked at it, saw the blood stains—and a spot blackened by the point-blank discharge of a gun.

Then Leibenroth noted this, picked up the garment and rolled it up.

"Raoul—you—"

"Made a mess of things to the end, yes."

Dumanoir touched the dressing on his body: "Didn't even do that right! But it's only a few minutes. I couldn't—too many dead. There is—there was—too much to go back into. Couldn't get away with it twice. Too many dead."

THE tragedy was recent, for Malthos had not known of it. Raynal felt that he would never know exactly what had happened. Had Dumanoir shot himself to escape facing a court martial for rashness, as he hinted? Or had Vernier, pushed too

far, taken matters in his capable hands to keep the detachment from abandoning mules and baggage?

"Didn't have you to pull me out," Dumanoir resumed, with a faint smile, "and couldn't imagine you'd show up."

What was the truth? Vernier would never talk, and in this case the Legionnaires would be forever mute. So far as the outside was concerned, Dumanoir must have fallen in action. He would be awarded a posthumous citation, probably.

A runner came up, shouting urgently.

"Lieutenant says to get going—to get going—"

A mule with a cacolet saddle was brought near for the officer. There were six bodies packed on mules, wrapped in blankets. And nine wounded. But the detachment was leaving nothing behind, not a single sound animal, not a pound of useful material, not a single wounded man, not even a corpse. Things were being done in Legion style, as was proper.

He shouldn't be moved, Raynal thought. However—"I'll take his shoulders," he addressed a Legionnaire; "get hold of his feet."

They lifted Dumanoir on to the seat of the cacolet. Blood rushed, flowed through the dressing. The wounded officer reached out for Raynal's hand, smiling, as if in derision.

Under the grime and beard, his features grew childish, relaxed. His lips moved as he tried to speak, he coughed once. Thin pink scum bubbled on his mouth, then blood streaked his chin. The pupils stared at Raynal.

"He's done for, Lieutenant"—Leibenroth touched Raynal's arm meaningly—"and we'd better get going."

"Right."

Raynal ran off without another glance at his dead friend. Grief gripped him, yet he experienced a strange sensation of utter

freedom. With the death of Dumanoir, the bizarre hold that had clutched his soul, his spirit, was broken. He was no longer part of another man's future.

He went over the ridge in long strides, and bullets at once sought him. The combat groups of the detachment were fighting furiously, forging across the plateau, knocking the natives back.

Far off, down in the ravine, the tumult of another combat swelled, where the units of the mobile group were battering their way to the rescue.

He overhauled Vernier, who rose from a crouch to greet him.

"He's gone," Raynal announced.

The sub-lieutenant offered his hand. He turned his broad back to the enemy, to the flying metal. He was calm. Perhaps, like Raynal, he felt that death had its toll of the detachment's officers for that day.

"I've learned a lot since I saw you," Vernier said. "Sorry I made an ass of myself."

"Forget it."

Vernier swept the groups with a gesture of one hand.

"Naturally, you're in command."

"I'm here as a volunteer, no official standing," Raynal protested. "In the Legion, I'm under your orders."

He went on quickly, as he saw that his friend was about to demur: "The hardest part of the job was done when I arrived."

Vernier looked at him, nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes. It was hard." Then his hand lifted, pointed. "All right. I assign you to your old platoon. We'll stop fooling around and drive those slobs out of our way."

Raynal snapped to attention, saluted.

"At your orders, *mon lieutenant*."

He ran down the line to his proper station, scorning to stoop. With a glance, he gathered them all to his will. His voice cut clear and sharp through the fusillade.

"Fix bayonets!"

THE END

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CHAPTER I

SENORITA REDHEAD

THE narrow side walks were crowded with beggars, and with old women selling lottery tickets. Street urchins, skipping no bets, offered a choice of dubious postcards, or garishly colored images of saints.

But Don Wayland ignored the street life of Guaymas, and the tourists also. He brushed both aside, impartially. His egg-shell tropicals hung well from broad shoulders; his spotless Panama towered well over the crowd, and Wayland was square and rugged, like his tanned face. Altogether, he was big enough to get away with being in a hurry in Mexico.

Wayland stepped into the patio of the Silver Tower, where broad-leaved plantains rustled, and a fountain scattered cool mist on the diamond-shaped tiles. A waiter with gold teeth and a scarlet sash bowed double, but Wayland was in a hurry. And he needed no guidance.

Lorela was at the usual table, where the green background made her copper-colored hair a splendid blaze.

"Hello, *Rubia!*" He caught the slim hands she extended; he kissed them, and not her generously rouged mouth, for the waiter was catfooting about in the arcade. Anyway, that was an old Spanish custom. "*Que tal?*"

"*Que tal* yourself, and don't call me *Rubia!*"

Her taffeta skirt rustled as she seated herself in the corner. The afternoon gown

was as incredible as the girl. But Guaymas expected Lorela Romero to be colorful; that was her job, even though she was not yet *prima donna* at the Silver Tower. *Esa rubia*, they called her, because of her hair and her cream-colored skin: that redhead, par excellence. So Wayland teased her by mimicking the Mexicans, who insisted that she must have come from Jalisco, where nearly everyone is Gothic blond.

"All right, I won't." The waiter had come in with two chilled dry sherries; no order was needed, not after three solid weeks of afternoon meetings in the patio. "Provided you stop kicking about the danger of flying over the Sierra Madre."

Lorela sighed, and her green eyes became tragic. "But, Don—those Yaquis! If you ever made a forced landing, you and your photographer, you'd never get back alive."

"Dennis—" Wayland grimaced as though he had just bitten into some of the fish scraps that rotted in the boats along the *pescadero*. "Dennis, that big lug, he claims it's an absolutely sound crate he's having brought down."

"You don't like Mr. Dennis, do you?"

"No, I don't." He did not bother to say that much of his distrust came from Elmer Dennis' admiration of Lorela. Dennis was junior member of the firm that employed Wayland, and also controlled the Silver Tower. "And I'd not take his word, if Corey Ledgate didn't back it up."

Lorela studied him with cool exasperation. "You say we'll get married; then, to earn some quick money, you take the