

## THE MUTINY AT FORT SAADA

[Frontispiece]



[Photo : Exclusive News Agency]

THE MERCILESS, TRACTLESS DESERT



# THE MUTINY AT FORT SAADA

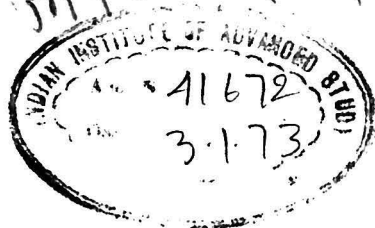
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# THE MUTINY AT FORT SAADA

## CHAPTER I

### HEAT

THE Fort looked anything but imposing. No lofty turrets stretched upwards to a cloud-racked sky, no moat flung its deep, dark waters round towering walls in a protective girdle. Unromantic and dourly practical, it stood four-square in that vast ocean of shifting, swirling sand that is the Sahara, a sentinel of France, guarding a land which can be occupied but can never be subdued by an invader.

Not the ideal setting, one might think, for one of the greatest stories of courage and chivalry, treachery and malice, lust and privation, that the soiled history of France's Foreign Legion has ever recorded; yet in the course of a few weeks Fort Saada was to witness more scenes of brutality and heroism than many a European fastness has seen in three hundred years.

To Captain Jean Dubois, wrestling with official correspondence in the sweltering heat of his little office in the north-west corner of the compound, the only thing that mattered at the moment was to trace three water bottles which had apparently vanished into thin air since the Fourth Squadron of Cavalry, which he commanded, had taken over

duty in the fort some three weeks ago. Three Légionnaires might be reported missing and Headquarters would shrug their shoulders and murmur, "*C'est la guerre*," but if three water bottles were unaccounted for when the squadron returned to the depot there would be the devil to pay with the Quartermaster's staff.

"I wish to heaven the Bureau would realise that I've something more important to do than to make out weekly returns of kit," he muttered, dabbing his face with a large bandanna handkerchief. "The Legion is no place for a soldier these days; what they want is a set of damned invoice clerks."

The fighting man is, at the best of times, intolerant of the meticulous attention to small details which the little panjandrums of the Staff expect from those who command mobile units, and the events of the last few days had done nothing to put Dubois in the frame of mind that will suffer fools gladly. Ever since they had been in the fort things had gone wrong; each new day had brought its fresh crop of worries and unexpected difficulties, until Dubois felt that he would be driven off his head trying to keep things running smoothly.

And now, to crown all, had come the wirelessly order to prepare and transmit a detailed return of kit within twenty-four hours.

Pushing away the papers which littered his desk, Dubois fumbled in a pocket of his tunic for his cigarette case, lit up and then, lying back in his chair, gave himself up to serious thought.

There could be no doubt but that the position of things there in Fort Saada was grave in the extreme.

The battalion of Legion infantry which should have relieved them, after a fortnight of garrison work, had failed to put in an appearance, for a serious native revolt, some eighty miles away, had necessitated their being rushed to the scene of the trouble, and there seemed little or no prospect of any other troops being spared to relieve the squadron. The Tuaregs in the immediate neighbourhood of the fort, doubtless encouraged by the news of the revolt, were proving more than usually troublesome, and although not present in large numbers, they were quite strong enough to make any sortie a dangerous and costly matter.

For some inscrutable reason, the authorities responsible for the building of the forts in the Sahara, very seldom erected them round one of the few fresh water wells to be found in those arid regions, and Fort Saada was no exception. True, there was an oasis with water in plenty some four hundred yards away, but both the approach and the oasis itself were overlooked by high sand dunes from which enemy snipers could pick off, with the greatest of ease, anyone approaching, unless the defenders were numerically strong enough to clear them out of the fastnesses at the point of the bayonet or sabre.

At present, the fort was so thinly manned that until it became a matter of absolute necessity, Dubois did not feel justified in risking valuable lives in this manner. Meanwhile, it meant a period of inactivity for all concerned, with the added hardship of short rations and all the discomforts of active service, with none of the excitement born of grim fighting, with no give-and-take asked for or expected on either side.



For days past, the enemy snipers had been busy, and although they had not succeeded in hitting many of the defenders, their efforts had been more successful than they could possibly have known. Only the previous day, Dubois' sergeant-major, a grizzled veteran whose lengthy experience of desert warfare had made him a very tower of strength to the squadron, had been mortally wounded by a bullet while he was changing the sentries mounted on the parapet which ran the length of the four walls of the fort.

Not a shot had been fired for nearly an hour before this one bullet was fired, and yet the gods had seen fit to deprive Dubois of a trusted and devoted friend and counsellor, and the squadron of a *sous-officier* for whom the men held nothing but affection and respect.

"And, as if that wasn't bad enough in itself," Dubois told himself, "here I am with my only two officers down with such bad attacks of fever that they are worse than useless, and the men growing more and more restless and discontented every day. Well, I suppose there's nothing for it but to promote Karvof, though I know I should be happier if he were not quite such a brute of a fellow. God knows we of the Legion are a tough crowd, but there are limits to what even *our* men will put up with, and if our Russian friend isn't careful, I'm afraid there'll be more than a little trouble coming his way."

An orderly entered, and, saluting, handed him a typewritten slip. "Just come through on the wireless, *mon capitaine*," he said.

As Dubois read the message he frowned.

"A large force of Tuaregs reported to be massing in the valley eight kilometers away, eh? Well, I'm sure that it is very kind of Headquarters to send us warning like this, though I must confess I should appreciate it more if they had sent us another hundred men, although I suppose that would be asking for the impossible! All right, Morreau, that's all."

The orderly saluted and turned on his heel. As he reached the door, Dubois called to him:

"By the way, I want to see Sergeant Karvof. At once, mind you, so look sharp."

As the door closed behind the orderly, Dubois once again drew the papers towards him and made a pretence of studying them. It would never do to let a subordinate think he was in any way rattled.

Few, indeed, are the people of whom it can be said that they do not possess one redeeming feature in their character. More than a few murderers who have paid for their crimes on the scaffold have displayed some streak of kindness or affection in their lives; brutality, vileness, treachery, all are to be found in many men and in many places on this earth, but even where they are most pronounced there is usually to be found some trace, no matter how faint, of that divine spark of humanity which raises man above the beasts that perish.

But search as you might, it would have been impossible to find any good in the character of Boris Karvof.

A Russian, with more than a little Tartar blood in his veins, his early days had been spent in one of the foulest slums of St. Petersburg where, before he was sixteen years old, his name had become a byword

for all that was bestial and cruel. It was when he was seventeen that he first fell foul of the police authorities in connection with a brutal assault on a young girl. Fortunately for him, his victim was one of the working-class and therefore a person of no great importance in the eyes of authority; had she been one of the aristocracy he could not have hoped to have escaped the dreaded salt mines.

Even as it was, he could not escape being sentenced to a severe flogging, and what his early environment and own degraded nature had begun, the knout finished. When Karvof slouched through the prison gates into the snow-covered streets of his native city, he was as vicious and brutal a specimen of humanity as ever cut a throat.

With the advent of the Revolution it seemed that his star was at last in the ascendant. The revolutionaries had need of brutes such as he, and it was not long before his untrammelled brutality and unrelenting persecution of the bourgeoisie and defenceless aristocrats won him official recognition, and he was promoted to command a detachment of Red Guards.

On the night of his promotion he and a boon companion made their way to a certain house not a mile from the barracks where they knew they would have opportunity of celebrating his success in the way that appealed to them. As the night wore on and the vodka they continuously poured down their throats fired their brains more and more, Karvof grew even more truculent and aggressive. Normally his friend would wisely have given in to him, but being as drunk as he, discretion was thrown

to the winds when Karvof insisted on enjoying the favours of the woman whom his friend had already marked down for himself.

Words swiftly led to blows, a knife flashed in the glare of the one unshaded electric light globe, and the next moment Karvof's companion sagged slowly to his knees and collapsed on the floor. The sight of the dead man sobered Karvof more than anything else could have done. It was not that he felt the slightest remorse at the thought of having killed his friend, but he realised, with a sudden shock, that the dead man was the brother of one of the most important officials of the dread OGPU, or Secret Police. When the news of the murder reached the ears of the latter, it would be the end of Karvof, for vengeance of a far from gentle kind is the lot of those who fall foul of the officials of the Soviet.

Without more ado, therefore, he hastened to his lodgings, collected such articles as he could conveniently carry, and made all speed for the frontier. Fortune favoured him, and he escaped from Russia without mishap. Then followed years of wandering from one unsavoury haunt to another, until, finally, he found a refuge in the famous *Légion des Étrangers*, where no tactless questions are asked of would-be recruits, provided they are not likely to boast powerful and influential friends who might raise tactless questions themselves if the true story of life in the Legion should ever reach them.

The harsh life suited Karvof admirably. His powerful physique enabled him to make light of the privations and hardships which are the lot of the *légionnaire*, while the licentiousness, debauchery and cruelty

which play so big a part in debasing the men who serve under the tricolour of France in Africa, suited his evil nature excellently. In fact, in all that vast company of brutal men, none was more brutal than Boris Karvof.

For Captain Dubois, Karvof had a wholesome respect. In his commander he recognised a man who was a stern disciplinarian and one who would not stand for any conduct that was likely to undermine the discipline or efficiency of the squadron under his orders. As a *sous-officier*, Dubois had served with distinction during the Great War and in the Spring of 1918 he had been raised to commission rank. The war over, he had transferred to the Foreign Legion and, after several years of hard campaigning, had received his captaincy and the command of the Fourth Cavalry Squadron.

Emphatically, Dubois was not the man to tolerate anything in the nature of unwarranted brutality in the non-commissioned officers under his command, for, like the great Doctor Arnold, of Rugby, he might be a beast but he was a just beast, and Karvof took good care that the real truth of his senior sergeant's misdeeds was carefully hidden from him.

Being anything but a fool, Dubois had a shrewd idea of the nature of his sergeant, but so long as the fellow maintained discipline and kept the men up to scratch, the methods he employed in doing so were his own business. There would be plenty of time to take action when official complaints were received. And to make complaints in the Legion is to court trouble with a capital T!

Therefore, it was with no sense of fear that Karvof

entered his commanding officer's apartment, and, approaching the desk, saluted smartly.

Dubois gave him a curt nod of recognition.

"As you know," he began, abruptly, "things are going badly here in the fort, Sergeant."

"Yes, *mon capitaine*."

"During this period of enforced inaction it is essential that the men be kept busy so that they have little or no opportunity for brooding. Unfortunately, both my junior officers are down with fever and my hands are already so full that I cannot possibly carry on their duties as well as my own. During their absence, therefore, you will act as my second-in-command. I look to you to see that the men are kept up to the mark and you will make it your duty to deal severely with anyone who shows the slightest sign of insubordination."

Karvof's narrow, close-set eyes gleamed. Here was not only a heaven-sent chance to show his commanding officer what a fine disciplinarian he was, but also the opportunity to make things even more unpleasant than usual for those members of the squadron who had been unlucky enough to get into his bad books.

Captain Dubois, glancing up suddenly from his papers, was in time to catch the look in his sergeant's eyes.

"Now, understand me, Sergeant," he continued, severely. "Although I expect you to maintain strict discipline, I will not stand for any unnecessary bullying of the men. They are in a sullen enough mood as it is, and will be quick to resent any unfair treatment. Besides, far from strengthening discipline,

needless bullying only undermines the respect men have or, rather, should have, for their superiors."

Karvof contrived to look pained.

"But, *mon capitaine*," he protested, "you surely do not think that I would——"

"Never mind what I think or do not think!" Dubois interrupted. "Just keep my words in mind, then you won't go far wrong. That will be all now. Meanwhile, see that all guards are doubled to-night; there's trouble brewing among those Tuaregs out there, and we can't take needless risks. Get the men on to cleaning up their side-arms and equipment and to-morrow morning I will inspect the squadron in full battle order. You can carry on now, and remember not to drive the men too hard."

Walking slowly across the sun-scorched, dusty barrack square, in the centre of the fort, Karvof smiled grimly to himself.

"Not drive the men too hard—I like that!" he muttered. "I suppose the next thing will be that I shall be expected to take them a cup of tea to bed every morning! It's nothing but a waste of time to treat these swine decently, and, by God, I'll show them that I'm the fellow to get things done!"

Catching sight of one of the men who had appeared at the door leading to the canteen, Karvof let out a bellow.

"Hi, you! Come here. At the double now!"

Obediently the soldier ran across the square and halted in front of the sergeant who looked at him with hatred in his little piglike eyes.

"So it's my friend, Texhard!" he snapped. "Well, pig of an American, I have some good news for your

filthy ears. The Captain has just appointed me second-in-command to see to it that you bghave yourself. You are greatly honoured, you know."

"Honoured, Sergeant?" The young American looked completely mystified.

"Yes, honoured! Keep your filthy ears open, you swine. I have something better to do than repeat every word for the benefit of gutter sweepings like you. You don't seem to realise that you are the first to receive an order from the Squadron's new second-in-command. And just so that you shall have the chance to remember the honour for some time, I have pleasure in detailing you to empty the latrines again to-morrow."

Richard Texhard choked back the protest that rose to his lips. The duty to which he had been assigned was one that, being the most unpleasant of all, was usually allotted in strict rotation, yet for the last three days Karvof had detailed him for it. Unfair though it was, he knew only too well that the sergeant was deliberately tempting him to an act of insubordination which would result in heavy punishment.

For the hundredth time, Texhard cursed the turn of fate which had brought Karvof to serve with the Fourth Squadron, for in the Russian he had an enemy who would stop at nothing to make his life a burden.

It was not to be wondered at that the sergeant hated the young American, for he had never forgotten the incident in the barracks at Marseilles, years before, when, as newly joined légionnaire awaiting the troopship that was to take them to Africa, Têxhard had given him the worst hiding of his life.



Although newly joined, there had been nothing of the weakling about Richard Texhard. The son of wealthy parents, he had early displayed a love of adventure that landed him in endless scrapes, and his high spirits and energy, coupled with a genuine love of the outdoor life, took him on many strange adventures in both Mexico and South America. Finally, his father had been compelled to put his foot down, a violent row had followed, and Richard, faced with the prospect of being compelled to settle down in the family business and become a respectable member of society, had found a way out of his difficulties by working his passage to Europe, and, after a hectic four months in Paris, joining the Foreign Legion.

Karvof, who included among other pleasant habits that of robbing légionnaires who returned to barracks the worse for drink, or who were too small to put up a fight, one night attempted to extract a wad of notes from the pocket of a man with whom Texhard had become friendly. Unfortunately for him, the Russian omitted to exercise his usual caution, and the young American awoke to catch him in the act.

The next moment the barrack-room was in an uproar as the two men, fighting furiously, crashed over a table as they swayed into the centre of the floor. It was not a pretty fight—the Legion knows little and cares less of such things as Queensberry rules—but it was soon over. Struggle as he might, the Russian was no match for his opponent, who not only gave him one of the greatest thrashings he had ever had, but was, in so doing, responsible for making him the laughing-stock of the entire barracks.

Karvof was not the sort of man to forget such a slight. "I'll get even with you one day, you *offal*," he had growled. "You may be the top dog now, but you'd better look out for yourself if ever I get you under me."

"A mighty fine chance *you* have of ever getting promotion," Texhard had retorted.

However, it is the unexpected that happens in the Legion, and thanks to the recommendation of a compatriot who was a sergeant-major, Karvof soon did gain promotion. Later he was transferred from an infantry battalion to the cavalry, and in due course found himself attached to the Fourth Squadron where, to his intense satisfaction, he found the young American serving. From that day, Texhard's life was made a perfect hell.

Karvof glared at the young American.

"Don't stand there gaping at me, you fool," he bellowed. "Say something, for God's sake! You heard my orders, didn't you?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Then see they are carried out!"

"Very good, Sergeant."

"Very good, Sergeant," Karvof mimicked. "It had better be 'very good, Sergeant' or it will be the worse for you! Now, get out of my sight, you loafing dog. The very sight of you makes me want to vomit!"

Without a word, Richard Texhard turned on his heel and walked slowly to the barracks. Flinging himself down on his bed, he lighted a cigarette and by its smoke attempted to keep at bay the hordes of flies which buzzed angrily round his head.

The heat in the room was stifling. The air, stale and heavy with the smell of sweat, sickened him. On a bed in the far corner a fat German, the perspiration gleaming on his naked chest, mumbled uneasily in his sleep as he turned restlessly from side to side.

Suddenly Texhard jumped to his feet and strode towards the door. As he pushed it open and stood blinking in the glare of the burning sun, a tap on his shoulder made him spin round. By his side stood a well-built young man, some six feet tall, whose dark wavy hair, clear grey eyes and firm, clean-cut features seemed to have "Englishman" written all over them.

"Hallo, 'Texas,' old man," he said, cheerfully. "You look fed up to the back teeth. What's biting you?"

"It's that brute, Karvof," muttered his friend. "The swine has been getting at me again, and I've had all I can stand from that quarter. I'm going to tell him where he gets off right now, even if I get shot for it!"

Without a word, the other seized him by the arm, and, heedless of his protests, marched him over to the canteen. Ordering a couple of drinks he pushed the American on to a seat and thrust a tumbler into his hand.

Not until the drinks had been consumed and two more had replaced them did Duncan Baring speak. Then, resting his elbows on the bare table, he said: "Now then, if you've simmered down a bit you can tell uncle all about it."

"It's nothing to laugh about!" protested the American.

"I'm not so sure," replied the Englishman. "An ability to laugh is the one thing that saves our reason when we're dumped in a god-forsaken spot like this."

"It's all right for you," grumbled the other. "*You* haven't got Karvof up against you. I admit I joined the Legion to get a kick out of life, but holy smoke! I guess I'm getting nothing *but* kicks now!"

Baring rose to his feet and gazed round the shoddy canteen with an expression of distaste. "Let's get out of this and see if a mouthful of fresh air will do us good," he suggested.

Strolling to the door, he flung it open and went out. As Texhard followed, he wondered for the hundredth time what exactly was the mystery surrounding the Englishman who was his friend.

That Duncan Baring was a man of education and breeding was obvious. A first-rate soldier, who was an expert marksman with both rifle and automatic, he was also one of the finest horsemen in the whole squadron. That he had had plenty of experience in soldiering was obvious, and it was not long before he had been offered promotion.

To the surprise of everybody he had declined the offer, remarking that he greatly preferred to remain a ranker with no weight of responsibility on his shoulders. The rumour in the squadron was that he had formerly held a commission in a crack cavalry regiment in the British Army, but when tackled on the point he invariably made some evasive answer which left his interrogators no wiser than before. However, his lazy charm of manner and the fact that, without ever trying to buy popularity, he was always

ready to spend money, of which he had plenty, on his needy comrades for whom the sou a day (which is the pay in the Legion) proved all too inadequate, made him universally popular.

Even the most case-hardened of his comrades would think twice before provoking him, for although quietly spoken and unassuming, he could, when the occasion arose, deal dramatically with those who were unwise enough to provoke him.

At the moment, the young American was too preoccupied with his own troubles to give more than a passing thought to the mystery surrounding his friend, and so with a resigned shrug of his shoulders he joined his companion and together they walked across the square and climbed on to the parapet at the south side of the fort.

Resting their elbows on the top of the wall they gazed across the rolling expanse of desert.

"This durned sand dump fairly gets my goat," exclaimed the American. "What the heck is the use of us wasting our time here, Duncan? We ought to be hitting the high spots in some civilised burg instead of squatting out here like a lot of sandhoppers!"

Baring laughed quietly. "As a matter of fact, old man," he replied, "I find the desert has a queer fascination for me. When I look out at it as we are doing now, there's something that grips my imagination like no other part of the world has ever been able to do. Look at it now," he continued, and pointed to their right where the sun was sinking rapidly behind a high range of mountains, some ten miles away. "The vastness of it, the changeless rolling sea of sand that is now exactly as it was

thousands of years ago, with its little patches of green where the oases provide the only shelter and the heat mirages shimmering over the dunes in the heat of the day."

In the distance a pariah dog howled mournfully, breaking the sunset hush.

Texhard laughed harshly. "That may be how it strikes you," he exclaimed, bitterly, "but to me it is nothing but a darned thirst-raising chunk of misery, complete with all the biting, crawling and stinging pests God ever made. To say nothing of that swine Karvof!" he added.

Duncan Baring laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Look here," he said, seriously, "if you go on brooding too much about our Russian friend you will go *cafard*. For the love of Mike try to put the blighter out of your mind."

"It's this inactivity that gets a guy down," Texhard replied. "Cooped up here, as we are, like a lot of dummies with nothing to do but think and think and think, it's not surprising that a guy gets the jitters. If only we could see a spot of fighting it would give us something to think about. Besides"—he grinned faintly—"some Tuareg might prove himself a regular guy and bump off that cross-eyed son of the Soviets. But there seems to be mighty little chance of anything so good happening."

Even as he spoke the sound of a couple of shots crashed with a loudness that was startling in the hush of the Eastern dusk. The next moment, the bugles sounded the alarm.

"*Aux armes! Aux armes!*" they called, and from every quarter of the fort men came racing on to the

parade ground hastily buttoning up tunics and adjusting equipment as they ran.

Texhard and his friend raced to the barrack room, collected their equipment and fell in with their section just as Captain Dubois, field-glasses in hand, mounted the fire-step and made a searching examination of the surrounding terrain.

"Say," whispered Texhard to his friend, "I guess *you* are the guy to be blamed for all this spot of rough housing!"

"What the blazes are you talking about now?" retorted the Englishman, cheerfully.

Texhard chuckled. "Why, you sucker, the surest way to come up against a spot of trouble is to start off by saying everything in the garden's lovely. No sooner had you expressed a lot of mushy sentiments about the beauty of the desert and all that therein is, than brother Tuareg gives you the lie by starting up a little Fourth of July celebration all of his own."

Sergeant Karvof stood facing the squadron. He glared in the direction of the two friends.

"Silence in the ranks!" he roared. "Call the roll, Corporal."

Roll call finished, Captain Dubois stepped down into the square, received the report from Karvof and turned to the assembled men.

"There is something wrong out there," he said, quietly. "More than likely it is one of the usual scares our friends like to arrange for our benefit, but I am not taking chances."

He turned to his second-in-command. "Sergeant Karvof, you will detail ten men to accompany you out of the fort to investigate. The details of the

reconnaissance I leave to you, but it must be understood that I will not allow any foolish risks to be run, so impress on your men the necessity of behaving with reasonable caution. There are no Croix de Guerre to be won on *this* jaunt!" he added, with a laugh.

"*Bien, mon capitaine.*" Karvof saluted, with an exaggerated flourish that was not lost on the men, who saw in it another expression of his own self-importance.

"As far as I can make out," Dubois continued, "there are several figures lying out in the desert some little distance away, but they are too far off for me to be able to distinguish plainly what manner of people they are. More than likely it is a decoy, so at the first sign of treachery, shoot! There will be plenty of time to ask for explanations afterwards." He spoke grimly.

While the rest of the garrison took up their positions on the walls at the strategic points already allocated to them, the ten men, among whom were Texhard and Baring, mounted their horses and walked them to the main gate.

While they waited in the shadow of the protecting wall of the fort, Karvof issued his orders.

"When we ride out," he said, "we shall split up into two parties. You, Baring, will take two men with you and deploy to the left, while I, with the remainder, will go to the right."

Noting the look of surprise which had come into the Englishman's eyes, he continued hastily. "Of course I shall need more men than you, for there are several sand dunes out on my flank which will



have to be combed out thoroughly, while you have flat country to traverse. However, if you feel you need more support you had better say so. I don't want to have any of my men turning tail."

Not a note in Baring's voice was changed as he answered, but to Karvof who was watching closely to see what effect his overt sneer would have, there was something more than a little menacing in the quiet tones of the Englishman.

"You need not waste your time speculating on the impossible, Sergeant. However, if you want to make quite sure that there will be no cowardice you had better detail Légionnaire Texhard to accompany me, for I know that with him by me there can be no question of any discreditable occurrence."

Karvof's eyes narrowed. He was convinced that Baring was, in some way of his own, making a fool of him, but there was nothing on to which he could seize as an excuse for asserting himself in a more unpleasant manner. Besides, with Captain Dubois standing by, it would never do for him to make an exhibition of himself by becoming involved in an argument in which his instinct warned him he would come out second best.

With a muttered, "If you want to be saddled with a useless cur like that, it's your own funeral!" he passed down the line to detail the third man of Baring's party.

After a hasty inspection, in which Dubois satisfied himself that every man of the party was correctly mounted and armed, the Captain added a final word of warning to the men.

"Now, *mes enfants*," he said, "remember that it is

essential that none of you come between the machine gunners up there"—pointing to the far corner of the parapet—"and the figures you are going to examine. Once the line of fire is obscured, we can't possibly assist you, and what is more, the chances are that you will stop one of your own comrades' bullets. As soon as you leave the gate, therefore, remember to deploy."

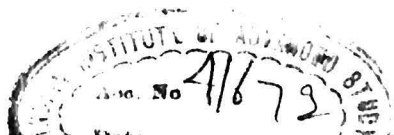
He raised his hand and the men who had been standing by the main gate, swung the heavy, armoured doors open and the little band rode out.

No shots greeted their appearance. Night had fallen and a full moon, climbing into the star-smeared sky, threw a clear cold light on to the sand still warm from the burning heat of the sun.

As the troop wheeled right and left, Karvof called to the Englishman: "No stupidity, mind. If you come up against a hostile force give them three rounds rapid and then ride for the fort as hard as you can. As likely as not the figures the Captain has seen have been planted there as a trap, so keep your eyes open."

Baring nodded, and followed by Texhard and a young German who had but recently joined the squadron, he led the way in single file towards a shallow dip in the ground along which their circular route lay. For half an hour they rode slowly forward, their horses moving silently over the sand.

Turning in his saddle, the Englishman whispered to Texhard: "Marvellous creatures, these Arab stallions. They seem as much at ease in all this drifting sand as my chestnut was in a Leicestershire meadow."



The other nodded. Not for worlds would he have given his friend any sign that he had unwittingly raised one little corner of the veil of secrecy in which he had shrouded himself. Not for long, however, had Texhard the opportunity to speculate on his friend's past. Some twenty minutes later, a sudden burst of firing, from the direction followed by Karvof and his men, shattered the silence of the night.

The Englishman turned in his saddle. "That sounds like business," he said. "We had better get a move on, or we may be too late for the fun and games."

He put his mount into a brisk trot and, followed by his two companions, wheeled sharply in the direction from which the sound had come.

Texhard, who had ridden some twenty yards to Baring's left flank, had just put his horse into a canter to gain ground, when the animal suddenly checked itself, nearly throwing its rider over its head in the process. Running a soothing hand over the crop of his mount, which was now standing, trembling slightly, the young American peered ahead.

Experience had taught him that these Arab horses, bred and reared as they were in the desert, possessed an almost uncanny sense of danger. Many a time his mount had sensed something untoward before any such premonition had reached him. Therefore, far from resenting the behaviour of the horse, he sought to reassure it while he made a carefully detailed scrutiny of the surrounding country.

Suddenly he gave a shout of warning to his two comrades and, hastily dismounting, dropped the reins over his horse's head. Drawing his revolver he ran

lightly across the sand to where his keen eyes had shown him the huddled form of a human being lying face downwards on the edge of a neighbouring dune.

With his automatic held at the ready, he approached the motionless figure and stirred it with his boot. A low moan greeted his far from gentle attentions and, still very much on his guard, he bent down and threw back the cloak that covered the head of the unknown.

"Well, I'll be smoked!" he muttered.

Instead of the unwashed, dusky features of a Saharan Arab, he found himself gazing at the face of a young girl whose wavy golden hair hung in damp curls over her forehead so that their ends brushed two cheeks which, with their slight but even sunburn, could belong to no one other than a European. As he stood staring at the unexpected apparition, his friend came running to his side.

"What sort of a flea-repository have you got there?" Baring demanded.

In his turn he caught sight of the fresh face, lifted towards him. Abruptly he turned to Texhard. "Who's the girl-friend?" he exclaimed. "I had no idea your fatal fascination could draw your admirers half across Africa!"

Without a word, the American dropped to his knees and took the still form in his arms. "I don't know who the dame is," he said, at last, "but she certainly looks in a mighty bad way. Here, Duncan, give me your water-bottle. I can't get at mine. We'll see if we can't bring her round."

Forcing the neck of the bottle between the girl's lips, he tilted it until a trickle of water had forced its way between her clenched teeth.

"There you are, sister," he said, cheerfully. "Take a pull at this."

The girl opened two eyes of deepest blue, and gazed around her in obvious alarm. Struggling to a sitting position she seized the water-bottle and drank deeply, then, handing it back to Texhard, who still knelt beside her, she smiled weakly, showing a set of small even teeth.

"I'm so sorry to be such a nuisance," she muttered.

The two men looked at each other in blank astonishment.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Baring. "She's English!"

"Or American!" retorted his friend, with a note of challenge in his voice.

The Englishman smiled. "Old Texas" might insist that he was a "tough guy," but obviously he was not lacking in *one* of the tenderer qualities!

## CHAPTER II

### DISCIPLINE

AFTER a few moments the white girl managed to struggle into a sitting position. Running a hand nervously over her forehead she gazed dazedly at the two Légionnaires. It was obvious that she was trying to assemble her thoughts once again, and Baring made a mental note that even in this moment of strain she showed no sign of hysteria.

"Take your time," he said in French. "There is nothing to alarm yourself over, Mademoiselle."

Texhard nodded: "Sure, you're with friends now, honey!"

The girl shuddered. She pulled herself together with an obvious effort, then turned to the American.

"How nice to hear English spoken again!" she exclaimed. "I thought a few minutes ago I should never live to see another white man, and now here I am with two of them to look after me!"

The American laughed. "If you want to hear *real* English, don't apply to me," he said, with a smile. "My buddy here is the guy who has all the patter at his finger tips."

The girl turned to Baring and gave him a faint smile. "If only I had known how lucky I was to be," she said, "I would not have done anything so Victorian as to faint! It's the first

time I've ever done such a thing. I can promise you that!"

"And yet you did it so gracefully that you might have had years of practice!" retorted the Englishman, cheerfully.

The girl's face suddenly clouded and, struggling to her feet, she gazed about her. As Texhard placed a supporting arm around her, she looked from one to the other of the two men.

"Where is my uncle?" she demanded. "He must be near somewhere. He must! He must!"

"Steady the Buffs!" Baring took hold of the girl's other arm, and together the friends led her to a nearby hillock, and, spreading her dust coat on the sand, lowered her gently down.

"Now," resumed Baring, when the girl was settled, "suppose you tell us all about yourself. What you are doing here, how you ever came near this outlandish spot, and all the rest of it."

Before the girl could answer, the German—the third member of their little detachment, came staggering up. Slung over his shoulder was the body of a white man, and one glance at the limply hanging head, with his gaping mouth and wide-open sightless eyes, was enough to tell the two *Légionnaires* that this elderly stranger was beyond human aid.

The girl sprang to her feet and strangled a cry. Only the restraining arm of Texhard prevented her from running to their comrade. "It's my uncle! They've murdered him! Oh, the devils, the devils!"

Turning to the German, who by now had lowered the lifeless body to the sand, and was standing with a silly vacant grin on his face, Baring rapped out

an order: "Get out of this," he commanded. "You've about as much sense as a dead toad! What did you want to bring that along here for before consulting me?"

The young German rubbed the back of his head in frank perplexity. "How was I to know that the Fraulein had anything to do with this so-dead Herr?" he muttered. "Besides, there is another dead one—an Arab—over yonder." He waved his arm vaguely in the direction of the sand dune on his right.

"Well, you can't do any more damage," Baring retorted, "so you might as well go and bring your dusky friend along here, too."

The boy grinned weakly, and drawing a large red handkerchief from his pocket, mopped his face. "It is hard work, this carrying of bodies!" he protested.

"Scram!"

Texhard shot out the order with such vehemence that the German started back involuntarily and then shuffled off in the direction from which he had come.

When he had gone, Baring turned to the girl. "I don't want to worry you more than I can help," he said. "It's all too plain to see that you've had a pretty ghastly experience of some sort, but I do really feel that if you can make the effort it would be a good thing if you could tell us briefly what has happened."

The girl nodded. "I'll try," she said. "But it all seems so unreal that it is hard to believe that it actually happened."

"When you've been in this country as long as I have," replied Baring, "you'll find that it is the unbelievable that usually *does* happen!"



Without more ado the girl launched into her story, and as she proceeded, speaking in quiet, almost unemotional tones, the two white men listened with an interest that grew tense.

Her name, she explained, was Joan Lexham, and until a few months ago she had lived with her uncle, Sir Arthur Lexham, at his home near Godalming.

Her parents had died in the great influenza epidemic of 1919, when she was still a child, and Sir Arthur had taken her to live with him. One of the greatest botanists of his generation, her uncle had found that as Joan began to grow up she shared his love of plants, and by the time she was nineteen she had become, not only a very beautiful girl who ran his home with the skill and quiet confidence of a woman twice her age, but also an assistant whose collaboration soon became invaluable to him in his work.

So it happened that when he made plans to visit North Africa in search of certain cacti, which he was most anxious to add to his collection, Joan had accompanied him. At first he had protested against her doing so, pointing out the many hardships and possible dangers which lay in store, but his protests had been those of a guardian with a sense of duty to perform, and when his niece had not only pooh-poohed the notion that any ill could befall her, but had also reminded him of the fact, which he was so unsuccessfully trying to forget, that her expert knowledge would prove invaluable to him on the expedition, he had given way with a show of reluctance that was really a cover to his genuine satisfaction.

The voyage out had been as uneventful as one

could be, and Tunis was reached without the loss of so much as one preserving jar. The day following their arrival, Sir Arthur had called on the French General commanding in Tunis, explained the object of his mission, and named the districts he proposed to visit in his search.

The official was courtesy itself. But of course it would be perfectly safe for the famous Sir Arthur Lexham to visit the districts he had mentioned! Naturally England was so occupied with her own vast overseas possessions that she could not be expected to concern her head about France's own humble efforts at colonisation, but he could assure Sir Arthur that, thanks to splendid policing, the country for many hundreds of square miles around was as peaceful as a fashionable suburb of Paris at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning. Tuaregs? Bah! An old wives' tale, doubtless started by detractors of la Belle France!

Would it be likely that he would for one moment suggest that so distinguished a gentleman as Sir Arthur—to say nothing of his so beautiful niece—should go anywhere near danger?

Quite overcome by the charm and kindness of the gallant soldier, uncle and niece had made plans for their departure into the interior without more ado, and some three weeks later, they, together with their Arab guide and six native servants, had reached a large oasis about seven miles away from Fort Saada. Leaving the servants to pitch camp, the two white people, and their guide, had ridden off to a water-hole two miles away, where it was understood a certain rare plant was to be found. And this action undoubtedly saved their lives for a time, for, on

returning to the oasis, they found their servants slain and the camels gone.

After a hasty council, it was decided to push forward with all speed to the fort where, so the guide had assured them, they would find shelter until an escort could be arranged to take them back to Tunis. Stopping only to fill their water-bottles, they rode forward and throughout that day made steady progress.

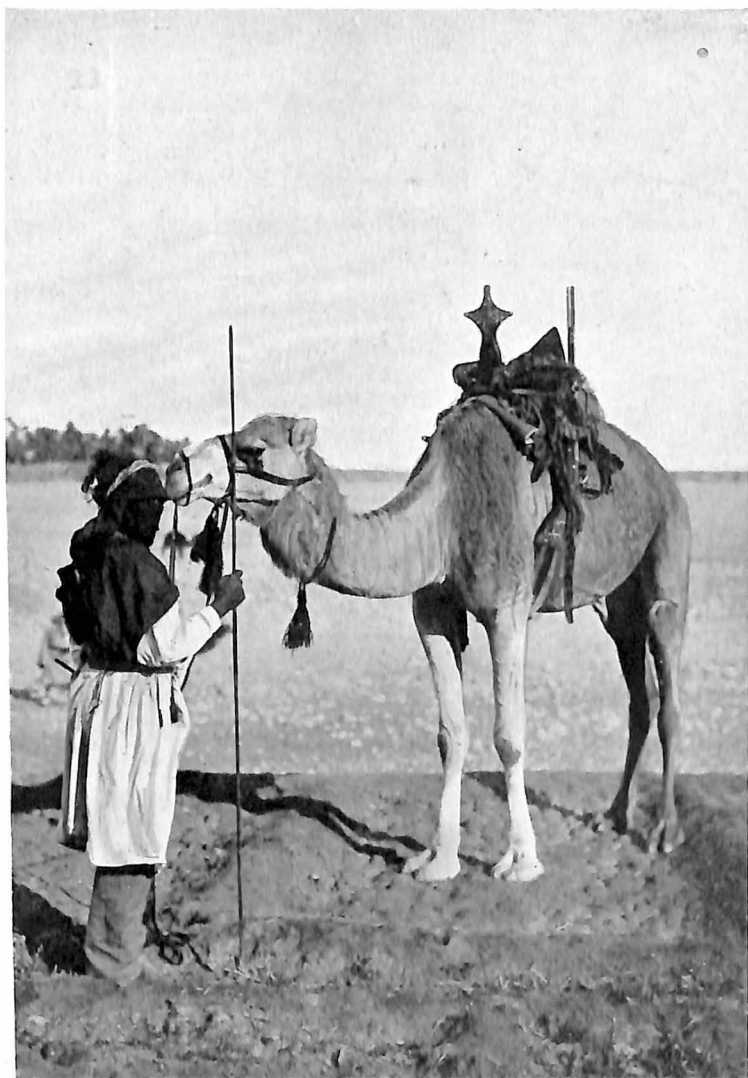
But as dusk fell, their good luck deserted them. With a sudden cry of alarm their guide pointed ahead and reined in his mount. Some fifty yards away appeared a group of figures. They were mounted on lean, wiry camels, and sat their awkward steeds with a natural ease which spoke of many long days spent in the saddle. The first thing that struck Joan about the men was that every one of them appeared to have injured himself in some way, for round the head of each was wrapped what looked like a large bandage swathing the crown and side of the head, wrapping the lower part of the face, covering everything except the eyes and forehead.

Turning to question the guide, she was alarmed to see that he was wrenching furiously at the bridle of his horse in an attempt to turn it.

"The Tuaregs!" he screamed, "The Veiled Tuaregs!"

Even as he spoke, the mysterious natives who had been sitting their camels with the immobility of statues, suddenly sprang to life. Putting their steeds into a sharp trot they came forward, spreading out in a rough semi-circle as they advanced.

The Arab guide swung his horse round and raising



[Photo: Exclusive News Agency]

A TAUREG WARRIOR WITH HIS MEHARI, OR RACING CAMEL

[Face page 30]

his cane prepared to give a sharp blow, but before the stick could fall a shot rang out and, with a gurgling cry, he pitched sideways from his saddle. Sir Arthur drew his automatic and, without a moment's hesitation, opened fire on the advancing Tuaregs. Two of them fell wounded or killed—Joan could not say which—before a bullet, tearing its way through the Englishman's chest put paid to his gallant fight. The next moment the girl was surrounded by a horde of mounted men whose eyes glared at her with a hatred that was almost insane in its intensity; strong arms seized her, pulling her from the saddle of her frightened horse, and the next moment she found herself being lifted on to the saddle of one of the camels.

Then, overcome by all the horror which had been crowded into the last few ghastly minutes, she had fainted.

"If it is true that your uncle winged some of these brutes," said Baring, when the girl had ended her tale, "we must get you out of this as quickly as we can. They will never rest until they have avenged their comrades, and the very fact that there is no sign of them now merely goes to show that they have gone off to round up as many of their pals as possible so that they can make a good killing."

"Say, you're a cheerful bird and no mistake!" his friend interposed. "If what you say is right, I move we make a get-away before brother Tuareg comes after us with a bowie knife. As it is, we've been out so long that dear, kind Sergeant Karvof is probably worrying his heart out in case we've fallen down and scratched our knees or something!"

"Worrying in case we *haven't*, you mean!" retorted the Englishman. "We must not wait a moment longer, though," he added, as the German Légionnaire appeared carrying the body of the dead Arab. "You take Miss Lexham with you, Tex, and get back to the fort as quickly as you can. Hans and I will see to this fellow here in case he has any papers or other valuables on him."

Vaulting into his saddle, Texhard bent down and, placing an arm round the girl's waist, lifted her gently on to the front of his saddle. He then turned his horse in the direction of the fort. "You'll be as happy as if you were on the Giant Coaster at Coney Island," he assured her. "Just hold tight and we'll be back in two shakes of a bandicoot's whiskers!"

As the young American cantered off with his human burden, Baring and Hans conducted a hasty but thorough search of the dead Arab. Many native guides are in the service of the French, and it would not have done to have run the risk of the Tuaregs finding any important secret papers on his person.

A few minutes sufficed to show them that there was nothing unusual hidden in his robes, and having collected such of his belongings as they could conveniently carry, they scooped a shallow grave in the sand and buried the unfortunate Arab. They then mounted their horses, and, bearing Sir Arthur's body with them, cantered after Texhard, whom they overtook a quarter of a mile from the fort. On reaching the gate they were challenged by one of the sentries, who demanded the password.

Joan Lexham turned to her escort with a faint smile.

"Isn't it being rather theatrical to make such a fuss when they must know you quite well?" she asked.

"It's not quite as silly as you might imagine," retorted Baring. "On more than one occasion the Arabs have captured small patrols of ours and, having murdered them, they have dressed themselves in the uniform and ridden boldly to the gate of a fort. Many of them speak French quite well enough to pass muster as a *Légionnaire*, and the sentries have been bluffed into opening the gate. The result being that the unfortunate garrison has been massacred before they realised the enemy had gained an entrance—and if ever you are unfortunate enough to see the way these brutes treat defenceless white men, you'll realise only too well that their methods are anything but pretty.

"The result is that nowadays every fort has its own password which is changed from day to day so that it is no longer a simple job for any unauthorised person to gain admittance to the place. In fact," he grinned, "I don't mind confessing that I've forgotten the wretched word myself!"

"There you are, sister," Texhard laughed. "You see now that our boy-friend may be as good-looking as a Hollywood film star, but from the neck up he's just solid bone!"

The German placed a large red hand to the corner of his mouth and bellowed the word, '*Chateaubriand!*' with a force that might have made itself heard for miles around, and the grinning sentry climbed down from the parapet to unfasten the gate.

"You must blame our Captain for the choice of word," Baring told the girl. "He is more than a bit of a *gourmet* when the opportunity occurs, and keeps himself in mental trim by inventing the passwords. Yesterday it was 'Escoffier' and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if to-morrow it was 'Boulestin,' or even 'Mrs. Beeton'!"

The heavy gates swung slowly open and the little party rode into the dusty square, where Captain Dubois and his second-in-command stood waiting. Ignoring Karvof, Baring dismounted and going up to the captain, saluted. In a few short sentences he reported all that had happened, and when he had finished Dubois strode across to where the English girl stood gazing round her with undisguised interest.

This unexpected addition to the little garrison worried Dubois more than he would admit even to himself. Quite apart from the danger of attack from the Tuaregs, a small fort in the Sahara offered no comforts for a girl such as Joan Lexham, and unless strong steps were taken immediately it was certain that the men would prove difficult.

There was, however, no sign of what was passing through his mind as he saluted the Englishwoman and introduced himself. He offered a few perfunctory words of condolence. "I am afraid, *mademoiselle*," he said, in reply to her first question, "that it will be impossible for you to return just at the moment. I am expecting our relief to arrive in a day or two, but until they show up I cannot spare any men to act as an escort."

"But surely there is nothing for them to do here!" protested Joan.



"After the report I have just received, I am afraid they may be only too busy at the moment," he replied, gravely.

"You mean that the Tuaregs——" began Joan.

"I mean, mademoiselle," the Captain cut in, "that I have no authority to weaken my defences by providing an escort even for one so charming as yourself."

Joan Lexham gazed round her forlornly. The low, drab buildings, with their plain walls nestling around the fort, presented anything but a cheerful picture; nor was it in any way relieved by the sight of the little groups of rough men who, standing around the barrack square, stared at her with a curiosity that was distinctly embarrassing.

"But where can I stay?" she protested.

"I propose to set aside a portion of my own quarters for your use, mademoiselle," Dubois replied. "You will be able to enjoy absolute privacy there and, furthermore, I shall order my personal servant to act as your bodyguard."

"It is a shame you should be worried like this!" Joan turned to the officer, with an apologetic smile. "You seem to have thought of everything for my comfort. Everything except a lady's maid, that is," she added, with a little laugh.

Dubois looked thoughtful for a moment. It was obvious he was debating in his own mind the best way to broach a subject which would have to be explained sooner or later. Suddenly he turned to the girl. "That, too, can be arranged for, if mademoiselle wishes," he said gravely.

Turning to Karvof, "Sergeant," he exclaimed,

sharply, "make immediate arrangements for the proper burial of the Englishman. And now, mademoiselle"—he turned to Joan—"if you will do me the honour to accompany me, I will show you your quarters."

With a final lingering look at the still figure of her uncle, Joan squared her shoulders and walked slowly across the square at the side of the Captain.

As they moved out of earshot, Karvof swung round to where the three men stood. "What are you scum loafing around here for?" he snarled. "Isn't it enough that you disobey my orders by getting out of touch with me, without mooning here like a lot of damned half-wits? You, mister American," he continued, "get a spade from the stores and bury this fellow outside the walls of the fort. And it's no use you getting all moonstruck over that girl, either."

Texhard came stiffly to attention. "Very well, Sergeant."

"I suppose," Karvof continued vindictively, "that you are all chockful of romance, but take it from an expert that the little mademoiselle is only another of these women who would give herself to the first man who comes along."

"Look here——" began Texhard.

"I tell you," went on the Sergeant, "you can pick up better than she in the Rue des Gallions in Havre for two a penny. And what is more I'll prove it before the week's out."

"You damned swine!"

White to the lips, Texhard drew back his right arm, and before Baring could fling himself upon his

friend he had driven his fist to the point of Karvof's jaw with such force that, taken unawares, the sergeant fell sprawling in the dust.

The next moment all was pandemonium. Struggling to his feet Karvof yelled for the guard who, carbines at the ready, came running from the guard-room. Seeing something unusual on foot, every légionnaire within sight raced across the square to learn what the trouble was about, and in the twinkling of an eye a seething, shouting crowd surrounded the little group.

Captain Dubois, emerging from his own quarters, strode across the barrack square, and at his coming an uneasy hush fell on the men. They drew to one side to let him pass. In absolute silence he made his way to the centre of the group and addressed himself directly to Karvof who stood tenderly fingering his jaw.

"What the devil is the meaning of all this hulla-balloo, Sergeant?" he snapped.

Karvof pointed a shaking finger at Texhard who stood confronting him in silence. "This man struck me, *mon capitaine!*" growled he. "I merely gave him an order and without a word of warning he flung himself upon me."

Dubois turned to Texhard. "Is it true that you struck Sergeant Karvof?" he said, quietly.

"Yes, *mon capitaine!*"

"And I suppose you know that the penalty for striking a superior-officer while on active service, is death?" he continued.

Texhard nodded. "But, *mon capitaine*, there were extenuating circumstances," he pleaded.

"In a case like this there can be no extenuating circumstances!" Dubois retorted. "Fortunately for you, however, I have observed that of late Sergeant Karvof has been giving you more than your fair share of duties and I will take that into consideration. You will, however, receive thirty lashes and seven days' solitary confinement. Take the prisoner away."

The escort hustled Texhard to the guard room, and five minutes later the bugle sounded the "assembly."

The news spread like wildfire, and it was with as bad a grace as they dared show that the men of the Squadron formed up in hollow square round the heavy iron triangle which had been dragged into the middle of the parade ground. Karvof was hated and the news that the bully had received a dose of his own medicine had delighted them.

A sharp word of command sounded and the next minute a file of armed men appeared, in the midst of whom walked Texhard, stripped to the buff, and with his hands strapped together in front of him. As the little party reached the triangle, Captain Dubois stepped forward, and, having read in a loud voice the offence of which Texhard had been found guilty, signalled the corporal in charge of the escort to strap the American securely to the whipping post.

In a deathly silence the sergeant who had been detailed to carry out the flogging stepped back, running the end of the whip through his fingers. Satisfied as to the flexibility of the thong, he raised his right arm and was on the point of striking the

first blow when a fusillade of shots rang out from behind the fort.

With a choking cry, one of the sentries, who had remained on the parapet, threw up his arms and pitched headlong from the firestep to the ground. At the same moment the bugler near the main gate sounded the alarm and the sentries on the west side of the fort opened up a heavy fire.

Captain Dubois took in the situation at a glance. He gave a brief command. "To your posts," he cried, and in a second the barrack square was the scene of fierce activity as the men doubled to their quarters for their arms preparatory to taking up their allotted stations.

The sergeant whose duty it was to administer the flogging, flung aside the whip with relief and hurrying to Texhard, released him as quickly as possible. Texhard, thanking his lucky stars for his eleventh hour escape, joined the others in their race to the barracks, and within a very few minutes had fallen in with his section.

Meanwhile the firing had increased in intensity, and above the angry splutter of the machine gun posted near the main gate, and the sharp crack of the rifles, could be heard the shouts of the attacking Tuaregs.

The attackers, encouraged by their initial success, were swarming round the walls of the fort, and it soon became obvious that their main attack was to be concentrated on the north and west sides. From the sand dunes, some two hundred yards away, the Tuareg snipers kept up a steady fire on the fort, making it impossible for the defenders to expose themselves for more than a second at a time.

Captain Dubois had taken up his station at a small observation window which had been made in the north wall, and which was carefully camouflaged. He turned to his runner. "Judging by their numbers, it looks as though our friends mean real business this time," he said. "Double across to the wireless room and tell Lacroix to put through an urgent call for reinforcements."

The man hurried away, only to return a few minutes later with anxiety marked on every line of his face. "The enemy's fire has put the wireless out of action, *mon capitaine*," he gasped. "We're entirely cut off from the outside world!"

Dubois shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I don't suppose it makes much difference," he replied, philosophically. "Headquarters might have sent over a few bombing planes to make things uncomfortable for the enemy, but the chances are that the fight would be settled one way or the other before they got within ten miles of the fort."

The sentry posted on the southern parapet gave a hoarse shout of warning. As Dubois swung round in the direction from which the cry came, he saw nine or ten white-robed figures appear on the top of the wall and clamber quickly on to the parapet.

The wind, which had been blowing from the southwest, had piled the drifting sand against the wall of the fort to such an extent that instead of being the regulation eight feet from the ground it had become not much more than four feet high. Taking advantage of the opportunity thus afforded them, the enemy had lured the garrison to the opposite wall while their main body had made a rapid enfilading move-

ment, and were even now scaling the walls on the undefended side of the fort.

Calling to the men to face about, Dubois dropped lightly to the parade ground, just as a bullet sang past his ear and flattened itself against the stonework not an inch from his head.

The enemy had penetrated the defence and now it would be a fight to the death.

## CHAPTER III

### TORTURE

THE machine-gun section posted on the parapet at the side of the main gate of the fort, swung their guns round and raked the top of the opposite wall with a stream of bullets which mowed down the invading Tuaregs like so much chaff. However, some thirty or forty of the invaders had already clambered swiftly down into the centre of the fort and, with curved swords flashing wickedly in the light, charged towards the nearest of the defenders.

The fanatical Mohammedan firmly believes that if he falls fighting against the Infidel he will receive a passport direct to Paradise without having to pass through many wearisome stages of promotion, and that thought drives him into battle with the reckless abandon of a madman. There is never any question of surrender in his mind, and it is this lust for combat that makes him so dangerous a foe.

The Legion knows all too well that there can be no question of quarter on either side, and consequently the defenders advanced to meet the white-robed figures of their enemy with the grim determination of fighting to the last ditch. Bayonet clanged harshly on sword blade as, grunting, shouting and gasping, white men and brown became locked in their grim struggle. There was no room now for



rifle fire to be used with safety; in that swaying, swirling mass it was impossible to use anything but the bayonet and the butt of a rifle.

Gradually the attackers were forced back against the wall over which they had come, their white robes flying wildly around them as they slashed and stabbed. But even if the men who had forced an entry into the fort were fighting a losing battle, there were hundreds of their comrades still waiting beyond the fort to seize the first opportunity to join battle with the defenders.

Captain Dubois had been standing watching the fighting with the cool, calculating gaze of an old campaigner; suddenly he drew a silver whistle from his breast pocket and blew three short blasts. Immediately two troops of cavalry, each fifty strong, which had formed up in the shelter of the opposite wall, cantered forward as the main gates swung open, and the next moment they were outside the walls.

Rapidly deploying right and left, they charged down upon the Tuaregs who, taken by surprise at the boldness of the manoeuvre, were given no time to form up in any semblance of order before the horsemen were upon them.

Although outnumbered by six or seven to one, the ordered discipline of the Legion told its own tale. Wheeling, attacking, retiring and attacking again, the squadrons threw the forces of the invaders into dire disorder. Bravely though the Tuaregs fought, they were no match for the mounted men, and despite the casualties they were able to inflict on the defenders it was not long before the attackers were in full flight.

To pursue the Tuaregs for any great distance would have been merely to court disaster, and breathless and panting the survivors formed up outside the main gate to await further orders.

Suddenly Texhard, who was on the right of the First Squadron, gave a shout and pointed towards a little group of Tuaregs who, mounted on their small, fighting camels, were moving away to the south. At the tail of the procession trailed two blue-coated figures, their arms bound securely by a long rope the other end of which was fastened to the pommel of one of the Tuaregs' saddles. That the captives were living was proved by the frantic shouts for help they were raising; they knew only too well that to fall alive into the hands of the Tuaregs is to court a death that is one of slow and fiendish torture.

Without waiting for orders, Texhard set spurs to his mount and, followed by others of the squadron, he charged forward through the drifting sand. At the sound of his approach, the party of Tuaregs turned and prepared to give battle. They would not part with their captives without a grim fight, and Texhard knew that unless he was able to come to grips with the natives in very quick time, his two comrades would be killed out of hand.

A bullet from a long-barrelled native rifle tore its way through the right sleeve of his tunic with an angry 'zip' that made his horse swerve dangerously.

"O.K. you goddam son of a cow!" he muttered, as he drew his automatic. "You've got yours coming to you right now."

Crouching low over his horse's head, he steadied

himself and fired from his hip. The Tuareg leading the two Légionnaires, flung up his arms as though in a gesture of surrender and toppled slowly from his saddle, a red patch soaking into the sand where he lay.

Emptying the rest of the magazine into the thick of the mob of natives, Texhard hastily thrust his automatic back into its holster and drawing his sabre, charged straight for the camel. With one sweeping slash he severed the rope which bound his comrades to the animal, and, wheeling abruptly, was just in time to ward off a vicious blow from a native sword aimed by one of the mounted Tuaregs.

The force of the blow was so great that it smashed the blade of his sabre, but without waiting for the native to follow up his advantage, Texhard dropped lightly to the ground and, with his shortened blade, hacked at the hocks of the nearest camel which fell screaming to the ground, rolling on its rider before he had time to throw himself clear.

The next moment the rest of the squadron was upon the scene and the Tuaregs, realising that they were now outnumbered, sought safety in flight.

Texhard and a comrade released the two captives from the ropes that bound them, and hoisted them over their own saddles. They turned their horses' heads towards the fort and cantered back, while their friends opened a rapid fire on the fast retreating enemy.

As the two men with their burdens drew near the gateway, a burst of fire from the direction of the parade ground made Texhard smile grimly.

"Sounds as though old man Dubois was sending the rest of those durned blacks to a hotter place even than this," he exclaimed.

His comrade nodded. "*Jawohl*," he replied, dispassionately. "But for such scum shooting is too goot, hein?"

Texhard laughed. "Say, I'd no idea you were such a bloodthirsty devil, Fritz!"

The German shrugged his shoulders. "For me," he replied, "I do not like killings, but the thrice-damned Tuaregs have killed mein freund and for that I would every one of them gladly murder."

Texhard nodded, sympathetically. "I know, old-timer," he replied. "When you lose a buddy it sure does make you feel like shooting up every goddam nigger in creation. Still, don't you worry; as things are, I'll bet my last sou you'll have all the scrapping you want before very long!"

"You think the swine will return?" demanded Fritz, eagerly.

"You bet your sweet life they will. This was only a clam-feast to what is coming to us soon."

Within the fort all was bustle. The wounded had already been carried to the sick bay and the medical orderlies were busy dressing the wounds of those who were not seriously injured, and the pungent smell of choloroform gave proof that the more dangerously wounded were already receiving such rough and ready treatment as was possible.

Crossing the parade ground, Texhard came upon Duncan Baring hurrying towards the sick bay, a large box of surgical dressings balanced on his shoulder.

"See the conquering hero comes!" chanted the Englishman.

"Smart guy!" retorted his friend. "If you'd only sing at the Tuaregs they'd beat it in no time. By the way," he continued, "what's happened to that Lexham dame? She's all right, I hope?"

Baring nodded. "A real brick," he said, fervently. "She's helping with the wounded, and doing her bit as calmly as though she'd been used to blood and mess all her life."

"Bully for her! I didn't know your English dames could buckle to like that."

"You don't know everything, old son!" Baring retorted. "And before I forget it, there's another thing you don't know. Dubois wants to see you in his quarters immediately. So go to it at the double."

Dubois received Texhard in his bedroom. Propped up on pillows, he turned a face white and drawn with pain to greet the young American.

"You sent for me, *mon capitaine*?"

Dubois nodded. "I want to congratulate you on your conduct just now," he said. "Unfortunately a Tuareg bullet smashed a bone in my leg or I would have joined you out there. As it is, I shall be *hors de combat* for some time, which is more than unfortunate. However, Sergeant Karvof will carry on for me, and as we've lost two of our best non-commissioned officers in to-day's engagement, I propose to promote you to the rank of acting-sergeant."

"*Merci, mon capitaine.*"

"Now attend carefully," Dubois went on, ignoring Texhard's thanks. "I know you and Sergeant

Karvof don't hit it off too well together, but I want you to understand this—here in Saada, we're an isolated force representing *La belle France*. It is the duty of every man to shoulder that responsibility to the best of his ability; the Legion comes first and all personal prejudices must give way to the call of duty. Any more trouble from you with Karvof and not only will you be reduced to the ranks, Texhard, but you will also receive a lesson you won't forget in a hurry. That's all. Now dismiss!"

In the sergeants' quarters, to which Texhard went, Karvof greeted him with his usual hostility.

"So it's *Sergeant* Texhard now, is it?" he sneered. "Well, let me tell you this, my friend. You may be a sergeant, but I'll have you remember that while there're no officers to carry on, I'm in command, and what I say goes, so don't you forget it."

Texhard nodded.

If Karvof was trying to trick him into losing his temper again he would be unlucky. As long as he himself was a sergeant, the American reflected, Karvof could do little that was of any moment to annoy him, but once let him be reduced to the ranks and his life would be made a hell on earth again.

Karvof spat on the floor and rubbed the saliva into the bare boards with the sole of his heavy boot. "Well, don't stand there gaping like a stuck pig," he growled. "Get busy and take out a squad of men to bury the dead. We shall have those cursed Tuaregs back at any moment now, and we don't want the whole place littered with smelling corpses."

"Very good."

Texhard turned in the direction of the door, as Karvof's voice halted him.

"I shall be on duty on the parapet," he said, warningly, "so see that there is no loafing about or it will be the worse for someone, and I need not tell you who that is!"

Selecting twenty men, Texhard fell them in on the barrack square and after having despatched them to collect shovels from the quartermaster's stores, explained to them what their duties were.

The men marched out of the main gate to the spot selected and began to dig. It was obvious they were in a bad humour, and it was not long before the more rebellious among them began to give open expression to their resentment.

"It's bad enough to be stuck in this God-forsaken hole on short rations without having to become a pack of damned sextons," growled a bearded Swede, resting on his shovel to wipe the sweat out of his eyes.

There was a pause. Every man in the party realised this was a challenge to Texhard's authority and, in silence, they awaited his reaction.

Striding to where the Swede stood staring insolently at him, Texhard clenched his left fist and sent it crashing into the other's face, then picking up the spade that had fallen to the ground, he pushed it roughly into the man's hands.

"Dig, you swine!" he shouted. "Open your ugly mug once more and I'll clap you in the punishment cells."

Without another word the man started work. The blood from his cut lip ran slowly into his beard, but

he appeared oblivious of it. Only the fierce light of anger that burned in his eyes betrayed the rage he felt. Texhard turned on his heel and moved slowly down the line of men now working as though their lives depended on it. He knew that unquestioning obedience would be his in future, for the men of the Legion are quick to sum up their superiors, and once they realise they have the reverse of a weakling to deal with, they respond to orders with alacrity.

The life of the Legion is hard, brutal even, but it is just. Had Texhard softened his heart, his authority would have gone for ever; both he and the men under him knew it. There is no room for weaklings in the ranks of those desperate men who guard the African possessions of a nation other than their own!

A warning shout came from the battlements, and the next moment bullets began to snap and spit round the working party. At a word of command from Texhard the men seized their shovels and in extended order doubled back to the fort.

They had not gone three paces before the huge Swede who had challenged Texhard's authority, gave a choking cry and pitched forward on his face. Bending over him, the American tried to lift him, but the other shook his head.

"I'm finished, Sergeant," he muttered. He raised his hand and gently stroked his swollen lips. "You were quite right to give me this souvenir. Good luck, *mon ami*."

His head fell forward as, with a final shudder, his body relaxed and he lay still. Even in death the Legion had conquered!



Texhard jumped to his feet, but before he had time to take more than a couple of steps a bullet sang past his head at so close a distance that he felt the flick of wind on his cheek. Looking up quickly he saw the evil face of Karvof who, rifle in hand, was peering over the top of the parapet.

Without more ado, the American sprinted after the others and the massive gates of the fort swung to behind them just as another salvo of bullets beat a tattoo on the strong front of the gate. Dismissing his fatigue party, Texhard hurried to where Karvof stood on the firestep.

"What's the game?" he demanded angrily.

Karvof swung round. "What the devil are you talking about?" he snarled.

"You deliberately fired at me just now," Texhard persisted.

Karvof laughed harshly. "Well, there's gratitude," he retorted. "Here am I putting up a hot covering fire to make the Tuaregs keep their lousy heads down and then you come up accusing me of trying to shoot you! I always thought you were a stinking coward but I didn't know you were mad, too."

The young American pulled himself together. To give way to anger would only be playing Karvof's game.

"Why, of course, you were only trying to save my life," he grinned. "That's why I've come here now. I want to thank you. And I hope," he added cheerfully, "that I may have the opportunity of serving you in the same way one day!"

Karvof glowered at him suspiciously, but not by

so much as the flicker of an eyelid did Texhard let the other see what was in his mind.

"All right, all right," grunted the Russian. "I've no time to waste talking to fools, so clear off. The very sight of you makes me want to spew!"

Texhard ran to the men's quarters, where he found his English friend sitting on the edge of his cot cleaning his rifle.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Baring, catching sight of his friend's face. "You look as though you've been having a rough passage. What's biting you?"

"Old friend Karvof is up to his tricks again," Texhard replied. He told Baring of his encounter with the Russian.

The Englishman nodded slowly. "Well, if it's any consolation to you," he replied, "I may as well tell you that you're not the only one to have come up against Karvof to-day."

"What else has he been doing?"

Baring laughed shortly. "Oh, he's versatile enough is Master Karvof," he retorted. "While Miss Lexham was helping to look after the wounded, Karvof came along and asked her to go round to the sergeants' quarters and attend to a man who was seriously injured in there. She followed him out, and the swine put his arms round her and tried to kiss her. Luckily some walking-wounded came up at that moment and he had to chuck it. When she told me what had happened, I sent her off to Dubois right away and told her to ask if she might act as his nurse. Our gallant commander fell for it, and now she's safely installed in the officers' quarters. So long as she stops there she'll have to endure

nothing worse than listening to Dubois explaining the one and only way to prepare a *canard en presse*."

"Still," commented Texhard. "I don't like the business one bit. Karvof is sure a nasty thing to have lying around loose, and the sooner we put paid to his little games the sooner I'll hit the hay with a free mind. Why, a Chicago 'big shot' is a thing of sweetness and light compared to that guy!"

"At least we've got him taped now," his friend replied. "So it's up to us to watch him from now on, and see he doesn't get up to any more of his funny business."

"You bet your sweet life we will!" asserted the American.

The notes of a bugle rang out with startling loudness and Texhard rose wearily to his feet.

"That's the sergeants' call," he remarked. "I suppose it means more trouble for someone. I wish you'd take a stripe, old-timer. You could get one any time you wanted it, and you know that as well as I do."

Baring laughed and shook his head.

"Thanks very much, but there's nothing doing," he replied. "I've all the trouble I want without asking for any more!"

As Texhard strode across the barrack square he wondered again what was the mystery of his English friend. That he was a man born to command was obvious, yet nothing would induce him to be anything other than one of the rank and file.

"Well, I guess it's none of my business," he mused. "Still, it certainly is a pity to see a good guy like that being wasted."

Dubois being unable to move from his room, the non-commissioned officers reported to their commander in his bedroom. The captain wasted no time in getting to business and, despite the fact that he was obviously in considerable pain, he showed the same clearness of foresight that had always characterized him.

"I have a report here," he began, when they were all present, "which I regard as serious in the extreme. It appears that the water supply has run so low that there is scarcely enough left to see us through the next twenty-four hours.

"I'm fully aware that the Tuareg snipers are back in action again, but unless we take immediate steps to replenish our supply it may be too late. Once the main body of the enemy are in position it will be impossible for anyone to leave the fort and return alive.

"At dusk this evening I want a party of men to go out and bring in as much water as possible. It's a ticklish job, but it has got to be done. In the circumstances, I think it would be as well to call for volunteers as we can't afford to send any man who may let us down and lose his head if the Tuareg snipers spot the party."

A murmur of assent greeted his remarks, and Dubois continued: "I need not tell you how grave our position is here in Saada, but I want you non-commissioned officers to do all you can to keep up the morale of the men under your own command. There must be no relaxing of discipline, but, at the same time, I don't want to hear of any cases of unnecessary bullying. At a time like this when nerves

are strained to their utmost, it is the duty of all who are in authority to do everything in their power to make life as endurable as possible for the men under their command.

"That will be all now. Settle among yourselves which of you is to be in charge of the forage party and you, Karvof, report to me when the men are leaving. That's all."

Back in the sergeants' quarters, Karvof took upon himself the duties of spokesman.

"Well," he said. "You've all heard what the captain had to say, so now has anyone a suggestion to make?"

"How about drawing lots for the job?" suggested one of the party.

Karvof shook his head. "That's a fool's idea!" he growled. "If you did that, it might fall to Texhard here, and he's already done his share of scrapping for the day. Besides," he added maliciously, "I'm afraid our American friend hasn't got a great deal of confidence in those of us whose duty it is to provide protection from the fort during the expedition."

Texhard flushed. Had the Russian openly taunted him with cowardice, he would have been content to ignore his jibes, knowing very well that his comrades would not be deceived, but this apparent attempt to mollicoddle him caught him unprepared, as, indeed, Karvof had hoped it would.

"Talk sense!" he retorted. "What do you think I am—a sissy? Sure, I'm able to tackle a job like this, and what's more I'm durned well going."

Karvof smiled sourly. "Well," he said, "if our fire-eating friend feels like that about it, there's no

reason why we shouldn't give way to him! It certainly saves us all a lot of trouble."

Too late Texhard realised how neatly Karvof had duped him into volunteering, but not for worlds would he let the other think he was aware of the trick. "That suits me fine," he said, quietly. "I'll go and see about getting volunteers right away."

He turned on his heel and strode over to the men's quarters. He was well aware that the feeling of discontent, inspired by the long delay in being relieved, was growing rapidly, and he felt far from happy at the idea of having to call for volunteers for so uncongenial a task as that which lay before him. The hardships of long, tiring marches, with the African sun beating down remorselessly on sweating, toiling men, the danger of death and the fear of mutilation when one comes to grips with the enemy, are as nothing compared to the soul-destroying monotony that comes from being cramped up in quarters for long periods at a stretch.

It is then that the little peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of one's comrades cease to be merely a matter of tolerant amusement, and gradually assume an importance out of all proportion to reality. After a time, petty hates and jealousies grow to gargantuan size, friend looks on friend with eyes hot with suspicion and mistrust, and trivialities become so magnified that violent arguments break out at the slightest provocation.

In the fort at Saada, discontent was seething. Men went about their duties with sullen glances and an obedience that was surly in the extreme. No longer was there any enthusiasm, any keenness

for whatever work lay at hand. Day after day, the fierce African sun had blazed down on the little outpost, the dusty barrack square threw back the heat from dawn to dusk, and beyond the four walls of the fort the shifting sands rolled away as far as the eye could see.

And over everything and everyone swarmed myriads of flies. They settled on the heads and chests of sweating men who sought a few minutes' rest, they buzzed incessantly round the walls and ceilings of barrack-room and canteen, and it was impossible to eat or drink without finding their dead bodies in one's rations.

Only the iron discipline of the Legion stood between order and mutiny. And as dreary day succeeded dreary day, the barriers of that discipline grew weaker and weaker.

It needed but one spark from the torch of revolt to start a conflagration that nothing would be able to quench, and, Texhard reflected bitterly, it looked as though Sergeant Karvof would undoubtedly be the means of supplying it.

A shrewd judge of his fellow men, Texhard handled the situation in exactly the right way, on reaching the men's quarters. "Thank God," he exclaimed to the men who gathered round him, "there's a job of work on hand at last! We've got to get in all the water we can before the Tuaregs make their next attack, and a little trip out to the wells will give us a break from the usual boredom of life here."

"How about the enemy snipers?" demanded one of the men. "They'll be certain to be on the lookout."

Texhard laughed. "Quite likely," he agreed, cheerfully. "But it won't be the first time we've had to chance our arm. Anyway, I'm going out with ten men and if anyone cares to volunteer it'll save me the trouble of detailing men for the job."

Silence. The men were obviously busy, each with his own thoughts.

Baring took a step forward. "You might as well take me along with you for one," he said, lazily. "I'm so damned bored that a change of scenery would be welcome. Besides, it'll be a treat to see these infernal walls from the outside for once in a while."

The next moment Texhard was surrounded by two score clamouring men. It seemed everyone was anxious to chance his luck. Selecting ten, including Duncan Baring, he told them to fall in a quarter of an hour before sundown, and having dismissed the others, told his party to get as much rest as possible before the time for departure.

At the set hour, the men paraded on the barrack square, and Dubois, supported on either side by an orderly, came slowly from his quarters to address them. He spoke in his usual direct, dispassionate manner.

"The water supply in the fort is running very low. We cannot live without water and it is your duty to see that we *do* live. While you are doing your work, your comrades will do theirs by providing every possible protection against a surprise attack. Carry on, Sergeant Texhard."

Saluting smartly, the young American turned on his heel and, at a sharp word of command, his



squad wheeled right and marched in single file to the main gate. As the men emerged, they spread out at regular intervals to make any possible enfilading fire more difficult and, buckets in hand, doubled towards the well about two hundred yards away.

The first journey was made without mishap, as was also the second, and it seemed that the Tuareg snipers must have withdrawn for no shot came from the sand dunes over on the left.

"This is almost too good to be true," laughed Baring, as he gripped the handles of his replenished buckets. "Our friends, the Tuaregs, must have gone off to the pictures this evening—and I don't blame them, either!"

"Don't be too sure, old scout," retorted Texhard. "They know how to play a waiting game right enough."

And hardly had the words left his mouth than the silence was broken by a sharp crackle of rifle fire and two men, standing a little to the left of Texhard and Baring, dropped to the sand.

An answering volley came from the defenders on the fort, but the native snipers were too securely protected for the fire from the *Légionnaires* to hamper them to any great extent, and they continued to pour shot after shot into the oasis.

"Back to the fort!" shouted Texhard, and seizing his two buckets he doubled towards the main gate. "Keep spread out," he called to his men. "If you start bunching together they'll find you a much easier target."

With Baring moving with a free, effortless stride, a little in advance of him, he reached the shelter of

the fort and, handing over his precious supply of water to a waiting orderly, hastened on to the parapet to see what was happening. Of his little squad of ten men, only Baring and one other had reached safety. The route from the fort to the oasis was dotted with the still figures of his comrades who had fallen beneath the fire of the Tuareg snipers.

Even as he watched, a ghastly cry came from the vicinity of the oasis. Dubois, who was propped against an angle of the parapet, called him over. "How many men are there out there?" he demanded brusquely.

Texhard gazed anxiously at the route he had just covered.

"I can see only six, *mon capitaine*," he replied.

"Then it is as I feared," Dubois answered. "The Tuaregs must have captured two of the wounded. That means they're torturing the poor devils."

Again there came the sound of a shriek, soul-searing in its ghastly agony. Dubois turned to Texhard, his face appearing white and drawn in the rapidly fading light.

"It's up to you; they were under your command," he said briefly.

Without reply, Texhard jumped off the firestep and, beckoning to Baring, he led the way to the armoury where the two men hastily took a rifle and an automatic apiece.

"Come on, buddy," he said. "We've no time to lose."

"You mean——"

"I mean," Texhard interrupted his friend sharply, "it's our job to put those poor devils out of their misery!"

## CHAPTER IV

### CAFARD

THE short African twilight was rapidly darkening into night as Texhard and his companion crossed to the far wall of the fort and, passing quietly through the narrow gate over which a solitary sentry mounted guard, slipped out into the desert.

"We shall have to circle out to the left," whispered the American, as the two men, crouching low, sprinted for the cover of a neighbouring dune. "The country on this side is so uneven that with luck we ought to be able to get within range before we are spotted."

The sentries on the parapet maintained a desultory fire to keep the Tuaregs safely under cover as the two Légionnaires, bending low to avoid detection, sprinted from one piece of cover to another. Fortune favoured them; they were able to approach within fifty yards of the oasis unobserved, and, crawling cautiously to the top of a low dune, get their first direct glimpse of the little band of Tuaregs and their two victims.

The natives had lighted a small fire on the far side of a few trees which gave them cover from the fort, and the sight which met the gaze of Texhard and his companion was such that neither was able to stifle a gasp of horror. The prisoners, stripped naked, were lying beside the fire, in the glowing embers of

which were thrust several long native swords. Even as they watched, one of the Tuaregs drew a sword from the fire and slowly pressed the red-hot blade against the stomach of one of the white men.

The wretched man shrieked in agony as the steel burnt into his flesh, writhing helplessly to free himself from his bonds. The sound of his cries was so terrifying that it was all Texhard and his friend could do to choke back the exclamations of horror and pity that rose to their lips.

Baring laid a hand gently on his friend's shoulder. "Take it easy, old man," he muttered through clenched teeth. "We shan't do any good by losing our nerve now, of all times."

Texhard nodded. The sweat stood out on his forehead in great beads and he bit his lower lip so hard that the blood oozed from it.

"Let's get it over," he answered, in a low voice. "You take that poor devil there and I'll attend to the other one."

Slowly they wormed their way into a convenient position from which they could bring their rifles into play and softly drawing back the bolts, pressed a clip of cartridges into the magazine.

"Don't fire till I give the word," the American whispered. "And for God's sake make sure of your man."

"And then, what's our next move?" asked Baring.

"We'll lie absolutely still for a few moments," his friend replied. "The chances are that the Tuaregs will not spot the direction from which our shots come, and even if they do they won't know how many of us are out here. With any luck they'll think it's a

counter-attack starting, and they'll be in such a hurry to get back to their line of outposts in safety that they'll not stop to put up a fight."

"Right you are."

Baring settled the butt of his rifle more comfortably into his shoulder and, adjusting the backsight to normal, gazed carefully down the barrel.

"O.K.?" whispered Texhard.

"Yes."

"Right. When I say 'three,' fire. We'd better give the poor chaps three rounds rapid to make sure of it. Now—one-two-three."

Both rifles spoke as one, and the bound figures on the ground heaved spasmodically and then lay still.

A shout of alarm came from the oasis and a few wild shots sang harmlessly overhead.

"Not a move," whispered Texhard. "The guys in the fort will do all the firing that's necessary. Our job is to get back safely, and no matter how much we'd like to give the swine something for themselves we mustn't risk it."

From the sounds of shouting that came from the direction of the well, it was obvious that the Tuaregs, now thoroughly alarmed, were in full flight, and the two friends lay motionless, their eyes glued on the oasis. It soon became obvious that there was no trouble to be expected from that quarter, and after a few moments Texhard and his friend rose slowly to their feet. They made a wide circuit to avoid any bullets that might come from the fort where the sentries were keeping up a hot fire directed at the oasis, and sprinted back to the fort.

"Gee!" muttered Texhard, as they reached the shelter of the walls, "it certainly is the hell of a proposition having to shoot your own buddies!"

"In the circumstances," retorted Baring, grimly, "it would have been a damned sight worse *not* to have shot them! That sort of brutality is a thing France will never be able to stamp out even if she occupies this dreary desert for a thousand years!"

Texhard reported to Dubois. The commanding officer lay on his bed, his hot, flushed face and shaking limbs told their own story, and the American realised that, wounded and racked with fever as he was, Dubois was indeed a very sick man. Even with careful nursing, it did not appear probable that he would be able to take up his duties again for some time.

Meanwhile, Karvof was in charge. And the temper of the men was growing hourly worse.

"If that relief doesn't reach us soon," muttered the American, as he made his way to his quarters and flung himself down on his cot, "we shall have such a display of fireworks that they will make a Fourth of July demonstration look like something out of a dime show."

Of Karvof there were no signs, and, thanking Heaven for small mercies, Texhard was soon deep in a dreamless sleep. It seemed to him he had barely closed his eyes when the sound of shouting brought him back to the land of realities with a sudden start. Sitting up on the edge of his cot he listened. The sounds appeared to come from the men's quarters, and, hastily pulling on his tunic, he seized a

heavy riding crop and raced across the barrack square to the canteen.

Texhard forced his way roughly past the crowd of Légionnaires who blocked the doorway, and he entered the building. The fumes of rank tobacco and coarse wine nearly choked him. Coughing and gasping, he pushed his way into the centre of the room and looked around.

In the light of the smoky oil lamps which hung from the ceiling, he beheld a picture which was to remain for years one of the most vivid in his memory. Some fifty Légionnaires, in all stages of undress, were huddled in one corner of the canteen. Bottles of wine, some full, some nearly empty, had been swept off one of the long, bare wooden tables and now lay on the floor, their contents running unheeded in thin rivulets of red and yellow.

His back pressed against the far corner of the walls, stood a huge, tawny-bearded Légionnaire whom Texhard recognised as a German named Adolf Weissermann. Normally one of the quietest and most unassuming of all the men in the Fourth Squadron, he was universally liked. A slow-witted, simple giant, whose mild blue eyes did much to belie the suggestion of brutal strength suggested by his massive frame, he had long been the object of good-natured chaff from the other men of his section. However, he had always taken it in perfect good humour, and at nights, when camp was pitched and the fires threw up challenging sparks to the star-powdered sky, his deep voice would be uplifted in some song of his Fatherland. And at such times his comrades were content to sit silent while Adolf, his thoughts

far away in the green, fertile valleys of his own mountain village, sang some simple folk-song, the pariah dogs howling mournfully in the distance and the scent of the African night struggling for mastery over the pungent fumes that sprang from the cakes of camel dung that burned slowly in the still air.

But now it was a very different being from the simple, good-tempered Teuton his comrades knew who stood glaring round the room like some hunted animal that has been cornered by its foes. His hair fell over his forehead in ragged, damp curls; his eyes glared unseeingly round the room and his lips curled in a vicious snarl exposing strong, red gums, on the corners of which a white foam was frothing. His clenched fists beat a ceaseless tattoo on his bare chest as he muttered and mumbled to himself in a dull monotone.

Texhard seized the nearest man by the shoulder. "What the devil's all this about?" he demanded.

The man turned a pair of scared eyes to the sergeant. "It's Weissermann," he mumbled, stupidly. "Weissermann."

"Pull yourself together, you fool."

Texhard wasted no time on words, but kicked the fellow on the shins with a vigour which had the desired result.

Springing to attention, the man burst into a torrent of words. "It's over the woman, Claudette," he explained. "Adolf there was sweet on her, although what any man could see in a scraggy bag of bones like that——"

"Get on with it, you damned scum, or it'll be the worse for you," rapped out the American.



The other continued hastily. "Weissermann used to spend every sou he possessed on her. I believe the fool was actually in love with her—carried her photograph in his tunic pocket and even talked of marrying her when the time came for him to take his discharge. Well, what would you? Such women don't expect to be treated like princesses, and there's no doubt that Adolf flattered her so that mademoiselle was enchanted.

"But to-day the truth came out. As you know, Adolf was detailed for the stables this morning—a job that should have kept him busy for hours, and thinking the coast was clear, Karvof——"

"Sergeant Karvof!" snapped Texhard.

The other corrected himself hastily. "A thousand pardons! Sergeant Karvof has long been fond of Claudette and she, realising he is a man of position here in the fort, was flattered by his attentions. So he was with her this morning when Adolf, who should have been safely at work with the horses, appeared on the scene. It seems he'd had a severe kick from one of the horses and had promptly hobbled off to get his loving Claudette to tend the injury for him.

"He stumbled into her quarters at a moment which to less sensitive ladies than mademoiselle would have been most embarrassing.

"Adolf's been acting queerly all day. He wouldn't speak to anyone. He left his food untouched, and all the time he mutters her name without ceasing."

"Where is Sergeant Karvof?" Texhard demanded, sharply.

The man shrugged. "I've no idea," he replied.

Texhard seized him by the shoulders and swung him sharply round. "Then off with you at once and find him," he ordered. "Tell him we're having trouble with Weissermann and say that as I'm here it might be as well if he were to keep away from the canteen until I've settled up the affair."

The man hurried off into the crowd round the door, and Texhard was able to turn his attention once more to the unhappy man in the corner. He was on the point of approaching him when Weissermann suddenly darted forward and seized hold of a Légionnaire standing in the front of the crowd.

"You're the swine who cheated me of her love!" he bellowed in guttural German.

Before anyone could raise a finger to stop him, Weissermann swung the man up bodily in his powerful arms and dashed him against the wall time and time again until the wretched victim's head was smashed to pulp. Leaping forward, he hurled the dead body straight into the crowd and drawing the long bayonet which he wore, he slashed viciously at all and sundry. Two men fell to the floor screaming with pain as he drove the sharp blade into their ribs; then, with a wild shriek, he flung himself bodily at the nearest window.

Such was the force he used that glass and wood-work gave with a fearful crash and, cut and bleeding, he fell head first on to the hard ground outside. In a flash he had regained his feet and begun tearing at his clothing with such violence that it was soon ripped to shreds. With a wild yell he rushed to the nearest parapet and, clad only in socks and boots, stood for a moment silhouetted against the

full moon that was swiftly climbing into the starry night sky.

Before the sentries were aware of what was happening, Weissermann gave a scream so inhuman that it sent the blood running cold in the veins of all who heard it, and, flinging his arms above his head he leapt from the wall to the sand outside and, his arms waving wildly, he raced frantically away in the direction of the oasis.

Texhard had dashed out of the canteen in pursuit and stood on the firestep watching the retreating figure of the German. A voice at his elbow made him turn sharply. Beside him stood Karvof, a sardonic grin on his face.

"Our friend out there seems a little worried about something," he said, nodding in the direction of the German.

"Some people resent treachery in love as much as treachery in war!" Texhard retorted, sharply.

Karvof's little eyes narrowed. "I don't know what you mean by that," he answered, "but let me tell you something right away, my dear Sergeant. I'm a plain man and I like plain speaking. If you've any accusation to make against me, you'll do me the favour of speaking out like a man and will not beat about the bush like some damned lawyer."

"Accusation?" Texhard regarded the other with well-simulated astonishment. "Why the heck should you think I've any accusation to make against *you*? Unless, of course, you're suffering from a nasty attack of guilty conscience?"

"You know very well that I wasn't anywhere

near the canteen when that fool of a German went *cafard*," Karvof continued.

"Yes, I did notice your absence," the American replied, with a dry smile. "In fact, most of the men present remarked on the fact that the good Sergeant Karvof seemed to be pressingly engaged elsewhere."

Karvof wheeled round to face his colleague. "Now you listen to me," he said, threateningly, "I'll not stand for any non-commissioned officer under my command hobnobbing with the men in order to curry favour. I thought at the time that Dubois was a fool to promote a loud-mouthed, boastful wastrel like you, and now I'm sure of it. If I hear of you trying to make trouble for me with the men, I warn you it will be the worse for you."

"Don't you worry your head over that," retorted Texhard. "Nothing that I could say or do would alter the men's opinion of you one way or the other."

Karvof scowled angrily. Into his slow brain there crept the suspicion that Texhard was getting the better of the argument, but nothing the American had said could be seized upon as a sign of insubordination.

"Well, don't say I haven't warned you!" he growled, as he got down from the firestep and stalked slowly across the barrack square in the direction of his own quarters.

Texhard gazed thoughtfully after the retreating figure of his colleague. If only the Russian were not such a brute, he reflected, the task of the other N.C.O.s would be considerably lighter. When

men are living on their nerves to the extent that the garrison of Fort Saada were, clear thinking becomes a thing of the past, and at such times the faults of a senior non-commissioned officer like Karvof are all too likely to be attributed to everyone who holds a command of any sort. A whisper here, a whisper there, and soon the rank and file come to regard their leaders as potential enemies, ignoring the merits or demerits of individuals.

With a slight shrug, Texhard turned away and walked slowly to his hut. He reflected, philosophically, he had known well enough what he was letting himself in for when he accepted promotion, and it certainly wouldn't help matters by indulging in a private hymn of hate against Karvof at this stage. It was up to him to try to keep the men as contented as possible, and the task would not become any easier if he allowed personal hatred and dislike to come between himself and his duty.

Half an hour before dawn the following morning, the bugles sounded the "Stand to Arms." This was an invariable practice in the fort for, in that short period before the sun appears over the eastern horizon to herald the approach of another day, the Arab is at his most dangerous. At such a time, when human energy and alertness are at their lowest ebb, a cunning and stealthy enemy may often be successful in launching a surprise attack, and experience has taught the Legion that this hour of all the twenty-four, is the one in which it is essential to keep the strictest vigilance. The Arab is a brave and fearless fighter, but he is slow to learn from failure, and the fact that in the past he met with much success when

launching his dawn attacks, still influences him, although steps have long been taken to guard against any chance of the defenders of outposts and forts being caught unawares.

Sleepy and disgruntled, the garrison turned out at the command of the bugle and took up their positions on the firestep as the N.C.O.s proceeded to call the roll. Scarcely was their task completed before one of the sentries shouted and pointed to the oasis.

In the fast-gathering light of early dawn the defenders peered anxiously over the parapet. Suddenly a low mutter of rage swept along the line as man after man caught sight of the object which had attracted the attention of the keen-eyed sentry.

Not twenty yards away from the main gate of the fort lay the body of Weissermann. Terribly mutilated, and with head missing, it lay there, a grim and silent reminder that the Tuaregs were still encircling the fort and, although obviously biding their time, were not relaxing vigilance.

"Shall we bring him in?" asked one of the men, pointing to the still form of their dead comrade.

Sergeant Karvof, passing at that moment, wheeled on the man. "Bring him in, you fool?" he bellowed. "Why the hell should we risk lives, even if they are as unimportant as your own, for the sake of that carrion out there? Let him stay where he is. Why should we go to the trouble of burying him when the vultures will attend to the job for us? Some of you scum have as few brains as you have many fathers! Don't let me hear any more darned

nonsense. The next man to open his ugly trap on the subject will find himself in the punishment cells in double quick time, I promise you."

The unfortunate trooper knew too well to attempt to argue with the sergeant. The slightest sign of resentment or disagreement would have been rewarded with a vicious kick in the pit of the stomach. Standing rigidly to attention, the man gazed straight in front until Karvof had given full vent to his spleen and passed down the line.

Before the sergeant could work off any more ill temper on the men, one of the Headquarters' troop approached with the message that Captain Dubois wished to see all non-commissioned officers immediately. Karvof growled an order to the senior trooper to assume command until they were again free, and led the way to the commanding officer's quarters.

It was at once evident to the men who formed up in a semi-circle round the bed in which Dubois lay, that their commander was considerably worse. His wound and the fever were taking heavy toll of his vitality, but such were his courage and determination that he allowed no sign of the pain he was suffering to make itself known, as he turned his head slowly to address them.

"Last night," he began, "one of the men—Weissermann—went *cafard* and was allowed to escape from the fort, with the inevitable result. Although it is, of course, impossible to safeguard against attacks of madness, it should be impossible for the victim to get out of the fort. Furthermore, I understand that the primary cause of all his trouble lay in some upset with one of the women.

"Now, all this points to a very lax state of discipline, and I'm determined to guard against any repetition of this sort of thing. It has a very bad effect on the men generally. I have decided, therefore, that two extra parades of an hour each must be held daily and the sternest measures taken against any men who are turning out for inspection in slipshod or slovenly manner.

"At a time like this, it is fatal to ease up in the slightest, and I expect every one of you to do all in your power to instil a greater smartness into the men. Naturally they will resent it—the fools always seem to object to anything that's done for their own good—but any show of insubordination, no matter how slight, must be put down with a heavy hand.

"On the shoulders of every one of you rests the responsibility of maintaining the highest traditions of the Legion—see that you do not fail."

With a wave of the hand, Dubois dismissed the little party. The effort of addressing them, even for so short a time, had taxed his strength to its utmost, and as the men filed silently from the room, Dubois turned his face to the wall with a sigh.

The following day was one of the most anxious Texhard had ever known. The news of the additional parades had been received by the men in the worst spirit. Your average Légionnaire is more noted for his powers of physical endurance than for his reasoning powers, and most of the men of the Fourth Squadron regarded the added imposition as an attempt on the part of their commanding officer to make their lives needlessly unhappy.



Headed by Baring, the more reasonable of them tried to convince their comrades that Dubois was actuated by no motive of personal spite. When one is kept physically active, they pointed out, it is impossible to brood too much on one's fate. They might have saved their breath, however, for the majority of the men refused to be comforted by any such philosophical reasoning. To them, a parade signified nothing more than an attempt on the part of their superiors to make life wretched, and they not only refused to be convinced by the arguments of their more sensible and level-headed comrades, but openly jeered at them for being nothing but lackeys of the commanding officer.

Towards evening, Baring sought out his friend. "Look here, Texas," he said, "things are looking pretty serious. One or two of us have done what we can to prevent the hotheads making fools of themselves, and incidentally rendering us all liable to come in for more trouble, but it wasn't the slightest use. They're firmly convinced they have a legitimate grievance against Dubois and they're busy forming a deputation to wait on him."

"God help them if they do!" exclaimed the American. "The captain is the last guy in the world to stand for that sort of stuff, as the suckers should know by now. He may be giving them a rough passage, but it is a pleasure cruise to what they'll have coming to them if they get the old man's goat with their damfool grounings."

Duncan Baring shook his head. "It's no earthly use trying to argue with them," he said. "They are asking for trouble and, by Jove, they're going

to get it." He pointed to where a party of six men was marching across the square in the direction of Dubois' quarters. "It won't be long before they *do* get it—exactly where the bottle got the cork, too; in the neck!"

Unaware of this gloomy prophecy, the little party of men disappeared into the officers' quarters. They had not been gone five minutes before an orderly appeared at the double and told Texhard to report immediately to the commanding officer with an escort of twelve men.

"What did I tell you?" exclaimed Baring. "Some of those bright lads are for the high-jump this time."

When Texhard entered the commanding officer's room, Dubois was sitting bolt upright in his bed. Before him stood the members of the deputation, their faces livid with rage. But such was their fear of the little Captain and the authority for which he stood, that not one of them dared open his mouth to give expression to the thoughts he felt.

Without so much as a glance at the men standing silently at the far end of the room, Dubois turned to Texhard. "Sergeant," he said, quietly, "march off these insolent dogs and clap them in the cells. I will have no insubordination under my command. When they have had an opportunity of cooling their heels for twenty-four hours, I will deal with them."

A mutter of angry protest came from the men standing silently at the far end of the room, but the voice of Dubois stilled it.

"Have you got your automatic with you, Sergeant?"

"Certainly, *mon capitaine*."

"Good. Then if another of these dogs dares to open his mouth, I command you to shoot him down where he stands. Now remove the swine from my sight."

A brief word of command, and the escort formed up on either side of the now thoroughly subdued men. The entire party moved off in the direction of the dark, stone cells, no better than unlighted cupboards in size and furnishing, which are used for those who have the lack of wisdom to fall foul of authority.

So scared were the prisoners that not one word did they utter, but it was plain to Texhard that each and every one of them was seething with a spirit of rebellion that, no matter what the consequences might be, would have to be given expression sooner or later.

There was a lot to be said for officers of the old school, reflected Texhard, as he ushered the men into their cells, but it was a thousand pities they were unable to employ a little more sympathy and understanding in their dealings. There are times when it is no crime to give nerve-strained men a little more latitude than usual.

A sharp burst of rifle fire from the sentries sent Texhard racing across the parade ground before the notes of the "Alarm," had finished sounding. Peering cautiously over the parapet he saw that a horde of Tuaregs, some four hundred strong, were advancing on the fort from the West. Shouting and yelling, the natives spurred forward their fighting camels at such a pace that great clouds of dust veiled their movements.

"Man the gate!" he shouted.

The next moment, the machine gun crew were in action, the rapid *ta-tat-tat-tat-tat-ta* of their fire impinging on the crack of the rifles as the sentries blazed away into the horde of advancing natives.

With his face streaming with blood, a man next to Texhard staggered back, his hands clawing at his chin. Losing his balance, he crashed from the parapet and lay writhing on the hard ground as he screamed in pain. Without so much as a passing glance, the men on either side continued to pour a rapid fire into the mounted natives. Suddenly there was a lull and then a shout went up from the defenders as it was seen that the Tuaregs were in flight.

"That's taught the scum a lesson they won't forget," yelled a Swiss, brandishing his rifle wildly above his head.

Texhard laughed bitterly. "Don't be a fool, man!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know it's only meant to get us on the jump? The real attack will come later when they've kept us on the go with these sorties for two or three days. And even as it is, they've not done so badly," he added, pointing to the ground behind.

Twelve dead or wounded had joined the first man who now lay still with hands outstretched and eyes on which the film of death was already forming.

"That little business has cost us more than it's cost the Tuaregs!" added the American, significantly.

## CHAPTER V

### HATE

As the firing died away, Karvof came over to where Texhard stood. He seemed to be in a strangely subdued frame of mind and disinclined to provoke the American in any way.

"Things are getting serious," he growled. "These continual minor attacks are playing the very devil with the men's nerves. I wish to God the Tuaregs would make up their minds to go for us on a big scale; then we could bring the matter to a definite conclusion one way or the other."

"Any news of the relief?" asked Texhard.

The Russian shook his head. "Did you ever know Headquarters to sweat their guts out to help the fighting men?" he growled. "It's my opinion we shall be damned lucky if we see anything of our opposite numbers before the week is out."

Texhard turned away. If Karvof went around airing his pessimism he would certainly help to stir up trouble more effectively than by any amount of bullying. At times of crisis, when news is scarce and rumour holds almost undisputed sway, the men hang on the lightest word of their superiors, who, they firmly believe, are possessed of many sources of information denied to the rank and file. Therefore, it behoves those in authority to do all they

can to stamp out panic rumours and to keep up the morale of the men by displaying an optimism which they probably do not feel.

The medical orderlies were busy tending the wounded, pouring iodine in wounds and applying bandages as quickly as possible. In the atmosphere of sweltering heat and dirty surroundings, which are so great a menace to the health of white men in Northern Africa, it is essential that every possible care be taken to prevent infection and disease from spreading, but despite all they could do, the medical orderlies were fighting a losing battle with fever and sickness generally.

Lack of fresh green food was playing havoc with the health of the little garrison, and a water supply so inadequate that proper facilities for washing were out of the question, added its quota to the general sense of ill-being which permeated the fort.

As Texhard turned wearily to supervise the collecting of the dead *Légionnaires*, preparatory to arranging for their burial, he caught sight of a white dress fluttering by the door of the commanding officer's hut.

Joan Lexham stood at the entrance, shielding her eyes from the glare of the hot sun with her cupped hand. She appeared to be searching for someone; her gaze travelled slowly over the barrack square till it came to rest on the figure of Texhard. She beckoned urgently, and the American strode across to where she stood.

Her face looked white and drawn, and little lines of fatigue puckered the corners of her eyes, but she was calm and collected when she spoke to him.



[Photo : Exclusive News Agency

THE INTERIOR OF A LONELY FORT IN THE SAHARA

"I'm sorry to bring you away from your work," she said, as he drew near. "The medical sergeant has just left Captain Dubois and he says there's little hope of him surviving for more than a few hours. His strength is going fast and he seems to have exhausted his powers of resistance."

Texhard shook his head. "It's a bad business," he said, slowly. "Bad for many reasons."

"You mean because of Sergeant Karvof?" Joan suggested.

"Yes. Dubois is a hard man, God knows, but he's a just one, and the men will put up with a lot from him on that account. But with Karvof, whom they hate in a way they could never hate Dubois, in charge of the garrison, anything might happen. Yes, it sure is a bad lookout and no mistake."

The girl appeared to hesitate. Then she spoke in low, rapid tones. "There's something I feel you ought to be told about Karvof. An hour ago he came to me and said that when Dubois is dead and he in charge, he proposes to see that I have, what he calls, 'a good time.' I told him I intend to go on as I am now, trying to do what I can to help nurse the sick and wounded, but he insisted that I shouldn't have to waste my time like that in future. Of course I knew well enough what he meant, but I pretended I didn't, and then he went away. But I know he doesn't mean to let the matter drop, and before he left he as good as told me he intends to take me to live in his quarters."

Texhard whistled. That Karvof was a brute who would stop at little to satisfy his own desires was common knowledge, but it came as a shock to the



American to realise the extent to which the fellow was prepared to go to get his own way.

"What do you think I ought to do?" demanded Joan, gazing up anxiously into the face of the young sergeant.

Texhard put a hand reassuringly on her shoulder.

"Now don't you worry yourself, honey," he said, soothingly. "Once that four-flushing hobo realises you're not standing for any of his Tarzan stuff he'll pipe down quick enough, you mark my words. If I were you," he continued, "I'd send the guy a note telling him exactly where he belongs. Only keep a copy of it because it may come in handy when we're relieved, if there's any need for investigation into our Russki friend's conduct."

The girl looked up quickly. "Relieved!" she whispered. "Do you really think there's a chance?"

"Why sure, honey." Texhard did his best to speak reassuringly. "In a day or two you'll be out of all this, and inside a month you'll be thinking of Fort Saada as nothing but a bad dream."

"And what about you?"

The American grinned. "Oh, I guess *my* African dream will have to go on for a few more years," he said, cheerfully. "I admit it's a nightmare sort of a one at times, but it has its moments, sister—it has its moments!" He laughed, as he caught the look on Joan Lexham's face. "Don't worry," he assured her. "I'm not trying to pull any of the sheikh stuff on you. Guess I wouldn't have a chance even if I tried, as long as that other guy's around."

"Do you mean Karvof?"

"Karvof nothing! No, the guy I'm thinking of isn't Russian, he's English."

Do what she would to prevent it, Joan Lexham could not check the flush that spread slowly over her cheeks. She had no idea that her admiration for the young Englishman had been so apparent, and she was furiously angry with herself to think that all the time this tall American Légionnaire had been on to her secret.

"Now don't you fret yourself, sister," exclaimed Texhard, soothingly. "That fellow Baring is a regular guy if ever there was one; in fact, he's almost good enough to be the man for you!"

Impulsively the girl laid a soft hand on Texhard's arm. "You really are rather a dear," she said, softly. "But promise me that you'll never, never say a word to him about all this."

"You win!" He wetted the index finger of his right hand and solemnly drew it across his throat. "Cut my throat if I tell a lie," he intoned. "There; are you satisfied?"

Joan treated him to a dazzling smile, then with a wave of her hand she turned and re-entered the building.

Texhard gazed after her and sighed loudly. "Gee," he muttered, "if I don't watch my step I'll find myself spending my spare dimes on candy for that girl and probably writing love poems into the bargain. Come on, buddy, snap out of it."

He took a final glance at the door through which Joan had vanished, then turned on his heel and strode across the square back to duty.

The remainder of the day passed quietly. No further attacks came from the Tuaregs, but when a

fatigue party attempted to slip across to the oasis for another supply of water, the enemy opened up so hot a fire on them that they were forced to beat a hasty retreat. It was plain that the plan of the Tuaregs was to starve them out, and with the relief long overdue it seemed they had all too good a chance of succeeding.

Dusk was falling when a message came to Texhard to report to Dubois immediately. On presenting himself in the commanding officer's room, he found Karvof already there, walking slowly up and down beside the window.

Dubois raised a face ghastly in its pallor and lined with suffering. "Karvof, and you, Texhard," he muttered, "attend to me. Before morning I shall be dead. No, don't interrupt," he broke off as the two men muttered hoarse words of reassurance. "I know what I'm saying. I want to impress on both of you most strongly the necessity of keeping the men together and the fort safe until the relief appears. As long as there is a man left standing there must be no surrender. You are in a position of trust here, and the honour, not only of the Fourth Squadron, but of France herself, lies in your hands. If I can feel you will play your parts to the full, upholding the traditions of the Legion, I shall die happy. Remember, this is not a request, it is a command. Your duty lies clear before you. See that you do not fail."

Dubois' voice sank to a whisper, and it seemed to the two men that the end could not be long. For a moment he lay still, struggling for breath. Then, propping himself up on one elbow, he held out a hand that shook with fever.

"*Adieu, mes amis,*" he whispered. "I don't mind the going, but I *should* have liked to see the inside of Prunier's in Paris, just once more. The blue trout are just coming into season again!"

The two men pressed the hand he held out, and then, coming to attention, saluted and walked softly from the room in which the Angel of Death was already hovering.

"Poor old Dubois," muttered Texhard softly, as they reached the outer air.

Karvof gave a hoarse laugh. "You might as well spare your sympathy," he sneered. "In my opinion it'll be a damned good thing when he *does* hand in his checks. If I can't run this fort better than he did, you can shoot me for a Romanof!"

Without waiting to see what effect his words had upon his companion, the Russian strode away towards the women's quarters and Texhard went in search of Baring, to whom he told what had happened.

Baring shook his head. "Karvof may imagine he's a heaven-sent leader," he observed, "but you can take it from me that unless he alters his ways considerably he'll destroy the last faint shreds of discipline that are left here."

How true was his prophecy became apparent within a very few hours!

The news that Dubois was dying spread like wild-fire through the fort. In the canteen, groups of men argued angrily, over their wine, some insisting that it was a good thing that they would suffer no more from the little martinet who had commanded them for so long, others asserting that life under Karvof

would be a hundred times worse. Of all the men present only one remained silent, taking no part in the discussion.

Crouched over a beaker of wine in a far corner of the room, Linopoulos, the Greek, sat straining his ears to the talk that surged and eddied round him. His little beady eyes darted from speaker to speaker in an attempt to memorise everything that was being said, but it was not until the harsh voice of one of the three Polish members of the Squadron launched into a torrent of abuse against Karvof, that the Greek moved. Noiselessly as a snake, he rose to his feet and slunk unnoticed from the room.

Barely had the Poles quietened than the door of the canteen was flung open and Karvof strode into the room. In his hand he carried a wicked-looking thong of elephant hide which he swung angrily backwards and forwards. Shouldering his way through the now silent throng he strode directly up to one of the Poles. Glaring at him, Karvof bared his teeth in a snarl as he thrust his face within a few inches of the other's.

"So you're the dog who dares to criticise me, are you?" he yelled.

"I—s—said nothing!" gasped the now frightened Légionnaire.

"Nothing, eh? Well, we'll soon see about that! Hi, you greasy dago, where are you?" Karvof swung round and seized the Greek who had followed him into the canteen. "Now then," he bellowed, "just you repeat what you have told me a moment ago."

"I don't understand," whined the Greek, gazing in terror at the ring of faces round him.

Karvof grunted. "So you're not only a spy but a double-crosser are you? Well, I'll deal with you later."

Giving the Greek a buffet on the side of the head, which sent him sprawling on to the floor, he turned to the Pole. "I'll show you how I deal with insubordination, you gutter scum," he snarled.

Raising his thong he brought it whistling down in a vicious slash that laid open the Pole's cheek down to the bone. The wretched man raised an arm to shield his face from the next blow and Karvof sprang back a pace. It was obvious that his victim was only attempting to protect himself, but with an oath the Russian drew his automatic and without a moment's hesitation pressed it to the Pole's head and squeezed the trigger. A slight click was all that greeted his effort, and the next moment the gun was struck from his hand.

Wheeling round he confronted the men standing behind him. "You all saw this man attempt to strike a superior officer," he cried, "and you know what the penalty is. Well, I'll deal with the mutinous all in good time."

Thrusting his way through the crowd, he crossed to the door and was about to stride through it when he came to a sudden halt. Stretched full length across the opening lay the body of the Greek, face downwards. And from the centre of his shoulder blades, protruded the handle of an Eastern dagger.

The Legion has its own methods of dealing with traitors!

Karvof stepped silently over the still figure and strode away. In his heart he knew that his first

essay at intimidation had failed, and instinct prompted him to walk warily for a time. That he would get his own back on the men who had murdered his spy was, he assured himself, a foregone conclusion, but he would have to employ more subtle methods the next time.

Within a very few minutes all the fort was buzzing with the news, and open revolt seemed to be on the point of flaring up at any moment. To Texhard, the news of Karvof's action came as a shock. None realised more clearly than he how critical the situation had become, and it was almost with a sense of relief that he heard of the death of Dubois, some minutes later. It was essential to keep the men occupied, and the death of the Commanding Officer afforded an excellent opportunity for calling a parade.

Going in search of Karvof, he found the Russian busy in the orderly room with official papers. The fellow looked more than a little scared, and when Texhard suggested to him that a parade be called immediately, the other hesitated. Seeing his uncertainty the American seized his chance.

"Don't you think it's a good opportunity to tell the men that with Dubois dead, all grievances must be forgotten for the common good?" he hinted.

Karvof nodded. "There may be something in what you say," he agreed. "Personally, I don't think anything but the Last Trump could change most of the carrion we have to command, but we'll try it."

Summoning the bugler on duty at the door of the office, Karvof ordered him to sound the General Assembly, and soon the men were tumbling out of

their quarters on to the parade ground. The roll was called, all absentees accounted for, and Karvof officially announced the death of Captain Dubois.

"It is up to all of us to carry on to the best of our ability," said he, after he had reminded them of the gravity of the situation. "For my part, I intend to set an example by starting with a new slate. Discipline must, of course, be kept up but I do not propose to take any further action concerning the incidents that happened a short while ago. In return, I expect you all to stand by me in my new command. All right. Squadron, dismiss!"

As the men filed silently off the parade ground he turned to Texhard with a sly grin. "That should fix the scum for a bit," he said, boastfully. "I know just how to handle these sweepings of the gutter, as you'll see. Any more funny business and they'll find out the sort of man I am!"

Texhard said nothing, but he was far from easy in his mind. He had studied the faces of the men as they listened, and there he had read a message which the Russian was too blind or too conceited to see for himself. They were not bluffed by the sudden change of front displayed by the senior *sous-officier*, and Texhard knew it would only be a very short time before the trouble broke out again. And when it did, there would be no hope of staving off the mutiny that would follow.

As night fell, the fire from the Tuareg snipers suddenly increased considerably in volume, and on Karvof's orders all guards were doubled. With the enemy showing such activity the garrison had little time to think about private grievances, and for this



Texhard offered up a silent prayer of thanks, although it was all too obvious that the continual strain was starting to tell heavily on the men.

Going his rounds of the parapet, the American cursed for the hundredth time the indifference of Headquarters that allowed men to suffer such long days and nights of strain without relieving them at the proper time. It seemed at that moment as though the Squadron was indeed a legion of the lost, left to die in the desert without a hand being raised to succour them.

"What you need, my lad, is a drink," he muttered. His duties completed for the moment, he made his way back to the barracks. "I'll get hold of Duncan and see if he feels inclined to split a bottle of that red poison that passes for wine out here."

Baring, when approached, agreed with enthusiasm, and it was not long before the two friends were enjoying the first moment of real relaxation they had known for days.

"By the way," said Texhard, as he held out a light for his friend's *Petit Caporal* cigarette, "I had a few minutes' chat with the Lexham dame this morning. It seems Karvof's been trying to get fresh with her."

His friend nodded.

"Yes, so she told me. She took your advice, old man, and sent the blighter a note that ought to put paid to any idea he might have of blossoming out into a Russian Romeo."

"Good for her," approved Texhard. "She certainly *has* got pluck!"

"You're right there. One of the women has gone

down with fever and Joan is looking after her. What's more, she insisted on the girl being moved over to her own quarters for the night."

"But where's Joan going to sleep?" demanded the American.

"She says she'll make a shakedown in the ante-room adjoining the officers' mess," Baring replied. "I told her I didn't like the idea of her pigging it like that, but she sent me packing. Wouldn't hear of any other arrangement, so there it is. She's not the sort of girl you can argue the toss with, believe me!"

"All the better for the time when she has to give Comrade Karvof a few words of wisdom," grunted Texhard. "And talking of Karvof, what do you think of his masterly performance to-day?"

The Englishman took a slow pull at his cigarette. "Well, since you ask me," he replied, "I think he's riding for an almighty crash. The only trouble is that I'm afraid he'll crash the whole bag of tricks, and that will be the end of Fort Saada and all that therein is!"

"I wish I could think of something we could do to keep the brute quiet," Texhard exclaimed.

His friend laughed. "Don't worry too much about that," he advised. "If he oversteps the mark again I have an idea some of our bright lads will succeed in doing it for you, and doing it effectively, too!"

A long and angry burst of firing made the windows of the hut rattle in their casements, and Texhard got slowly to his feet. "I don't like the sound of things this evening," he confided to his friend. "It isn't like the old Tuareg to play Brer Rabbit for long,

and it's my opinion he'll start getting busy again within the next twenty-four hours. And when he *does* attack," he added grimly, "you can bet your bottom dollar he'll make a really good go of it. All this messing about is merely to keep us on the jump and prevent us from sending out patrols to find out just what his game is."

Baring leaned across the table and, picking up the half empty bottle, poured himself another tumblerful of wine. "You know, old man," he said, as he raised the glass to his lips, "what I like most about you is your cheery optimism!"

Texhard laughed. "Well, that's better than being a cold-blooded fish like you!" he retorted. "And leave a drop in the bottle for me, my need is greater than yours!"

Throughout the night the enemy kept up a spasmodic fire on the fort that made it a difficult matter for the defenders to get any real rest, and when morning broke and the fire from the Tuareg outposts diminished, the nerves of most of the Squadron were sorely tried. Karvof decided to take a chance by maintaining only a skeleton force of sentries, and ordered the others to get what sleep they could.

Texhard, who had been kept on the alert throughout the night, also tumbled into his cot and lay down to snatch a few hours' well-earned rest. But before he had time to settle himself comfortably, a corporal put his head round the door.

"What the devil's the matter now?" the American demanded angrily.

The man entered the room and crossed over to

the cot. "You must come at once, Sergeant," he said, urgently. "A murder has been committed."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Texhard demanded angrily. "Who the heck has been murdered?"

"One of the women."

With a groan, the American pulled himself slowly to his feet and buttoned his tunic. "I wish the goddam girl would choose some other time for getting murdered," muttered he. "Which of them is it?"

"Yvonne—the red-haired one," explained the corporal.

"All right, lead on."

Instead of crossing the square in the direction of the women's quarters, the man led the way towards the part of the barracks given over to the officers. At the door of the mess, Texhard was met by the medical sergeant and an orderly, behind whom he caught sight of the pale, scared face of Joan Lexham.

Ignoring the two soldiers, he turned directly to the English girl. "What's been happening?" he demanded, anxiously.

"Oh, it's too terrible!" Burying her face in her hands, Joan broke down.

Texhard put his arm around her and led her into the mess, then forced her into a chair. "Here," he said, "drink this and you'll soon be O.K., honey." He thrust a glass of neat brandy into her hand.

The girl took a drink, coughed, and set the glass back on the table. "Thank you," she said. "I'm all right again now, but I got such a shock this

morning when I went into my room to get my clothes that I felt faint."

"I guess we'll get to brass tacks soon," the American said, with a sigh.

Joan Lexham pulled herself together. "You know that I lent my room last night to that poor girl. She was down with fever. I tucked her up safely and then turned in myself in the adjoining room. I'm a heavy sleeper as a rule and last night I didn't wake up once, which must have been my salvation, for if I'd heard any noise in the room I should certainly have gone in to see what was happening, and shared her fate, I expect. At some time during the night, someone came into the room and cut her throat from ear to ear."

"Good God! Why in the name of all that's wonderful should anyone want to murder that poor girl?"

"I don't think anyone meant to murder *her*," said Joan, slowly. "You see, she was sleeping in my bed for the first time, and don't forget—I sent a note to a certain person yesterday!"

Texhard stared in horror. "You mean——?"

The girl nodded. "It looks like it." She was much calmer now as she continued. "If it's not the work of Sergeant Karvof I'm very much surprised!"

## CHAPTER VI

### LUST

TEXHARD whistled softly. "I don't doubt but you're right," he said. "Though suspicion is one thing and proof another. Would you like me to tackle Karvof point-blank with the murder?"

Joan shook her head. "It wouldn't do any good, would it? He'd be sure to have a cast iron alibi prepared, but it might be a good thing to let him know we suspect him."

Turning to the medical orderly who was hovering near, Texhard told him to go in search of Karvof at once, and about three minutes later the Russian appeared at the door.

"What the devil's all this about?" he demanded. He suddenly caught sight of Joan Lexham and, coming to a dead halt, his jaw dropped. He looked, as the watchers were quick to observe, as though he was seeing a ghost, but he pulled himself together and stared round the little group with as much of his customary insolence as he could summon to his aid.

"I'm sorry to say there's been a spot of trouble here during the night," Texhard answered, evenly. "Of course, you know nothing about it, so I'll explain what has happened."

Texhard told his story, watching the Russian's face as he spoke.

When he had finished, Karvof turned to the English girl, now standing close to the American.

"Let me assure mademoiselle that no one regrets what has happened more than I do," he said, suavely. "Judging by what occurred last night it is quite clear it will not be safe for you to be left so much alone in the future. If I may be permitted to offer you the shelter——"

"Please don't worry," Joan cut in quickly. "I'm quite capable of looking after myself, as I should have thought you must have seen for yourself by now!"

"Just as mademoiselle wishes," retorted Karvof. "Meanwhile I will make arrangements for the strictest enquiries to be made, and I can promise you that if I lay hands on the fellow responsible, he will receive little mercy!" With a curt nod he turned and strode out of the room.

"Cool customer, isn't he?" Texhard nodded at the retreating figure of Karvof. Then he turned to the girl and beckoned her to follow him into the privacy of the back room. "I don't want you to worry more than you can possibly help about all this," he said. "As a matter of fact, Karvof must be feeling far too alarmed to try any more of his murderous tricks for some time, but just for safety I think you'll be well advised to keep out of his way for a bit."

"I most certainly will," Joan answered fervently. "And I don't mind confessing," she added, with a sigh, "that the sooner the relief comes, the happier I shall be."

Having made sure she was sufficiently recovered to be left alone in safety, Texhard hurried over to

the men's quarters. As soon as he entered one of the huts it became obvious that the news of the murder had preceded him. Standing on one of the tables in the centre of the room, Laski, the Pole who had so nearly lost his life at the hands of Karvof on the previous day, was haranguing a group of his comrades. At the sight of Texhard he stopped abruptly. Then, pointing his finger, he called out:

"We don't want you in here, Sergeant. You'd better clear out. We've nothing against you personally but you can't come butting your nose in where it isn't wanted!"

Texhard shook his head. "Now suppose you listen to me for a change," he retorted. "As long as I hold authority I'm going to make it my duty to see that this fort is run properly. It's easy enough for you to stand up there shooting off that big mouth of yours, but you know as well as I do what the penalty is for mutiny, and if you think that just because we're all up against things at the moment your action will be overlooked, you're making the mistake of your life!"

The Pole pointed a derisive finger at Texhard. "Hark at him!" he roared. "Haven't we had enough of the bullying these swine of *sous-officiers* give us? 'Be the worse for me,' will it? Well, even if it is, neither you nor any other damned counter-jumper will be alive to see what happens."

A deep growl came from the assembled men. It was plain that the Pole had succeeded in stirring up the spirit of mutiny that had long lain dormant in them. Texhard stood his ground. If the threatened mutiny was indeed to break out there was nothing



to be gained by retreating, for in a very short space of time the men would have caught and killed all the *sous-officiers* who refused to throw in their lot with them, and with Dubois' dying words still ringing in his ears, the American had not the slightest intention of surrendering his principles to the mutineers.

Before Texhard had time to frame a retort, a fresh interruption occurred. One of the women had joined the party in the room and had clambered on to the table beside Laski. With hands on hips and flashing eyes she now stood confronting the men. "Shut your dirty mouths, all of you!" she cried.

In the sudden quiet that followed her unexpected interruption, the woman turned to the Pole and pointed a shaking finger at him. "Look at him!" she went on. "Is that long-gutted son of a she-ass to run all your heads into a noose just to satisfy his own spite? Oh, I know all about what happened between him and Karvof," she continued, "but that is his business and not yours. Don't you realise he's only trying to get you to back him up so he can save his own skin?"

"Easy enough for *you* to talk!" shouted a voice from the back of the room. "All that you women have to do is to keep out of matters that don't concern you!"

The woman laughed harshly. "You stupid fool," she retorted. "Do you imagine you can help matters with that sort of talk? If you gang of half-witted oafs have no brains in your ugly heads there are others who have."

Laski seized her roughly round the waist. "Give us a kiss, sweetheart," he bellowed.

Wrenching herself free, the woman snatched up an empty bottle from the table, and brought it down on the Pole's head with so resounding a smack that he toppled to the floor and sat nursing his pate and groaning loudly.

A roar of laughter greeted the discomfiture of the orator, and the woman was quick to seize her opportunity.

"There you are!" she yelled, pointing at him. "That's the sort of hero you were going to follow! What you boys want," she said with an abrupt change of tone, "is less heavy fatigue duties. You have your time fully taken up with the flea-ridden bunch of niggers out there, I know. Well, here's what I suggest. For your own sakes, carry on as well as you can and we women will help you as much as we can."

A whispered conversation took place among the men. Finally one of them forced his way to the table.

"All right," he shouted, "we'll give it a trial. But if you lights-o'-love don't stick to your side of the bargain, it'll be the worse for you—an' you can tell the other women so, with our love!"

The meeting broke up, and Texhard slipped quietly away and went in search of Karvof whom he found busy with the quartermaster-sergeant.

"Look at this!" cried the Russian, holding out a list for Texhard's inspection. "I've just been checking up the stores, and I find the reserve is so low that we'll have to put the men on half rations after to-day."

Texhard whistled. "Half rations for all of us. That's not too happy, is it?"

"Who the hell said anything about *us* going on half rations?" retorted Karvof. "There'll be plenty of time for that later."

"If we put the men on half rations," replied the American, "we'll have to do the same for ourselves. That's only fair."

"And I say we shan't!" roared Karvof. "I'm in charge here and what I say goes! If you're such a sanctimonious fool as to choose to ration yourself, that's your own funeral."

Texhard shook his head. "You know the rules as well as I do," he retorted. "If the men have to go on half rations, so do the *sous-officiers*. If you think you're entitled to have a full share, call a parade and tell the men that while you're cutting down their food you don't propose to cut down your own!"

"That's the worst of you newly-promoted green-horns," growled Karvof. "You're in such a damned panic of getting on the wrong side of the men that you crawl to them."

"Sergeant Texhard is right——" began the quartermaster.

"Shut up, you!" bellowed the Russian. "Another word from you and you'll be returned to your section. There are plenty of other lazy, thieving rascals who'd sell their souls for your job, so don't forget it!"

With a curt nod to Texhard, Karvof strode away to the stables.

"A nice one, that!" grumbled the quartermaster-sergeant, nodding a bald head at the figure of the Russian. "But don't you worry, *mon ami*, I shall

take good care he doesn't get more than his due. A thieving rascal, am I?" he muttered as he turned back to his task of checking over the sacks of dried beans and lentils that remained in store. "It's about time someone taught that fellow manners!"

"I'm afraid that would be a whole-time job!" retorted Texhard, "but don't let *me* spoil your boyish fun!"

During the noonday heat, when the sun scorched down with such a relentless intensity that European and native alike relaxed as far as possible and sought what shelter they might from its overpowering glare, Texhard assembled a small party of men in one corner of the parade ground. Knowing well that the Tuaregs would not be on the *qui vive* at this time of day, he had resolved on the bold stroke of trying to replenish the water supply now instead of waiting for nightfall. The very unexpectedness of the manœuvre would, he hoped, catch the natives napping both figuratively and literally, and if luck favoured the expedition, the party in the fort would be able to face the night free from the need of making a sortie at dusk.

Karvof, to whom he went for approval of the plan, merely shrugged his shoulders. "I accept no responsibility for the business," he told the American. "You're the person who has charge of the matter of arranging for proper supplies."

Having explained the reason for the venture to the men who were to accompany him, Texhard ordered the main gate of the fort to be opened. Followed by the ten troopers who formed the party,

he slipped quietly out and, making a wide detour, led the way to the oasis.

Beyond the walls of the fort the heat was almost unendurable. The sand scorched through the soles of their boots as they moved forward, and the faint breeze that played about them was so hot it might have come straight from a furnace. In the distance, heat waves danced and shimmered over the rolling expanse of golden sand that stretched for as far as the eye could see, and the sand flies buzzed angrily round their heads and chests, from which the sweat poured in a ceaseless stream.

Of the Tuaregs who were encamped beyond the dunes to the left of the oasis, there was no sign, and Texhard, thanking his lucky stars that his ruse had taken them unawares, pressed forward as fast as possible to the well. It was laborious going and despite the risk, he allowed the men to seek a few minutes' rest in the shelter of the palm trees before starting work.

A few yards to their right lay all that remained of the two men who had fallen into the hands of the Tuaregs so short a time ago. The natives had stripped them of every vestige of clothing and their bones were already picked clean by the vultures which appear from all quarters to gorge on dead man and beast as soon as life leaves the body.

"I reckon they are a damned sight better off than we are!" one of the men muttered as he stooped to pick up his freshly filled buckets. "At least they don't have to do these filthy fatigues."

"If you don't get a move on," retorted Texhard, "you'll have a mighty good chance of testing that fool idea of yours at first hand!"

At a word of command the little party turned towards the fort and were within five yards of the gate when the Légionnaire who had called forth the retort, suddenly lowered his buckets to the ground and turned on the American.

"I'm damned if I'm coming back to that hell!" he cried. "If you want to die of slow thirst and starvation, I don't. I'm going back, and no dirty, black-faced son of Satan shall stop me!"

As the man turned towards the oasis, Texhard grabbed him by the arm. "Come back, you mad-man!" he exclaimed.

The other wrenched himself free, and with a curse aimed a blow at Texhard's head. Then with a yell that brought a row of anxious faces peering over the parapet, he turned tail and ran towards the oasis, yelling and shouting.

"Let him go," cried Texhard, as two of the men placed their buckets on the ground and appeared about to give chase. "It's too late to save him."

And the next moment, a burst of firing came from the direction of the dunes, bullets throwing up little fountains of dry spray as they struck the ground all around the party.

"Come on, you fools, get a move on," Texhard shouted. Picking up his two buckets he made for the fort at a brisk walking pace. "It's no use running," he called out to the men. "If you run you'll only spill the water, and that will mean having to go out again to-night."

The intense glare made it impossible for the Tuaregs to put up as accurate a fire as usual, and the party succeeded in regaining the shelter of the

fort without any casualties. As they slipped through the gate into the parade ground, Karvof came striding to them.

"That's a fine fool thing you've done!" he exclaimed to Texhard. "Thanks to you we've lost another good man."

"Yes," retorted the other, "and also thanks to me we've got our water supply replenished. If you can devise a means by which we can get in water without risking anything, I should be glad to learn what it is!"

Turning his back on the Russian, he strode angrily to his own quarters. That Karvof should use every possible opportunity for venting his spite was only to be expected, but that he should show such gross unfairness and try to lessen his authority before the men, was altogether too much.

"I've stood just as much as I can from that swine," he muttered as he flung himself into a chair and produced a crumpled packet of cigarettes. "If he goes on like this I'm durned if I don't start a mutiny of my own!"

Sixty minutes later, Baring, who had come in search of his friend for a quiet chat, found Texhard still very far from his normally cheerful self.

"Pull yourself together," the Englishman advised him. "If you let Karvof get the better of you like this and throw up the sponge you'll do yourself more harm than good."

Texhard shook his head,

"The trouble with you British," he exclaimed, half seriously and half laughing, "is that you're all too durned good at shooting copybook maxims at a guy!"

"Well," retorted Baring cheerfully, "old comrade Karvof seems to be pretty good at that line himself, only *his* pet proverb seems to be, 'Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die'."

"What's the idea?" demanded his friend, sharply.

Baring held up his hand. "Listen," he commanded.

From the men's quarters came the sound of laughter and cheering and Texhard looked enquiringly at the Englishman. It was many days since the Fourth Squadron had found cause for laughter.

"Karvof is trying to curry favour with the men," Baring explained. "It seems he was given a pretty straight tip that unless he cut out that Cossack business he was booked for a bullet in the back one dark night. Anyway, he's ordered one of the horses to be killed, and told the canteen corporal to serve out free wine. As you hear, the fun and games are starting."

Texhard looked worried. "That's a fine way to maintain discipline," he exclaimed angrily. "Once give the men their heads like this and we'll never be able to handle them properly."

"Exactly. And if you ask me, I say the women are at the back of it all. They've any amount of low cunning, and they've not forgotten that it was undoubtedly Karvof who murdered one of them. They're working for his downfall, and what's more they seem to be going the right way about it!"

The American shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it's too late to do anything about it to-night," he mused. "I suppose I'd better go over and see what's happening though. With all the wine going begging the men will be up to mischief before long, so I



think it would be as well if you were to go over to the officers' quarters and keep an eye on that Lexham dame of yours."

Baring stood up. "Is that an order, Sergeant?"

"It is."

"Very good, Sergeant." Baring saluted with terrific gusto. "You can trust me to do my duty to the utmost, sir!"

"Are you telling *me*?" retorted the other, as Baring, a broad smile on his face, hurried from the room.

The largest mess hut presented an amazing picture. Bottles of wine stood about on all the tables, or were grasped in the hot hands of Légionnaires who packed the room to suffocation. In the centre of the floor, two of the women danced to the accompaniment of a concertina and a guitar played by two men perched on empty ammunition boxes. The other women flitted from table to table exchanging jokes and chaff with the men, who held out restraining hands to them. Shouting, yelling and singing, the men were seeking forgetfulness in the only way known to the vast majority of them.

Commotion! From the firestep a sudden burst was followed by the urgent notes of the bugle sounding the "alarm." For a moment the men stood gazing foolishly at each other, their fuddled brains trying to grasp the significance of the summons. Then, as the call was repeated, the long months of iron discipline to which they had been subjected told their tale.

Hastily buttoning tunics and buckling on side arms, the men ran for their rifles, leaving behind them the

unfinished wine with which, but a few moments earlier, they had been celebrating their unexpected treat. Above the noise and clatter of hurrying men, rose the shouts of the *sous-officiers* urging them to their battle stations without delay.

Although the sound of firing continued to increase, it soon became apparent that but few shots were being directed at the fort. The sentries reported that enemy snipers were fairly active, but it was not till a moment earlier that anything approaching a heavy fire had been directed at the fort. Indeed, it seemed almost as though the Tuaregs were anxious to keep the garrison occupied while the main body of the native invaders were busy on some matter other than the harassing of the fort.

That the enemy were still present in fairly large numbers was obvious. Their shots were coming spasmodically from three sides of the square and the flickering lights of their fires gave proof that they had not abandoned their positions. But whether the main body had left for good, a rearguard remaining to cover their retreat, or whether they had gone to a safe distance to reorganise and increase their ranks it was impossible to say.

When no attack developed, the men began to grumble among themselves, insisting that the call to arms was merely a ruse of Karvof's to get them away from the orgy which was just showing signs of developing into one of the most hectic affairs they had known for many dull weeks. Sullenly they stood to their arms, showing by their studied indifference to what was happening, that they regarded the whole business as nothing but a trick.

Texhard questioned the sentries closely, and all agreed that when the alarm was given the sound of firing in the distance had been very heavy.

"I guess there must be a tribal war of some sort going on," Texhard said. "Well, as long as they scrap with each other instead of with us, they're welcome to all the fighting they can get."

Karvof had kept well out of the way during the orgy, which he had sanctioned, but now he appeared on the firestep and focused his night-glasses on the Tuareg outposts.

"If this infernal sniping goes on," he growled, "I shall try to stage some sort of counter-attack. I can't stand it much longer."

"Well, there's something new happening right now," and Texhard repeated what he had heard about the heavy firing, and gave it as his opinion that the natives were staging one of their interminable tribal wars.

Karvof looked at Texhard curiously. "I don't agree," he retorted. "I believe it's the relief force on the way at last!"

## CHAPTER VII

### RESPIRE

DURING the night that followed, rumours flew round the fort. The Tuaregs had retreated—the Tuaregs were being heavily reinforced—a big attack was due in the morning—the Squadron was shortly going out to mop up the rearguard that was all that remained of the Tuareg forces.

Backwards and forwards, to and fro, the stories flew, each more fantastic than the last but each finding its own little coterie of adherents. Be the truth what it might, the defenders of Fort Saada were in complete agreement on one thing; the morrow would bring relief from the deadly monotony that was slowly undermining the morale of all of them.

It was with quite an unusual eagerness that the men stood-to at dawn the next morning. The night had passed uneventfully, with scarcely a shot exchanged by either side, and, unless the Tuaregs were showing unusual skill and craft in assembling their troops, it seemed most unlikely that they would launch an attack just at present.

As the sun climbed over the rim of the eastern horizon, and the darkness changed rapidly to light, the men realised with mixed emotions that after all they were apparently doomed to another day of monotony. The *sous-officiers* set about their first duty

of changing the sentries, but before the relief was completed an unexpected interruption brought the routine to an abrupt end.

From beyond a high ridge some half mile away to the south, a burst of heavy firing broke out. Immediately the garrison sprang to life. Rifles were hastily reloaded, the machine gun crew sighted their gun on the hill from whence the firing came, as the spare men, under the direction of a corporal, dashed to the magazine to haul out cases of ammunition. Tensely the squadron waited as the sounds of firing drew nearer and nearer.

Karvof hurried up and down the line. "Hold your fire till you get the order from me," he roared. "Any man who opens fire before he gets the word will find himself in the cells in double quick time, so don't forget what I say, you spawn of the Devil! Set your sights at four hundred yards and when you *do* get the command to fire, see that you don't blaze away blindly. Some of you gutter scum need a couple of wet-nurses apiece when it comes to handling your firearms with a little intelligence!"

To his vituperation the men paid but scant attention. Abuse from superiors is so usual a thing in the Legion that after a very little time men come so to take it for granted that the only occasion when they show any surprise is when they are addressed as normal human beings.

Karvof's invective was suddenly cut short by a shout from the sentry posted above the gateway. Owing to the height of his observation post he commanded a greater field of view than the others, and it was he who first saw the little party of blue-

coats struggling laboriously towards the fort. As they slowly drew nearer and came within sight of the other defenders, a great cheer went up from the fort.

"The relief! The relief!"

Men shouted and sang as they pointed. In a flash all the hardships and privations of the past weeks were forgotten. Soon they would be free of the fort and all its misery, and with the prospect of the flesh pots of civilization once more on the verge of becoming a reality, their excitement increased with every second.

The small party had not advanced fifty yards before it suddenly halted and faced left. Across the desert a horde of mounted Tuaregs were advancing rapidly on the white men. As the peril in which the men of the Legion stood dawned on the defenders, Karvof yelled a sharp order.

"Two troops will engage the enemy immediately!"

The bugler sounded a loud call and before the notes had died away, the men of Numbers One and Two Troops were racing across to the stables. In a remarkably few moments they had saddled and mounted their horses and formed up on the barrack square.

As Texhard took up his position at their head, the heavy main gates swung open and with a jingle and a clatter the men cantered out into the desert to do battle with the Tuareg hordes which were sweeping down on the party of *Légionnaires*.

Half choked with the sand that flew up from their horses' hooves as they spurred forward, and with eyes and faces smarting from the stinging

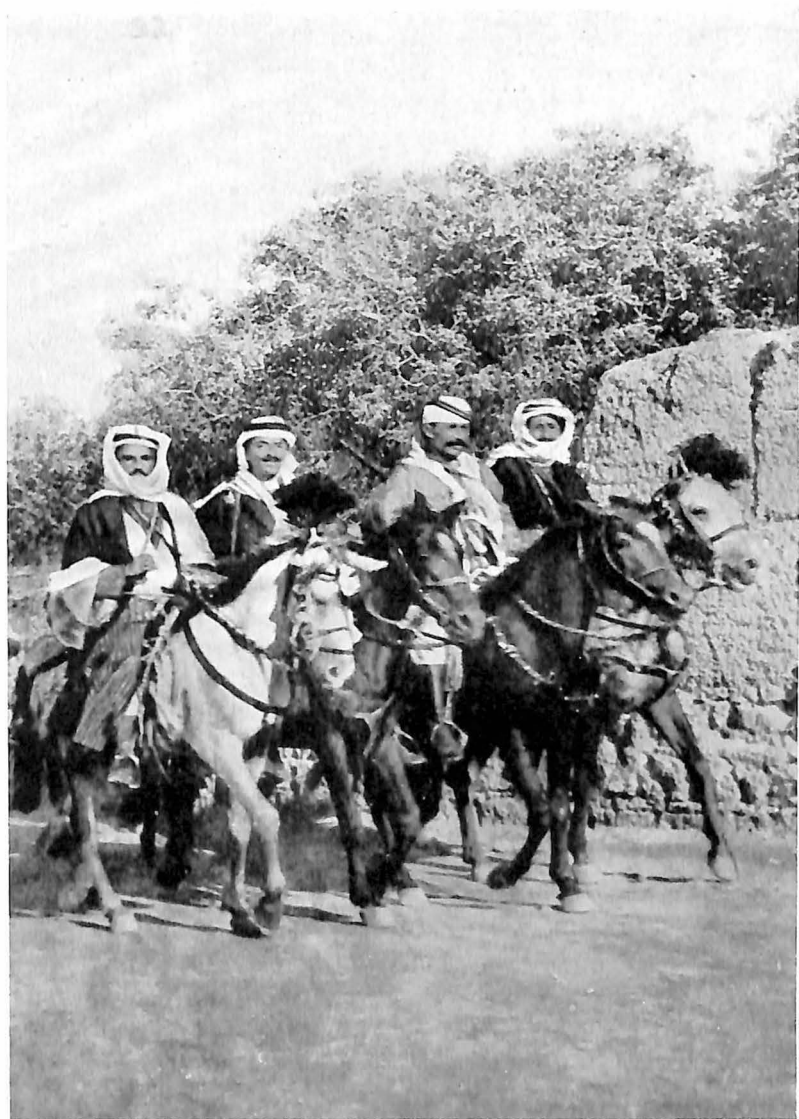
particles that flew up at every step, the riders, with sabres drawn, swept forward to join battle.

The lust for action was in the hearts of all the little band, and they shouted wild threats and challenges to the white-robed figures as they approached.

The infantry had halted and formed up in two lines which converged to a point at one end, forming a rough V, the apex of the letter being the point nearest to the advancing Tuaregs, who were spread out in the shape of a crescent. To try to come to grips with the enemy by means of a frontal attack would, Texhard realised at once, be an error of tactics, for the only way in which the cavalry could do so would be by riding through the infantry and thus throwing them out of formation. Equally dangerous would it be to attack the Tuaregs from the rear, for the blow struck from this direction would not only tend to force the attacking natives on to the infantry but, if immediately successful, might hamper the action by the presence of the unmounted troops in the midst of the horses.

The only course appeared to be to divide up into two parts which would advance on the Tuaregs along lines that ran parallel with those taken up by the infantry. Thus the latter would be screened from the attackers, and by driving a wedge into the centre of the crescent the cavalry would be able to cut the Tuareg force into two parts while they themselves would be able to reform as one body if the necessity demanded.

Issuing a brief word of command, Texhard wheeled left as the second troop swung to the right. Seeing



[Photo: Exclusive News Agency]

WARRIORS ON THEIR ARAB STEEDS

[Face page 112]



what was his intention, the infantry knelt down as the horsemen swept towards them, thus giving the relieving party a better opportunity to sight the enemy. As he galloped up at the head of his troop, Texhard shouted to the kneeling men to make for the fort the moment the opportunity came.

"We'll cover your retreat," he shouted, "but for the love of Mike go to it as soon as you can."

The next moment Tuareg and trooper joined battle. Horses and camels, white men and brown, swayed together in a frantic, straining mass. Sabre clashed on sword and the cries of the wounded mingled with the screams of the camels as they struggled to escape from the *mêlée*.

Unlike the highly-trained cavalry horses, which not only act with the discipline of veterans during a fight, but appear to find a positive enjoyment in battle, the camel is a poor fighting mount, and lacks in courage all that his rider possesses.

"Ships of the Desert" the camels may be, but they are merchant ships rather than men-o'-war, and even centuries of schooling have failed to make them valuable allies when it comes to fighting.

Texhard looked hastily round, and saw that the infantry had obeyed his instructions and were even now staggering to the fort, at the gate of which a party of men, under Karvof, was waiting to receive them.

The Tuaregs fought with their customary reckless bravery, and although they lacked the discipline of the Legion, they inflicted many casualties on the little band. Texhard knew well that if he gave the signal, Karvof would dispatch another troop to

aid him, but the thought of the sneers and jibes that the Russian would pour out in commenting on his inability to deal with the Tuaregs without calling for extra assistance, made him resolve grimly to fight to the last man before giving the signal that would send aid spurring across the desert to him.

Whether the Tuaregs realised that their prey had slipped through their fingers, or whether they had no wish to engage in anything approaching a big battle, it was impossible to say; but they suddenly turned tail, as one man, and flogged their camels forward at top speed, heading for the sand dunes behind which lay their main body of troops.

"Let 'em go!" shouted Texhard, as several of the men showed signs of pursuing the Tuaregs. "We'll call it a day!"

Reluctantly the men drew rein, and Texhard ordered the two troops to re-form. Of the hundred men who had ridden out, eighteen or twenty had been killed, while almost twice that number were more or less seriously wounded. The Tuaregs themselves had suffered much more severely, and without more ado the Légionnaires set about the task of shooting those natives who still lay wounded on the field of battle. Then, picking up their own wounded, the two troops headed slowly for the fort.

"It was an expensive little trip," Baring remarked, as he drew alongside his friend.

"Sure," Texhard nodded. "But we can afford it now the advance guard of the relieving force has turned up. If we had to go on hanging about in this goldurned fort we'd need every man we could raise, for I'm prepared to bet my last dollar that

old man Tuareg is going to make one mighty big smash at us soon. Still, by then, I hope we'll be far away enjoying a spot of fun in a town where a guy can get real wine—to say nothing of real women!”

“Now that the advance guard has arrived, we can start packing up, I suppose,” Baring replied. “And I must confess that when we say good-bye to Fort Saada and all its works I shall be dashed glad. I didn't like the place when we first got here, but now I loathe the very thought of it.”

The two troops rode through the gate of the fort which was closed behind them, and Texhard, having seen that the wounded were handed over to the care of the medical staff, made his way to the orderly room to report to Karvof.

Karvof was seated at the desk formerly used by Dubois, and beside him sat a tired, grizzled man in the uniform of a sergeant of infantry. The stranger lay back in his chair, his hands shielding his face, and made no effort to move as Texhard came in. It looked as if the man were all in, and the American noticed a glass of half-finished brandy stood on the table before him.

The Russian nodded brusquely, and picking up the pen, with which he had been toying, bit angrily at the holder. Far from looking like a man who was about to hand over a difficult command to higher authority, his face had the strained, tense look of one to whom bad news has come.

“This is Sergeant Michel, of the infantry battalion, sent to relieve us,” he said in a dull monotone.

The newcomer gave not the faintest sign of having heard what Karvof had said. He continued to sit

with face buried in hands and made no effort to join in the conversation. Texhard glanced from one to the other in perplexity. That something was wrong was plain, but what exactly it was he could not tell.

Suddenly Karvof spoke again. "You saw the men who have just arrived?" he said, sharply.

"Of course. I helped to bring in the advance guard."

"That's where you're wrong!" Something of the old fire returned to Karvof's voice. "That was no advance guard you relieved out there, it was the main body!"

"Good God!" Texhard stared in blank horror at the Russian. "You mean that this handful of men is all that was sent to relieve us?"

"Not all that was sent," Karvof corrected him, "but all that reached Fort Saada!"

Leaning across the table, the Russian shook the infantry *sous-officier* roughly by the arm. "Here, you," he shouted, "pull yourself together and give Sergeant Texhard an account of what happened to you on your journey here. He has a right to know if anybody has."

The man lowered his hands and turned a face grimed with dust and sweat towards Texhard, who noticed how hollow and shrunken his cheeks were, and how tired the eyes that stared into his own with almost inhuman fixity. Taking up the glass of brandy the man gulped down the remainder of the contents in one hasty movement, then drawing the back of his hand slowly across his mouth, he sighed.

"That's better," he muttered. "*Nom d'un nom*, but I never thought to taste a drop of *eau de vie* again!"

Karvof regarded him with a sneer. "Well, you have," he said, "so now suppose you make some effort to pull yourself together and give us the facts concerning what has happened."

The other nodded. "But naturally you will want to know," he replied simply before starting his tale.

All had gone well with the relief battalion, he explained, until they were within two days' march of Fort Saada. They had pushed along at a good pace, and this had taxed the endurance of the men to such an extent that the commanding officer had decided to pitch camp about three hours earlier than was customary.

The site chosen was a large oasis nestling in a ravine of low hills and amply provided with both shade and water. After fires had been made and the first meal of the day cooked, a party of about fifty men, under the command of the junior officers, had been sent forward to the end of the ravine, three miles ahead, to act as a protective screen for the resting troops. They had seen nothing to arouse their suspicions on the way to their posts, and for two hours had carried out the usual routine of searching the neighbouring dunes for any traces of Tuaregs, but without coming on any signs of the enemy.

As dusk was drawing on, the officer in charge of the party had sent back ten men and the other officer to collect rations for the night and to report all was quiet ahead. When the party was half a mile from the oasis they had been alarmed to hear the sound of firing coming from the camp and, pressing forward to investigate, had found, to their horror, that a vast body of Tuaregs had made an encircling movement

from the direction of the high foothills on the right and had fallen upon the battalion before the sentries had time to give a warning.

So sudden and so determined had been the attack that the tired infantry had been unable to form up in any sort of order before the natives were upon them. After a short, bloody struggle, in which the Tuaregs outnumbered their enemies by at least ten men to one, the battalion had been completely wiped out.

The shots the returning troops had heard were the last to be fired by the little band of men who had survived the carnage. As they crept cautiously toward the camp a silence, ominous in its completeness, fell on the oasis, and they realised that to advance nearer would be to share the fate of their comrades.

At the command of the lieutenant in charge, they turned round and began a cautious retirement in the direction of the main body of the advance guard. But, careful though they were, their movement was spotted by the native scouts who, mounted on their fast-moving camels, spurred forward to complete the massacre. Realising the danger in which the rest of the advance guard stood, the officer ordered two of the fittest and sturdiest of his men to return with all speed and warn the others; then, with the few remaining to him, he had barred the way down the ravine. How long he and his gallant party had been able to hold out it was impossible to say, but the two messengers were able to reach the rest of their comrades in safety.

It was obvious that the only thing to do was to

press forward to Fort Saada as fast as they could, and this the officer commanding the outpost decided to do. Whether the Tuaregs would be content to rest where they were for a little, under the impression that there were no more survivors, was a matter that time only could settle, but in the direction of the fort lay their salvation and so, tired and hungry, the little band formed up and pressed doggedly ahead.

For a time fortune favoured them. Of the Tuaregs there was no sign, but to delay would be to court too grave a risk, and so they advanced by forced marches, never knowing from one hour to the next when the dreaded figures of the veiled warriors of the desert might appear on the skyline and swoop down upon them. Parched with thirst, blistered by the scorching rays of the sun, they struggled on with steps that grew weaker, but buoyed up by the knowledge that once they reached the shelter of the fort they would be able to rest in safety once more.

They were about three miles from their goal when the blow fell. Exhausted, they had flung themselves down in the shelter of an oasis to snatch an hour's rest, when the sight of mounted Tuaregs brought them staggering to their feet again. Some fifteen natives were approaching the oasis, and at any moment would discover the exhausted band of survivors.

If the natives once saw them and were allowed to return for reinforcements, there would be no hope. Loading their rifles they waited until the enemy were close upon them, then opened a heavy fire, which the Tuaregs quickly returned. It was this

firing which had alarmed the garrison of Fort Saada the previous night.

Twelve of the Tuaregs fell beneath the bullets of the Légionnaires, but the remaining three wheeled rapidly about and escaped in the darkness. Not even pausing to bury the four comrades who had lost their lives in the skirmish, the remainder, throwing away everything except their rifles and ten rounds of ammunition a man, set off once more on their trek to the fort. As they drew nearer to their objective without further signs of the enemy they felt their heroic efforts were to be rewarded, but with the fort less than a mile away their hopes were shattered. Over the low hill which they had just breasted, appeared the advance guard of the Tuaregs, and the white men, realising that now all was indeed lost, loaded their rifles and prepared to do battle for the last time. Then their plight had been seen by those in the fort, and with the arrival of Texhard and his troops, their perils were over for the time being.

Texhard turned to Karvof, when the sergeant had finished speaking, and Karvof shrugged his shoulders. It needed no words to express what was passing through the minds of the two men. After long days of suffering the relief had arrived, but so reduced in numbers and shattered in physique that there was no hope of being able to vacate the fort. It was as though no one had come to this lonely outpost of the French colonial empire to release the defenders from their all too long trial.

At last Karvof got to his feet and nodded toward the infantryman, who had now relapsed into a stupefied silence.



"Look after this fellow," he ordered, "and I'll go and have a word with the rest of the survivors."

On the instructions of Karvof the new arrivals had been accommodated in one of the huts over which a guard had been posted to prevent the other men in the fort from mixing with them. Although the reason for this step had been given as being in the best interests of the survivors, who would need all the rest and quiet they could get after their ordeal in the desert, the real reason for the segregation was very different.

No one knew better than the Russian that once the news spread that the longed-for relief could not take place for at least three months, trouble of a serious nature would be sure to arise. In the hope of staving it off until he could lay some plans to cope with it, Karvof was anxious that the new arrivals should have as little chance as possible to fan the flames of discontent with their stories of the misfortunes that had overtaken their comrades.

Three years ago, the Fourth Squadron had occupied lines next to the infantry battalion which constituted the relief, and Karvof had made several friends among the men. If he could talk to them and get them on his side before they had a chance to learn of his unpopularity in the fort, his position would be considerably strengthened, as he well knew.

Consequently, he went to much trouble to flatter and cajole the survivors, for whom he ordered extra rations to be prepared. Luck favoured him to a great extent, for he found several men whom he remembered from the old days, and he did not delay in appealing to their sympathies.

"I can't tell you how thankful I am to have some real soldiers here with me at last," he said, as he took his seat at one of the long tables. "Instead of real men like you, I've had to cope with a lot of weak-kneed gutter sweepings who are no more use than a bunch of blind imbeciles when it comes to a crisis. But with you to back me up, things will be very different here in Saada, and I can promise that you won't suffer by giving me your support."

To hear a *sous-officier* compare his own unit unfavourably with a strange one, is almost unheard of in the Legion, where rivalry is keen to a fault, and many of his listeners looked at the Russian curiously as he continued to harp on his theme. However, human nature being what it is, the thought uppermost in the minds of most of these men was that instead of being regarded as a nuisance by those in authority, they appeared to be in the happy position of being very much in favour with the man who was in command. And they were too much of old campaigners to query the unexpected stroke of good fortune that had come their way.

Well satisfied with the result of his interview, Karvof left the infantrymen to get what rest they might, and set off across the parade ground in the direction of the officers' quarters. He had not walked fifty yards before a crowd of shouting, gesticulating Légionnaires came pouring out of the canteen and headed towards him.

Karvof halted and stood motionless as the crowd of angry men surged nearer. Then he suddenly let out a bellow of anger so fierce that the men halted instinctively.

"What do you scum mean by creating this infernal row?" he raged. "Do you imagine you're back in the zoos from which you came that you can behave like this? Back to your huts the whole damned lot of you or it'll be the worse for you."

Sullen and muttering, the men stood their ground, and Karvof's hand dropped to the holster of his revolver. "Mutiny, eh?" he growled. "Well, we'll see who is to come out on top, my fine friends."

"Take it easy, Sergeant," one of the men advised him. "Suppose you listen to what we've got to say before losing your temper?"

Seeing the men meant business, Karvof temporised. "If you've anything to say, say it in an orderly manner," he growled, "instead of acting like a lot of hysterical schoolgirls."

"Perhaps you'll tell us if that handful of men that arrived to-day is the advance guard or all the relief?"

Karvof realised it would be useless to bluff any longer, and now that he had the new-comers on his side he determined to take the bull by the horns. In a few sharp sentences he told the men the truth about their predicament; then, before they had time to utter a word of protest, he pointed to the hut from which he had come.

"If you don't believe me," he snapped, "you are at liberty to ask the men in there. Only I warn you they are behind me to a man, and if any of you imagine you'll make things better by kicking up a fuss over what can't be remedied, you'll find I am strong enough to deal with you as you deserve. Here we are and here we must remain till we can get word back to Headquarters. I hold the upper hand remember."

"How do you mean?" growled the ringleader of the party of men.

"Any trouble, and I shall destroy the wireless," Karvof retorted. "As you know, that is our only hope of getting into communication with the outside world, and as soon as it is repaired messages will be sent. But I warn you that if you try any of your mutinous tricks on me, rather than let you get your own way I shall destroy your last chance of rescue!"

The men turned away muttering, and slouched back to their quarters. Karvof, as they knew, was a man who would stop at nothing to get his own ends, and if it suited him to abandon them all to the Tuaregs, abandon them he would.

He had called their bluff for the moment, but the knowledge that he had done so served merely to increase their discontent. Trouble hung in the very air, and the men, who but a short time ago, were so full of optimism, now walked about with dragging steps and sullen looks that boded ill for the future.

## CHAPTER VIII

### REUNION

IF Karvof had been deliberately trying to stir up bad feeling between the newcomers and the men of the Fourth Squadron, he was doomed to see his efforts fail. There is a camaraderie among the men of the Legion that is seen at its best at times of crisis, and the efforts of the Russian to antagonize the newcomers to the rest of the garrison met with but little success.

Those of the infantry who were old cronies of Karvof's, naturally rallied to his side, prompted as much by the hope of favours to come as by any real respect for him, but the majority of the men wisely refused to be bluffed by his promises, and it was not long before they were chatting with their cavalry colleagues like old friends. Naturally the full story of Karvof's duplicity soon became known, and as the news spread through the fort, resentment at his conduct grew greater every moment.

Early the following morning, Texhard sought out Duncan Baring and told him of Karvof's stupid attempt to stir up trouble in the fort.

"I sure am worried," he confided; "things are just about as bad as they can be and then along comes this four-flushing son of Satan and does his best to make them a hundred times worse! What poor

old Dubois would have said to all this, I'm durned if I know."

"Well, from what you tell me," rejoined Baring, "the newcomers seem to be a pretty decent bunch on the whole—although I wish there were more of them! Still, if you can't have quantity, you might as well have quality. I've been too busy to give them the once-over yet, but if you're going along to their hut, I'll come with you."

Texhard nodded. "Sure," he replied, leading the way out to the square. "I'm going there right now, so come on, buddy."

They strolled toward the hut, but before they had half covered the distance, the Englishman suddenly grasped his friend's arm.

"Look!" he exclaimed, and pointed to the door of the hut.

The American shook himself free. "What the heck's the matter with you?" he demanded, tersely. "Have you never seen a flat-footed infantryman before?"

"But who is he?" Baring gazed at the man who had appeared in the doorway, and now stood, pipe in mouth, gazing round the parade ground in idle curiosity.

"Better ask him, since you're so het up about it," the American suggested.

Baring hurried across the parade ground, shook hands heartily with the infantryman, and the next moment was deep in conversation with him. The two men were so absorbed in what they were saying that they paid not the slightest attention to Texhard or anyone else. They stood whispering to each

other as though state secrets of the utmost importance were being exchanged.

"Say," exclaimed the American, his patience exhausted, "I hate to burst in on a meeting of the local branch of the Ku Klux Klan or anything like that, but don't you think you might admit me to the secret society? It's kind of lonesome standing about here!"

Baring turned abruptly, and Texhard was impressed by the change that had come over him. No longer had he that look of reserve which had been so conspicuous in him; his face beamed, and his eyes shone with an animation his friend had never seen in them before.

"Texas, old man," the Englishman cried. "I want you to meet my cousin, Andrew Chawner."

Texhard shook hands with the good-looking young man. He noticed that he lacked the hard-bitten appearance which comes to Légionnaires who have years of service to their credit. His skin was not yet burnt to that deep shade of mahogany which is the result of many months of campaigning under the African sun, and his hands, though strong and firm, had not acquired the roughness born of much manual work.

"*Some* coincidence," he said, as they smiled.

The newcomer shook his head. "Not such a coincidence as you might suppose, Sergeant," he retorted. "As a matter of fact, I've been looking for my cousin for a long time."

"Well, I've heard of some mighty strange hobbies in my day," Texhard laughed, "but this is something new on me. I guess there's not many English families

who join up in the Legion just to hold one of their domestic reunions!"

Andrew Chawner's face became grave. "I assure you it was not just a merry jaunt that brought me to Africa," he said, seriously. He turned to his cousin. "Go on, Duncan, tell him about it."

Baring pondered for a moment. "I suppose I'd better," he said, a little dubiously. He turned to Texhard. "It'll be just as well if you get the facts about the whole business straight away from me."

"About two years ago, I was involved in a scandal that created something of a stir at the time. Andrew here has always been a heavy gambler and the parties he used to give at his flat were pretty hectic. Well, one night he rang me up and asked me to make a point of coming along as there was the prospect of some high play, and knowing I'm fond of a flutter he thought he could promise me an interesting evening. I went along at about midnight and I certainly got all the interest I wanted, *and* a lot over!

"Roulette was being played and I found myself sitting at the table next to a girl who was one of the most conspicuous members of that bunch of young things who seem to spend their lives dashing from one cocktail party to another, and getting into a lot of stupid scrapes in between times.

"I'd very little use for that type of waster of either sex, but I'd met her at dances and at Ranelagh during the season, and I did my best to be pleasant. A big crowd was playing and every seat was filled, but people stood two or three deep behind the chairs and put their stakes on the table by reaching over our shoulders. When I really get down to a game,



Tex, I don't have time to worry what my neighbours are doing, but I *did* notice that the girl next to me was having pretty rotten luck. She was obviously not the sort to chance a small amount on the even chances—that sort of play, I suppose, may be good enough for old dowagers flitting tamely from *rouge* to *noir*, *pair* to *impair*, and *reste* to *manque*, but it had not got the kick demanded by people of her type.

“The girl seemed to be concentrating on one number, putting on the full amount *en plein*, and fairly plastering the table all round the same number. Twice she bought fresh stacks of chips within an hour. Her luck appeared to be dead out, and knowing she was by no means wealthy I wondered how much longer she'd stand the pace before she cracked. Suddenly, Tex, she shot out her hand and collared the pile of counters the croupier was pushing across to me after a particularly successful *coup*.”

“Now I've played enough roulette to know this sort of thing is liable to happen at any table, but naturally I wasn't going to see her snaffle my winnings without protesting.

“‘I think there's some mistake,’ I said. ‘Those chips are mine.’

“I wasn't optimist enough to expect her to return them, but what she actually did, surprised me. She turned round and called to a lanky young fellow behind us: ‘Archie, come here and teach this swine a lesson. He's just accused me of cheating!’

“I protested that I hadn't said any such thing, but the young fellow had obviously had more champagne than was good for him, and he came barging through the crowd. Before anyone could stop him, he'd

grabbed me by the collar of my tail coat. 'You filthy liar,' he shouted, and before I could even get to my feet he'd landed me a punch on the side of the jaw.

"That got me to my feet, I can tell you! Andrew and a few of the other men grabbed hold of us and hustled us out into the hall before we had a chance to do any rough-housing, and the professional croupier, who'd been hired for the evening, got busy with the next spin.

"I told the young fool to put his fists up, and he flung himself at me. I let him have it then as hard as I could, and my fist caught him straight on the point, just as he came rushing in with his arms waving about like windmills. He gave a sort of choking yell and swinging on his heel, spun sideways and crashed to the floor, catching his head an appalling crack on the edge of a heavy bookcase, as he dropped.

"He lay absolutely still, and when someone bent down to examine him the man's face turned as white as that of the fallen man. 'Good heavens!' he gasped. 'You're for it this time, Baring. You've killed the blighter!'

"Like a fool I lost my head. Instead of sticking it out and taking what was coming to me, I grabbed my hat and coat and bolted out of the flat. My car was just round the corner, and I drove hell-for-leather down to Lee-on-Solent where I kept a fast racing motor-boat. Every minute I expected to be stopped by the police, but my luck held and I reached Lee in safety.

"Luckily I kept an old suit of clothes down there for wearing when I messed about with the boat. I dumped my evening kit on the foreshore, scribbled

a hasty note to Andrew saying I was fed up with life and going to take the coward's way out. I stuck it in the car. Then I got the boat going and with lights out, headed for the French coast.

"I landed on a deserted spot somewhere in Brittany, and then pushed the boat's nose round, and leaning inboard started the engines and gave her a shove. She headed a shaky course out to sea again.

"About my only assets were fluent French and polo-playing, in those days, and at least the language has been of some use to me. I managed to get on board a tramp steamer going to Marseilles and to change a little money. The skipper wasn't too particular as I had the cash, and I managed to reach the port without much trouble. It wasn't long before I reached the recruiting centre for the Legion and enlisted.

"From there on, you know the rest, Texas."

Andrew took up his cousin's story. He turned to the American who was an interested audience.

"It turned out a rotten business," he said. "We really thought that young fool was going to die. It was touch and go for weeks, and the police sat by his bedside ready to take his statement as soon as he was conscious. But when he came to, I must say he did the sporting thing. He told them frankly what had happened, said he was so drunk that he fell down and cracked his head against the bookcase without anyone having touched him. Of course they didn't believe him, but he stuck to his story, and they had to accept it.

"Naturally the Press got busy on one of their campaigns against gambling, so it wasn't long before

I was generally barred. I can't say I blame people. I've always been a gambler and I suppose I always shall be, so it's no use whining when the cards are against you. But what troubled me more than anything was the thought of Duncan having committed suicide. I felt pretty miserable about it.

"One day I met a fellow just back from the Near East who swore he'd seen Duncan walking down a street in Algiers and wearing the uniform of the Legion. I made enquiries, but couldn't get any confirmation of the story. I began to think it was the result of imagination when, quite by accident, I chanced to pick up an illustrated magazine containing an article on life in the Legion. Among the pictures accompanying it was one showing a troop of cavalry riding out of barracks, and there, right in the front, was unmistakably Duncan.

"I was faced with the problem of how to get in touch with him. I guessed he'd joined under another name. Life was becoming daily more unpleasant for me, and then I had the idea of joining the Legion myself. No stupid ideas about glory and romance, you know, but there did seem not only an escape from my own rather miserable surroundings, but a chance of running my cousin to earth and telling him that all is in order for him at home. Well, here I am—or rather, what's left of me after that infernal trek across the desert—and glad to be able to set Duncan's mind at rest."

Texhard smiled cheerfully at the cousins. "Well, I'm glad that at least two guys here have something to be happy about. As far as I'm concerned I don't expect ever to smile again. That's what this durned

fort is doing to me; robbing me of my sweet, sunny nature! And talking of sunny natures, here comes the big shot. Scram before he collars you for any extra pleasant fatigue."

With a nod and a smile the two men hurried away as Karvof came striding up to Texhard.

"Since those fools of foot-sloggers allowed the Tuaregs to cut them up," he growled, "we can be sure that the natives are on their toes and thirsting to have another smack at us. We must find out what they're up to, so I intend to send out a patrol this evening to get some idea of the strength and probable line of attack of the enemy."

"D'you think it safe to risk any more lives?" Texhard asked. "It's an absolute cert. these niggers mean to have another go at us, and when they do we'll need every durned guy we can raise if we're going to keep them from bagging the fort."

Karvof snorted. "What a white-livered coward you are!" he retorted. "I suppose you'd be quite ready to sit on here in the fort without lifting a finger to find out what the enemy are doing."

"I wouldn't waste valuable lives unnecessarily!"

Texhard stared coolly back into the red, angry face of the Russian. "Still," he continued, "if you want to make the men run the risk, that's your business."

"Yes, and it's *your* business to carry out the orders of your superiors without arguing," snapped Karvof.

Texhard checked a retort. Nothing was to be gained by quarrelling with Karvof, who would only seize on a row as an excuse to make things more unpleasant. "Well," he said, as he turned

away, "it's your own pidgeon, but for the love of Mike don't say that I'd anything to do with it if the patrol runs into trouble!"

Shortly after dusk had fallen, ten men, under two corporals, slipped quietly out of the fort by the small gate at the back. Their duties, as outlined by Karvof, were clear. They were to approach as near the Tuareg outposts as possible and try to note the strength of the enemy, any unusual signs of activity in the lines, and other points which would be of assistance to the garrison in preparing for the attack. In no circumstances were they to remain out for more than three hours, and in the event of being attacked, were to make for the fort with all speed and not stop to engage the enemy.

The rest of the defenders waited anxiously for any sounds that might indicate that their comrades had fallen foul of the Tuareg outposts, but to their relief all was quiet. Apart from the usual desultory fire from the sand dunes nothing occurred to suggest that any enemy were within miles of the fort.

Shortly before midnight, at which hour the patrol was due back, Karvof posted two sentries at the small gate with orders to open it as soon as they sighted the party returning. Midnight came and went without any sign of the patrol and when some two more hours had gone by without any trace of the men, Karvof began also to show signs of the concern affecting the defenders of the fort.

Muttering angrily to himself, he strode up and down the parapet, pausing occasionally to turn his night glasses in the direction from which the patrol might be expected to return. At last he climbed

down from the firestep and strode across to the men's quarters. The babble of excited talk died away as he appeared in the doorway, and an uneasy silence followed.

Closing the door behind him, and resting his back against the portal, he stared round the hut. No man broke the silence. Finally he roared: "Well, are you all struck dumb? A moment ago you were making enough noise to waken the dead; now you stand looking like a lot of damned gargoyles. What the hell's the matter?"

One of the men stepped forward. "Is there any news of the patrol, Sergeant?" he asked.

"So that's what's worrying you, is it?" Karvof demanded. "Well, I'll set your minds—or what passes for them—at rest. There *is* no news of the patrol because doubtless the fools have disobeyed my orders and run their heads into trouble."

A low angry muttering broke out among the men. It was obvious they resented the Russian's callous reference to their comrades, and they were no longer at pains to hide their feelings from the tyrant who was making their lives a hell.

"It's easy to give orders," shouted a man from the back of the crowd. "Why don't you try practising what you preach, for a change?"

Karvof's hand shot up demanding silence. "So some of you knock-kneed washerwomen think I can only talk, do you? Well, you'll soon know better! I'm taking a patrol myself in half an hour and six of you loud-mouthed windbags are going with me. If I thought there was a single decent soldier among you, I'd detail my own men, but as you're nothing

but a pack of useless washerwomen it means nothing to me which of you come—settle it among yourselves.”

He turned on his heel and strode out of the room without a backward glance, cunningly leaving the men to argue it out among themselves.

True to his word Karvof duly set out half an hour later with his sullen, cowed escort, leaving the fort in charge of Texhard.

When the Russian and his men had disappeared into the night, Texhard sought out the sergeant of the infantry battalion and having arranged for his men to share in the fatigue and sentry duties of the garrison, questioned him concerning the amount of ammunition the new-comers had brought with them. The information was far from reassuring.

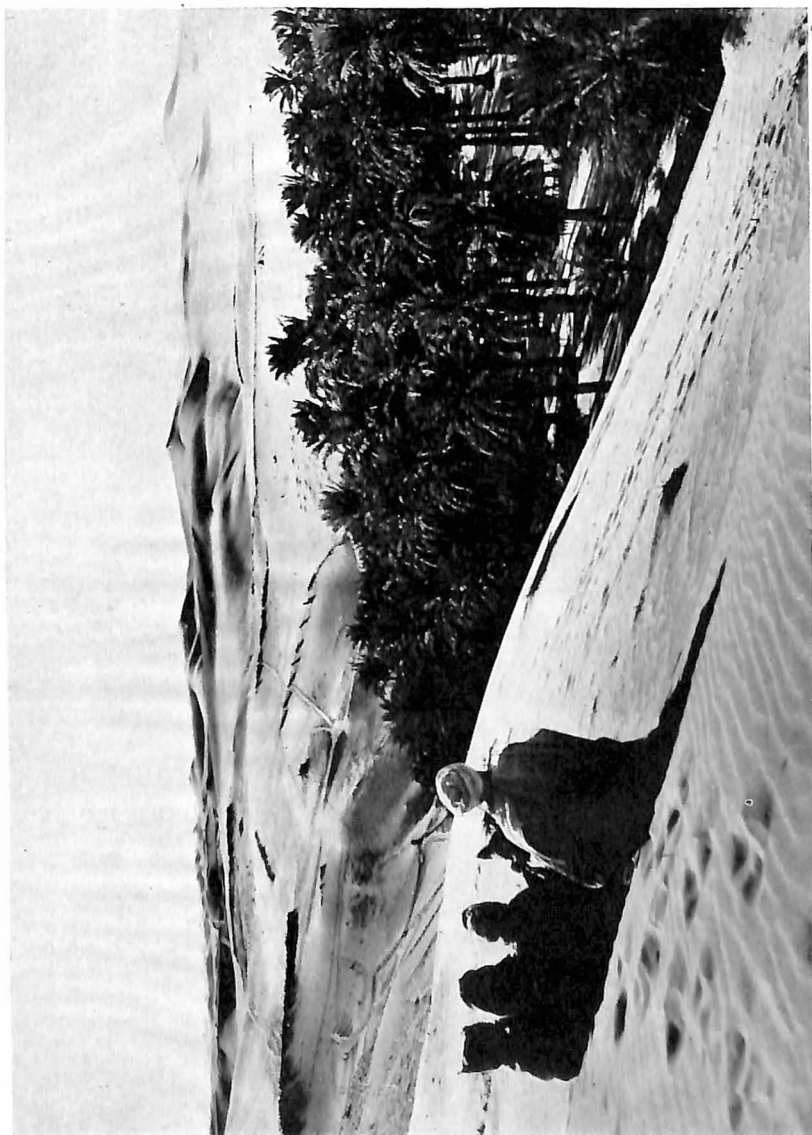
“By the time we reached here,” explained the sergeant, “we’d not more than ten rounds per man. The main bulk of the ammunition was in the waggons, of course, which the Tuaregs captured. I’ll get my men together and check up on the amount so you can know exactly. Is it very important?”

“It sure is,” Texhard answered. “Our own supply must be running very low and the chances are we’ve not got more than enough to last for one big engagement. But I’m having it checked right away. I don’t mean to take any chances.”

Leaving the infantry *sous-officier* to carry on with his task, the American detailed a corporal and six men to go into the store where the ammunition was kept, and make a careful check on what was there. Then he set out on a round of the sentries.

The men were jumpy, and on every one of them





[Photo: Exclusive News Agency

“MEN MOVING ABOUT JUST IN FRONT OF THE OASIS”

he impressed the importance of conserving their fire as much as possible.

"There are a lot of our men out there." He nodded to the desert. "At night it's easy to mistake one of your own comrades for the enemy, especially if your nerves are jumpy, so even at the risk of allowing a Tuareg to get within close range, hold your fire. If you see anything suspicious, send for me. I'll be around here till the patrols return."

Two hours later an excited orderly raced to the corner of the parade ground where the American stood talking to a group of men who had just been relieved from duty on the parapet.

"Men moving about just in front of the oasis, Sergeant," he exclaimed. "We're sure they're Tuaregs. Shall we open fire?"

"The first man to do so will find himself clapped in clink before he can say 'peanuts!'" retorted Texhard. "I'll be right over to take a dekkko myself."

The moon was starting on its nocturnal ride as Texhard peered over the parapet, but the light was not yet strong enough to make visibility clear. As he stared, he fancied he saw some shadowy figures coming slowly in the direction of the fort, but at night trees and bushes can take on the semblance of moving figures, and the familiar objects of the daytime appear by night in new and sinister guise.

"Be prepared to open fire at my word," he whispered to the sentries on each side of him, "but do nothing till you get the command."

He stared again toward the oasis, and now distinctly picked out the forms of stealthily moving figures. Instinct prompted him to run no risks but

to open fire at once, for Karvof and his men were not expected from that direction, but he reasoned to himself that if the Tuaregs were planning a surprise attack they would scarcely have waited until the moon rose, making themselves a better mark for the sentries.

Several minutes dragged slowly by, then came a low whistle from the shadowy figures. "It's all right," he called, "they're our men."

Hurrying over to the main gate, Texhard ordered it to be opened slightly, and a few moments later Karvof slipped through followed by his patrol. Without exchanging greetings, the Russian took Texhard by the arm and walked with him across the parade ground to the main office. Flinging off his equipment, he sank into a chair and ordered the sentry at the door to fetch him a bottle of wine. Not before he had gulped down a tumbler of the rough red wine, did he speak. Then, resting his elbows on the table, he nodded slowly at his colleague.

"Well, my friend," he said, "you may as well know that we're for it with a vengeance."

Texhard made no reply, but waited patiently for the rest.

"We came across traces of the first patrol about two kilometres to the west of the fort. Some rifles and pieces of equipment lying in a dip of the ground were enough to show us that the fools had allowed themselves to be surprised by a raiding party and carried off before they could put up a fight. I didn't hang about the spot longer than I could help, it isn't a healthy locality. The scum I took with me wanted to go to rescue their comrades, but I knocked some

common sense into them with the toe of my boot, then we pushed on, heading a little north to come up with the main camel route. Sure enough, we'd not been there ten minutes when along came a big *harke*. It was hundreds strong, and the men were well armed. You know what that means. They're joining their friends out in front there, and as soon as they've reorganised they'll attack the fort."

"Then I suppose the Tuaregs will get busy some time to-night or to-morrow at the latest," Texhard said, thoughtfully. "In some ways I suppose it'll be just as well to get the business over and done with. We can't go on holding out here much longer. We're already on half rations, the sickness and fever are growing worse every darned minute, and not long ago the medical sergeant told me that the two junior officers are likely to pass in their checks to-night."

"To hell with officers," replied Karvof. "At present they're only a burden, taking the time of the medical orderlies who ought to be looking after the wounded. Good riddance to both of them, I say!"

Texhard ignored the Russian's outburst. "What is the most worrying thing is the shortage of ammunition," he commented. "I've got men on to the checking up-how we stand, and I expect a report at any moment, but from what I gather we're right up against it. If we've enough to see us through one more big engagement we'll be mighty lucky."

Karvof laughed harshly. "My friend," he sneered, "if any of us are in a position to use ammunition or anything else after the next attack, we'll be walking miracles!"

To Texhard it was evident that the Russian was

in one of those moods of reckless despair when he was liable to do anything. On the man's ability to control his emotions and present a calm front to the defenders very much depended. The American did all he could to steady him down.

"Whatever we feel," he remarked, quietly, "we must bottle up in front of the men."

"Do you think they're such fools as not to realize the true position?" he retorted.

"Whether they do or not, it won't help matters by showing them you're a coward."

Texhard's words had the effect for which he hoped. Leaping to his feet, Karvof stood glowering down at the other man who remained quietly in his chair.

"No man calls me a coward and gets away with it," he stormed. "I'll teach you——"

He broke off abruptly. A corporal stood in the doorway.

"What do *you* want?" he shouted.

The man ignored Karvof and turned to Texhard.

"I've checked up on the ammunition," he said.

"Well, how do we break?"

"No more than fifty rounds per man remain," he replied gravely.

## CHAPTER IX

### CARNAGE

THE night was nearly over. In half an hour the first streaks of dawn would appear in the sky to herald a day which, for many of the three hundred men in the fort, was to be their last upon this earth.

Drawn up in hollow square on the parade ground were the whole of the garrison except the sentries, who still peered through red, tired eyes towards the Tuareg encampment. In the centre of the square stood Karvof, Texhard and the infantry sergeant, all wearing battle equipment.

At a word from the Russian the men stood easy and waited with dull, expressionless faces for him to speak. Silently he paced up and down, his head thrust forward and hands clasped behind his back, but at last he came to a halt and cleared his throat.

"Attend to me, all of you," he began. "We learnt last night that the Tuaregs have received heavy reinforcements which mean, of course, they are planning a big attack. Just when that attack will take place it is impossible to say, but it can't be long delayed. I want to impress on every one of you the vital necessity of giving these lousy brutes a lesson they won't forget. Smash them up and we'll have a chance of getting away from here alive, but unless you make a clean job of it we haven't a dog's chance.

"There's another thing. The question of ammunition. There's barely enough left to see us through one more engagement, and it's vital you don't waste it in wild firing. Some of you haven't the brains of a louse when it comes to keeping your heads, but I tell you this, if I find anyone disobeying orders in this matter I shall shoot him like a dog! It's the duty of every one of you to think of doing more than just saving your own dirty hides. Don't forget what I've said.

"That's all now. Fall out, and be ready to stand-to at a moment's notice. I don't think you'll have long to wait," he added sotto voce, as the men moved silently away to their own quarters.

The three senior *sous-officiers* took up their stations on the parapet and made sure the sentries were keeping their eyes skinned to note any unusual activity on the part of the enemy. Apart from an occasional bullet that spat its way overhead, or thudded against the wall of the fort, all was quiet. The red glow of the Tuaregs' camp fires flickered against the starry background of the sky, giving proof that the enemy was still in the immediate vicinity, but apart from an occasional angry squeal of a camel, no other sound came from the direction of the dunes behind which the Tuareg forces encamped.

"A hell of a life this is, I'll tell the world," muttered Texhard, as he stared across the desert, leaning his elbows on the parapet. "Much more of this sort of thing and I'll go crackers." The darkness slowly changed to that vague twilight which heralds an Eastern morning. "'Came the dawn,' as those

dear old silent movies used to inform us," he mused. "Hullo!" His form stiffened. "Came brother Tuareg, too, or I'm a Dutchman!"

The notes of the "Alarm" sounded from the observation post by the main gate, and the defenders came running to take up their stations along the walls.

In the swiftly-strengthening light appeared a vast horde of white robed men mounted on their native fighting camels. Yelling like fiends, they swept down upon the fort, from which, as yet, no shot had been fired. The advancing Tuaregs were within a hundred yards of the walls when a whistle sounded a sharp blast, and the next moment the rifles of the defenders barked their defiance.

At so short a range, it was almost impossible for the bullets to miss their mark, and as the rain of lead poured into the ranks of the Tuaregs, their leading line became a shambles of struggling men and screaming camels. Without pausing for a moment to avoid the men and beasts, the succeeding ranks of the natives swept forward in wave upon wave which carried them to the foot of the walls.

Leaping from their camels, the first attackers flung themselves at the stone defences in a mad, reckless abandon, searching wildly for any foothold that would enable them to scale the obstacle. The carnage became terrible as the Légionnaires, leaning over the parapet, poured round upon round into the attacking hordes until their rifles were red-hot to the touch, and the reek of cordite became almost overpowering. But still the Tuaregs swarmed forward; the very presence of their dead assisted them, for,



using the bodies as platforms, they piled the corpses against the walls and clambered over the still warm figures in a frantic struggle to scale the wall.

A small party, more resourceful and daring than their fellows, succeeded in reaching the top of the wall. Texhard, who was standing near, threw down the rifle he had been using, and drew his revolver.

"Give them a taste of cold steel, men!" he yelled, and emptied his automatic into their ranks before picking up the rifle again and charging forward with the bayonet gleaming in the first rays of the sun. The troopers drew their sabres and flung themselves on the enemy; gasping, panting and swearing, they hacked at the white-robed figures who were wielding their sharp, curved knives with terrible effect.

Close behind Texhard, Duncan Baring joined battle with a huge native who, with his robes gathered round his waist to give freer play, was giving as good as he was taking. But Baring made a quick feint, and before his opponent could regain his balance, brought his sabre whistling down on the other's head. At the same moment, another attacker, who had crept up behind, drew back his arm to plunge his sword into the Englishman's back.

Almost without thinking, Texhard flung himself on the Tuareg and together they rolled on the ground from the firestep, struggling viciously. The native twisting round with the litheness of a snake, managed to get his hands to Texhard's throat. Relentlessly the hard, brown fingers fastened round his windpipe and two evil eyes glared into his face from above the half-veil covering the man's mouth and nose.

As he felt the breath being squeezed out of his wind-pipe, Texhard clawed wildly to get a hold on his attacker, but the man was far too clever for him, and as the pressure increased and stars danced before his straining eyes, Texhard gave himself up for lost.

Then, something whirled past the American's head and as a dull, crunching thud sounded in his ears, the Tuareg relaxed his grip and fell across his body, blood pouring from his head which had been smashed almost to pulp from the blow. Panting and gasping, Texhard rolled clear and struggled to his knees. Beside him stood the infantry sergeant, a grin on his lean face.

"Come along, *mon ami*," he exclaimed, putting an arm round the American and lifting him bodily to his feet. "This is no time to settle down for a quiet nap!"

Texhard attempted to mutter a few words of thanks, but the other cut him short.

"No time to present bouquets," he exclaimed. "That can wait till we've got these black devils out of the fort."

Baring joined the two men. "All right, Tex?" he enquired, anxiously.

Texhard reassured him, and dashed off again into the thick of the fighting.

Baring and the infantry sergeant looked round. Although some hundred of the Tuaregs had managed to fight their way into the fort, and were even now advancing on the group of *Légionnaires* who stood with their backs to the door leading to the living quarters, no further ingress appeared to have been made.

The sergeant nodded to the post beside the main gate. "We have those lads to thank for keeping most of the enemy out," he said.

Baring glanced up at the wall. The machine gun section had swung their gun round so that it enfiladed the line of attackers and was now pouring fire into their ranks. Even as the two men watched, one of the gun crew threw up his arms and crashed backward on to the parade ground, but almost before he touched the ground, one of the reserves, sheltering in the lee of the wall, had clambered up to take his place and carry on.

"They have courage, those little ones," muttered the sergeant. "*Le bon Dieu* grant they may not have made their sacrifices in vain!"

He dashed across the parade ground to the party of Tuaregs, while at his heels followed some ten or twelve Légionnaires, Baring amongst them. As the attackers turned to face this new danger, the sergeant yelled, "Down on your faces, all of you. Down, down!"

He flung himself flat on the ground, and his companions followed his example. Immediately the men standing by the door opened a rapid fire on the Tuaregs who, having seen that there were two groups of Légionnaires confronting each other, assumed that the defenders would not use their rifles for fear of hitting some of their colleagues.

The ruse succeeded, for, as the last shot echoed round the square, the men lying prone raised their heads and saw that not one Tuareg was left standing. Scrambling hastily to their feet, they fell upon the invaders, bayoneting or bludgeoning all who were

still living. Then, at a word of command from the sergeant, both parties raced across the parade ground to reinforce their colleagues on the firestep."

Looking over the parapet, Baring saw a sight of horror. At the foot of the wall lay the mangled bodies of hundreds of men and beasts, abandoned by their comrades who were even now retiring in disorder. The cries from the wounded were ghastly and the stench of newly-shed blood overpowering, but the defenders had eyes for nothing now save the retreating host of Tuaregs.

The "Cease Fire" sounded, and, panting and gasping, the survivors leant on their arms and for the first time had the opportunity of taking stock of the situation within the fort. Dead Légionnaires and Tuaregs lay in huddled heaps everywhere, and round, or over their silent forms crawled wounded men, seeking to escape from the heat of the sun to find shelter and aid in the medical hut which was now crowded to suffocation.

The canteen had been hastily converted into an auxiliary dressing station, and Joan Lexham, with the other women of the fort, was busy applying dressings, and washing the wounds of the injured men, who were pitifully grateful for even the rough and ready assistance such unskilled workers could render.

Karvof, a blood-soaked bandage tied tightly round the upper part of his left arm, which had been grazed by a native bullet, sought out the medical sergeant.

"Never mind about the seriously wounded," he said. "The women must look after them as best

they can. Your job is to patch up the slightly injured, sufficiently to enable them to return to duty when the next attack is launched."

The other wiped the back of his hand across his face, down which the sweat poured, and glanced down instinctively at the blood-soaked apron he wore.

"Very good," he muttered. "It's hard on those poor ones who are badly wounded, *mais c'est la guerre*. What's the use of patching up men merely for them to be massacred by the Tuaregs!"

The Russian turned away. Then, as a thought struck him, he called over his shoulder. "You'd better get a move on. When the next attack starts I shall need every man of your section to be up on the parapet with the rest of the defenders."

Leaving the sergeant to urge his men on at an even greater pace, the Russian crossed to where Texhard was carrying out a hasty examination of the defences. The Tuareg fire had pierced many of the sandbags which lined the top of the parapet and it would be essential to repair the damage before another attack was launched.

On catching sight of the Russian, Texhard turned to him, a rueful smile on his drawn face. "Those durned niggers sure have made a mess of things," he said, pointing to the nearly emptied sandbags.

Karvof inspected the damage carefully. When he had concluded his inspection, he shook his head. "There's too much work needed on those sandbags to get it done in reasonable time," he said. "What do you propose to do?"

Texhard shook his head. "It's a real problem!" he answered.

Karvof laughed. "A real problem!" he mimicked. "What the devil Dubois wanted to promote a half-wit like you for, passes my understanding!"

Turning to a passing corporal, he called to him and ordered him to collect a fatigue party of ten men to collect all the dead Tuaregs they could find. As the men started work on his unwelcome task, Karvof turned again to the American.

"There are your sandbags," he said. "There's nothing like a few corpses to prevent others becoming dead 'uns also. They'll stop bullets as well as anything else, and the sight of their dear brothers making themselves useful will make the Tuaregs realize what they're up against! Now, Texhard," he went on, "just to help you to remember what sandbags are made of in Saada, you'll supervise the arranging of these dusky gentlemen in the best positions. Don't be long about it, because I want you to check up on the ammunition supply as soon as you've finished."

With a curt nod he strode away leaving Texhard to carry on with the job.

When the American had finished supervising the uncongenial work, he set off in search of his friend. He came upon Baring helping the last of the wounded into the dressing station. When he had handed over the man, the Englishman buttonholed the American.

"You know, Texas," he said seriously, "I just can't stand the idea of Joan working over the wounded all this time. She's a brick, but if she goes on like this she'll break down."

"Well, why don't you tell her to chuck it for a bit?"

Baring shook his head. From the expression on

his face it was obvious he regarded the American as more than a bit of an idiot. "My dear fellow," he said, in pitying tones, "do you imagine for one moment that Joan would do anything *I* told her to do? I did try to get her to chuck up this ghastly work, but she merely said she was acting on orders from one of the *sous-officiers*, and until that order was revoked she proposed to carry on with her present job."

"Well, that's soon settled," Texhard retorted. "Just you lead me to her and I'll exercise some of my commanding personality on your behalf."

A few minutes later, Joan Lexham was interrupted in her work by the appearance of the American who called her over to a quiet corner.

"Look here, honey," he said, pleasantly, "I know you're doing swell work where you are, but there's another job I want you to take over for me if you will."

The girl looked at him dubiously. "Only if it's as important as the job I'm doing now," she retorted.

"As important!" repeated Texhard. "Why, in its way it's a darned sight more important, or I wouldn't have asked you to do it."

Joan appeared only half convinced. "Suppose you tell me what it is?" she suggested.

"O.K., sister; just listen to me and I'll put you wise to the whole thing. You know, we're in real danger of running short of ammunition before we've settled the hash of these Tuareg guys once and for all. There's a shortage of men, and it's impossible to spare anyone for the job I have in mind, which is to go down into the cellars under the officers' quarters and have a careful look round. I've heard

rumours that there's a certain amount of reserve ammunition hidden down there but as I said, I can't spare the men just to go hunting round on the off-chance."

"And you want me to go down there?"

Texhard smiled. "It's not an order. I know how scared some of you dames are of the dark, and although I would give you a good electric torch, even then I expect it would scare you, so forget all about it!"

Joan came as near to snorting with indignation as any well brought up girl could come.

"How like a man," she snapped. "If the average male lived to be a hundred and fifty years old he'd still believe that every normal woman was scared out of her wits by mice, cows and the dark. You just get me that torch, show me the way down, and leave me to carry on. Frightened of the dark, indeed!"

With a toss of her head she stalked to her own room, leaving Texhard and Baring grinning like mischievous schoolboys.

"Who says I don't understand dames?" demanded the American.

"You worked the oracle this time, anyway," his friend replied. "But is there anything to look for down in the cellars?"

The other nodded. "Sure there is," he replied. "I wouldn't take that girl away from her work unless there was a darned good cause for it. There's some more ammunition of sorts down there and she's just the person to look for it. We can't have her exposed to danger when the next attack comes along, and there's no safer place to be in than the cellars."



Joan Lexham came back, a light dust coat enveloping her slim form. Going up to the American she held out her hand. "Give me the torch, and I'll get going."

"This way." Texhard led the way to the office and, opening one of the desks, produced a powerful electric torch which he handed to the girl. Then crossing the room he opened the door of the inner office and led the way to a door in one corner which gave on to a narrow flight of stairs.

"Mind how you go," he advised. "The steps are a bit steep."

With a nod, the girl took the torch from him and turned its beam on to the flight of steep steps she was to descend.

"Take your time over the job," Texhard called down to her, as her footsteps sounded faintly in the distance. "The cellars are large, and there's no end of old junk down there."

Joan called back a cheery response and he returned to the outer office. As he pushed open the communicating door he saw that the Russian had entered and was sitting at the big desk.

Karvof raised his head. "Where the devil have you been?" he demanded, sourly.

Texhard told him of what he had done. To his surprise the other showed no sign of his usual annoyance, but merely nodded as he replied: "Yes, it was a good move. We're getting desperately low in ammunition, and, as you say, we can't afford to overlook any chance of finding a hidden reserve."

An orderly came to the door. "The Tuaregs are massing again," he panted.

"Very well, I'll be out in a moment." Carefully nursing his arm, Karvof turned to the door. The next moment he had sunk back in his chair, his face twisted with pain. "It's this infernal arm of mine," he muttered. "It must be worse than I thought because it's giving me hell. You take over a time, Texhard, and I'll join you in a few minutes when I've been able to get it dressed again."

"Right."

Texhard swung out of the room and raced for the parapet leaving the Russian nursing his injured arm. But as soon as the door swung to behind the American, Karvof sprang to his feet. No longer did his arm appear to hurt, for it was with his left hand that he pushed shut the outer door of the office and turned the key in the lock. Taking an electric torch out of the store cupboard, he hurried into the inner office and stole quietly to the top of the stairs.

The man listened attentively for some moments, then smiled to himself as he switched on the torch and started down the steps.

Joan Lexham found the cellars were surprisingly large. Dry and airy, they appeared to have been used as the dumping ground for the discarded *lares et penates* of many succeeding units. Broken chairs, ancient tables and shattered mirrors lay about in profusion or leaned against some of the packing cases of all sizes that lined the walls and littered the centre of the floor.

"Heavens," she murmured. "It will be nearly as bad as looking for a needle in a haystack. Well, it's no good moaning, I'll start straight away. If I take

this left-hand wall and work my way to the far end I can then deal with that appalling collection of junk in the centre of the floor before tackling the stuff against the other wall."

She began searching among the boxes and crates that lay at her left hand. It was tiring work, but she carried on determinedly and progressed about half way along the left hand wall when she stopped suddenly.

From the direction of the stairway came the sound of soft, shuffling footsteps. As they came nearer, the girl hastily switched off the light in her torch and slipped behind a packing case. To be alone in the dark cellar with some unknown man is an experience that might tax the courage of the bravest girl, and as she crouched down the better to avoid detection she felt her heart thumping against her ribs.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of those shuffling feet, then just when she felt she would no longer be able to stifle the scream rising in her throat, a beam of light sprang to life somewhere in the middle of the cellar and swung this way and that as though searching for some particular object. As the light moved in her direction, Joan crouched lower to avoid its beam and after flickering over the packing case behind which she sheltered, it swung away again.

Suddenly, the man holding the torch spoke, and she recognized the voice of Karvof:

"Mademoiselle," the Russian called softly, "where are you?"

Joan did some quick thinking. To appear to be hiding from Karvof would be a mistake in tactics

for, if the Russian thought she was afraid of him he would take advantage of the fact, so summoning up her courage she called out, in as natural a voice as she could assume: "Oh, is that you, Sergeant Karvof? The battery in my torch seems to have gone wrong and I'm trying to fix it."

From the darkness came the voice of the Russian.

"One little minute, mademoiselle, and I will aid you."

Once more the light flashed from his torch and Joan scrambled to her feet. "It's quite all right," she replied quickly, "I've got it going again now."

"But it is a pleasure," Karvof retorted, as he picked his way carefully down the centre of the cellar. "And now," he continued, "as mademoiselle has managed to get her torch working again, we shall be at liberty to discuss other and more important matters, such as, for instance, mademoiselle's strange reluctance to allow me to look after her during her stay here at Saada."

"I'm quite capable of looking after myself, thanks," she retorted.

The Russian laughed softly. "That, if I may say so, remains to be seen, *ma chérie*."

With an agility remarkable in one so heavily built, Karvof sprang forward and tried to seize the girl. With a sweep of her right hand Joan knocked his torch flying and as it crashed to the ground she slipped from his groping hands and moved silently over to her left.

With a loud curse the Russian dropped on hands and knees. "Mademoiselle has a temper," he

muttered, as he fumbled about on the floor, searching for his torch. "Well, we shall have to tame her, that's all."

He rose to his feet, having found what he sought, and switched on the light.

In an attempt to avoid its beam, Joan lurched heavily against the piled crates beside which she stood, bringing the two topmost crashing to the ground. The third was now exposed to view. It was without a lid, and the girl thrusting out her hand to steady herself, felt a long, cylindrical object. Automatically her hand closed over it and as Karvof's torch focused on the crate she glanced down at the big red label on the side of the crate. The next moment she had dodged to the far side, and, still grasping the object she had taken out of the tightly-packed case, confronted the Russian.

Karvof, seeing he had cornered the girl seemed in no hurry to press home his advantage. He directed the light from his torch straight on to her face and continued to talk in the low drawl which was so unlike his usual staccato speech.

"I don't think you realize, my dear young lady," he said, "how much at a disadvantage you are down here. I have only to go upstairs in five or ten minutes and let it be known that the charming English miss has been gracious enough to show me her favours and in less than half an hour you will be besieged with suitors!"

"For goodness' sake, don't be so melodramatic!" retorted Joan. "I can assure you that you're cut out for nothing better than the low comedy part."

The Russian flushed. "We'll see about that," he

answered. "By the time I've finished, you won't think I'm so very funny, I assure you."

"I'll give you one chance to get out of here and leave me to carry on my work," the girl replied, coolly. "If you're not up those stairs by the time I count five I'll not answer for the consequences."

"I thought mademoiselle objected to melodrama," retorted Karvof. "She should practise what she preaches."

"Naturally. And if you can suggest anything more melodramatic than this, I shall be glad to know what it is!"

Raising her right arm, Joan held aloft the stick she had taken from the case.

"You would not hit me on the head with that?" mocked Karvof.

Joan shook her head.

"No," she said, calmly. "If necessary I shall throw it hard against that wall. This happens to be a stick of dynamite and in that crate there is enough to blow you, me, and all this cellar into tiny atoms!"

## CHAPTER X

### INTRIGUE

THE defenders on the battlements had not long to wait before the Tuaregs launched their next attack. Despite the shortage of ammunition, Texhard, who was in charge during the absence of Karvof, decided it was essential to open fire on the Tuaregs from a fairly long range. If once the enemy were able to force their way into the fort again, it would go badly with the defenders, who were too exhausted physically to hope to put up much of a show in hand-to-hand fighting.

It was obvious that the Tuaregs expected the defenders to hold back their fire, as they had previously done, and therefore they advanced on the fort in solid formation preparatory to opening out into some form of extended order when they were within closer range. While the enemy were still some three hundred yards away, Texhard seized the opportunity afforded by a really good target, and gave the order to fire. The *Légionnaires* poured a fierce stream of bullets into the advancing natives.

The success of the new tactics was soon proved. Thrown into confusion, the Tuaregs tried valiantly to re-form in some sort of order, but the fire from the fort was too accurate, and soon a cheer went up from the defenders as it was seen that this attack, at any

rate, was abortive. The Tuaregs had obviously suffered heavy casualties, and as their actions showed, were by no means inclined to press on to the fort. Essentially a fighter who is at his best at close quarters, the Tuareg lacks the discipline and control which are necessary for effective long range fighting, and if he cannot get to grips with the enemy at once, he is of little account in organized battle as opposed to guerilla warfare.

When it became apparent that there was nothing more to be feared for some time, Texhard handed over to the sergeant of the Infantry and, accompanied by three troopers, set off to the office in search of Karvof. Not finding him there, he decided to go down to the cellars and find out what luck Joan was having in her search.

As Texhard and his companions reached the foot of the stairs and switched on their torches, a strange sight met their gaze. Standing with her back to the wall, was Joan Lexham, a stick of some description in her upraised hand, and facing her, Karvof, white as death, backing slowly to the stairway.

At the sight of the newcomers, Joan lowered her arm and with an exclamation of relief ran over to Texhard. "Thank God you've turned up!" she said.

"Why, honey, what's wrong?"

In quick, nervous sentences she told the men what had happened. They listened in silence till she had finished, then Texhard turned to his companions.

"Take that man and put him in the punishment cells with the other prisoners," he said, curtly.

Karvof swung round on him, a livid flush on his face. "You mutinous hound!" he bellowed. "Don't



you know I'm in charge here? If you so much as lay one of your greasy fingers on me you'll find yourself court martialled when we're relieved, and then I wouldn't be in your shoes for all the money in France."

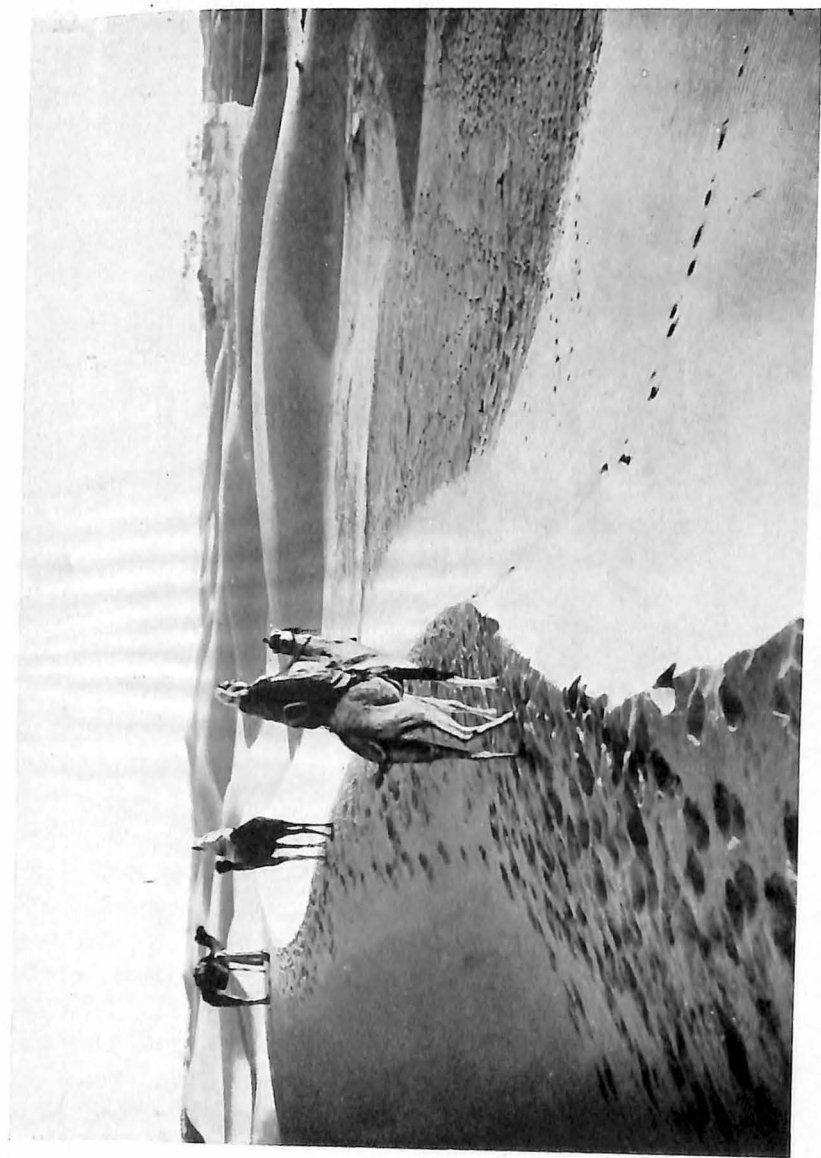
"I guess I'll take a chance on that!" retorted Texhard. "I'm damned if I'm going to have you around loose—you're as dangerous as a rattler when decent women are about! Carry on, you men; I'll take all the responsibility for what you do."

The men needed no second bidding. They laid far from gentle hands on the fulminating Russian and dragged him forcibly up the stairs. Never, even in their most optimistic moments, had they thought they would get such a chance to treat the hated *sous-officier* to a taste of his own medicine, and now they were grimly determined to make the most of their opportunity.

When the escort had left with their prisoner, Texhard was able to give his attention to the girl. In reply to his anxious questioning she reassured him that Karvof had done her no hurt, and then pointed to the crate.

"Perhaps it was a lucky thing, after all, that Karvof came down here, because if he hadn't done so, it's doubtful if I should ever have found this."

Texhard looked at the contents and gave a low whistle. "You sure have found something worth while," he told her. "These sticks of dynamite may yet be the saving of the fort if the Tuaregs prove too durned officious. Come along out of this hole—I guess you've had more than enough of it down here—and I'll get all this stuff stored in a safe place



[Photo : Exclusive News Agency

TAUREG SCOUTS

right away. It's not the sort of thing that should be left lying around for anyone to mess about with."

Under his instructions the dynamite was carried up and carefully packed in ammunition boxes ready for any emergency that might arise. Texhard fully realized it might prove an invaluable weapon of defence, but he was determined not to use it until he was left with no alternative, for once the dynamite had been exploded nothing except the bayonet and sabre would remain as a means of defence.

After the failure of their second attack, the Tuaregs showed no inclination to renew their activities, and Texhard set the men to repairing the defences of the fort as far as was possible. Tired and hungry, the garrison went about their duties with a surly lethargy that told its own tale of fatigue and despair, but the news that Seregant Karvof was checkmated for at least the time being, acted on them like a tonic, and the open grumbling that had been increasing rapidly during the last few days now quietened down.

Towards the close of the afternoon, most of the work had been completed, and the fort once more presented a tidy appearance that was in violent contrast to the scene of carnage evident a few hours earlier. The dead of the Legion had been buried in the desert a few yards from the rear of the fort, the burial party working feverishly at their task while an armed guard kept watch for the first signs of approaching Tuaregs; the wounded had been made as comfortable as circumstances permitted and the different troops of the squadron had been hastily reorganized to incorporate those of the infantry who still remained after the battle of the morning.

Despite the herculean efforts of the medical section, fever was growing apace, and even now threatening to attack the sound and the wounded alike; so there were scarcely fifty men left capable of carrying on the duties of the garrison. Had the Tuaregs but ventured to stake their fortune on an attack at that moment, it would have been impossible for the defenders to put up anything approaching a strong resistance, and within a short time Fort Saada's last chapter would have been written in letters of blood and fire.

But the enemy was content to lie low, and the breathing space afforded to the men of the Legion was indeed a godsend.

Towards evening, Texhard instructed all the *sous-officiers* to report to him for a council of war. Unlike Karvof, the American was anxious to sound his colleagues as to their views, and thus try to work out some solution between them.

Accordingly the *sous-officiers* came to the office in a spirit of goodwill which was as welcome as it was unusual, and soon the discussion on ways and means was in full swing.

"As far as I can see," Texhard said, after the talk had continued for some time, "we're faced with two alternatives. We can either hold on here and hope to keep the enemy out until Headquarters send us reinforcements, or we can chance all on a sortie and hope to reach the nearest fort, and from there get in touch with Headquarters. There's something to be said for both ideas, but before expressing a definite opinion myself, I'd like to hear your views."

"I'm all for chancing our arm and slipping quietly away," said a corporal. "The men are sick to death of being cooped up in this damned rabbit hutch, and from what they say it's clear they'd rather chance falling into the hands of the Tuaregs or dying of thirst in the desert, than hang on here with the fever spreading hourly and the ration supply cut down every day."

"I disagree," broke in the infantry sergeant. "The prospect either way is as bad as it can be, but, speaking for my own men, I can say they'd rather hang on here, than die out in the desert. If we're to be killed here, we'll at least have a quick death, but out there"—he waved his hand toward the window through which the last slanting rays of the setting sun shone in molten gold—"we might well suffer all the tortures of the damned before death released us."

"You've got to be prepared to chance something either way," retorted another. "If it goes to the vote, you can put me down as being in favour of making a dash for it. Anything would be better than hanging on here."

"There's one thing you all seem to have forgotten," Texhard cut in. "Here in Saada we have a vast number of sick and wounded. What's going to happen to them if we clear out and leave them?"

"If we get through, we'll bring a relief force and rescue them," said the corporal who had spoken first. "They must take a chance on things as much as the sound men must."

"But if the Tuaregs attack the fort while we're away—and you can bet your bottom dollar that if

they think the fort has been deserted, they'll waste no time in doing so—what sort of a chance would a handful of sick and wounded men have against a horde of natives?" Texhard gazed round the room at the circle of drawn faces.

A silence followed his words. It was obvious he had raised a question which his listeners found difficulty in answering to their satisfaction.

Finally the silence was broken by one of the corporals of the headquarters squadron. "You're right. To desert the wounded would be a shocking thing to do. I was all in favour of making a bolt for it, but I see I'm mistaken, and I'd like to say that I'm voting for staying."

As the others joined in the discussion to cast their votes on the side of the last speaker, Texhard listened in silence. When the last man had spoken, he stood up and said simply: "I'm glad you feel like that, but the last thing I want is for you to let loyalty to your wounded comrades influence your judgement unduly. I know I can speak for them when I say they would be the last people to do anything to prevent you from doing what might be the best for the Squadron as a whole."

The *sous-officiers* held a whispered conference, and then the infantry sergeant, as the senior man there, spoke. "We're all of one mind," he said, deliberately. "We're now convinced that our job is to hang on here until relief comes or until we're killed. Our motto is: *J'y suis, j'y reste!*"

Texhard nodded. "That's swell," he exclaimed. "And now that we're of one mind on the point, the next thing is to decide what measures we can take

to hold the fort until we're relieved. If anyone has any suggestions to offer, let's hear them."

It was lucky for their peace of mind that the *sous-officiers* had no idea of what was going on in the building in which the defaulters were housed. Had they known that Karvof was stirring up trouble, they would scarcely have discussed the future of the garrison with the sangfroid they now showed.

Owing to the lack of accommodation, the cells which were usually occupied by those men under close arrest, had been hastily converted into rooms for the more seriously wounded, and the prisoners had been transferred to a small hut over the door of which two armed sentries were posted. With its bare trestle beds and cheerless, whitewashed walls, it was no more comfortable than the cells from which the prisoners had been transferred a few hours before, but it had one advantage which the cells lacked, and that was the opportunity for conversation which it provided, an opportunity of which the inmates were not slow to take advantage.

Smarting under the indignity of his arrest, Karvof soon got busy on his own behalf. "Listen, my friends," he said to his fellow prisoners, "if you'll do as I say, not only will you be released from this pigsty, but, when the time comes for us to be relieved, I'll see to it you are all specially mentioned to Headquarters for your loyalty to me, your acting commander.

"This cursed American who has seized command of the fort must be disposed of. As long as he's in command the place will be run to suit his convenience, and his only. Already the men are grumbling about his brutality, and if we can only get at them

to tell them we will lead them to safety out of this accursed fort, they'll follow us to a man."

"It's no good talking generalities," growled one of the prisoners. "Have you got anything useful to suggest?"

Karvof laughed. "Do you imagine I should be such a fool as to shoot my mouth off without having some definite plan?" he countered. "Of course I've a suggestion to make!"

"Let's have it then."

The men clustered round, waiting for the Russian to speak. When you have nothing more to lose in the way of freedom and privileges, it is only human nature to grasp at any opportunity that may possibly make one's life more tolerable, and to the desperate men in the detention hut, Karvof brought a new hope. No matter how mad-brained his suggestion might have been, it was certain they would have hailed it with acclamation, and it was on this fact that he counted as he began to explain his plans.

"When the guard is changed at four o'clock to-morrow morning," he said, "the men who will take over duty will be Giacomo, the Italian, and Boris Malinsky. The Dago is a weak fool under the thumb of the good Boris, and will do exactly as he says."

"And Boris?" queried one of the listeners.

Karvof grinned. "We Russians have our faults, but we know how to stand by each other. When I tell friend Boris we intend to take command of the fort, he'll do just as I say, and what's more, will make Giacomo fall in with our plans, also."

"So we'll be free to-morrow?"



"Steady, my friend. Steady. There's nothing to be gained by rushing things. When the two men come on duty I'll make an excuse for calling in my compatriot and telling him what we propose to do. Then, when he goes off, he can seek out those of the garrison whom he can trust and tell them what's in the wind. So we can count on a fair amount of support when the time comes.

"When Boris comes on duty the following morning, all he'll have to do is to leave the door of this pigsty open and we'll make straight for the ammunition shed, where our friends will be waiting for us with all the rifles and carbines they can lay hands on. Before the others know what's afoot we'll be in command of the fort. Those who are wise enough to throw in their lot with us, we'll arm from our store."

"And the others?"

Karvof rubbed the palms of his hands together. "The others," he said, slowly, "will learn what it is to defy their commanding officer. And the first man of whom we'll make an example will be our gallant friend, the American, who was responsible for getting me stuck in this mouldering cesspit. And I guarantee that by the time I've finished with him there'll be precious little defiance left in the others!"

During the day, the Tuaregs remained passive, and Texhard took the opportunity of allowing the men who were not on duty to get as much rest as possible. Among those who found themselves with time to kill was the Italian who had been on duty over the guard-room in the early hours of the morning.

After resting, he strolled over to the women's quarters and sought out Lisette. The fact that after

many weeks devoted to the lady in question he had transferred his affections to one of her colleagues, did not appear to him a cogent reason for continuing to ignore her, for the good Giacomo liked variety in his amours. Great was his surprise, therefore, when Lisette told him in no uncertain terms that she was sick of him and that if she never saw him again she would certainly die happy. Something, obviously, had to be done to put the lady in a more kindly frame of mind, and Giacomo thought he knew exactly what that something was.

"Listen, *bella mia*," he said, "if only you'll stop being so jealous of your Giacomo he will tell you something that is known to none in the barracks."

His innamorata laughed. "A fine story," she mocked. "And who are you that you should have such a wonderful piece of news stored away in that dirty chest of yours?"

"But I tell you it's true," protested the Italian. "As you may know, I was on sentry outside the prisoners' hut this morning and it was told to me by none other than Sergeant Karvof himself."

"Sergeant Karvof, eh?" The woman's eyes narrowed, for she had no occasion to love the Russian. "And do you expect me to believe *that* tale? You and Karvof chatting together like long-lost brothers when only a week ago he gave you three extra fatigues for appearing on parade even dirtier than you usually are!"

"But I tell you it *is* true!"

The Italian almost screamed in his excitement and Lisette, realizing he might be speaking the

truth, shrugged her shoulders. "I'll believe you when I've heard the tale and not before!"

"Then listen!" The Italian launched into a detailed account of all that had passed between Karvof and the two guards in the early hours of the morning.

Lisette listened in silence, a smile of incredulity on her lips. But though she was willing for the Italian to believe that she paid little attention to his story, in reality she was eagerly drinking in every word. So, when her admirer had finally been dismissed, she lost no time in hurrying over to the hut in which Texhard was busy over some of the official returns which had been allowed to get sadly behind. She insisted on seeing him alone. The women were everlastingly bickering and fighting among themselves, and the American, fearing to be treated to a long and incoherent account of how one of her colleagues had been guilty of some misdemeanour, did his best to shoo her out of the room.

Lisette, however, was a determined woman and stood her ground, so, with a cough of resignation, Texhard signalled to the orderly seated at another desk to leave them alone. He then turned to the woman who stood with her arms folded waiting to speak.

"Come on, sister," he ordered, "get it off your chest, and for the love of Mike don't be all day about it. I've got really important work to do."

Lisette launched into her story, and as she continued, the American's face grew graver.

"So you see," she concluded, "the damned Russian and those others with him will be released

by the guards when they go on duty to-morrow and we shall all be at their mercy!"

Serious though the news was, Texhard could not resist a smile at her melodramatic climax. "Cheer up, sister," he admonished, "you won't be murdered in your bed—at least not to-morrow morning. What may happen in the future is quite another matter! Now you run along back to your own quarters and whatever happens remember to keep your mouth tightly shut. If you blow the gaff to one solitary soul it may put the kybosh on all my plans, and then the bogeyman *will* get you—so look out!"

When Lisette had departed with an air of furtive secrecy that would have done credit to a villain in a transpontine melodrama, Texhard summoned an urgent meeting of his fellow *sous-officiers* to whom he told the story he had just heard.

"This is a bad business," exclaimed one of the corporals. "Some of the men are already in almost open revolt because we've decided to stay here rather than take a chance in the desert, and if they knew that Karvof was prepared to lead them on a wild-goose chase they would probably stand by him even though they normally loathed the sight of him."

Texhard produced a battered pipe and began to fill it slowly. The operation appeared to assist his mental powers, for, before he had finished the job, the frown of worry had left his face and was replaced by a cheerful smile. -

"Good," he said. "Karvof obviously knows nothing of what the general feeling is here in the fort, but it is equally certain that if he did get to know he'd willingly fall in with any plan that would make for

his own popularity. Well, then," Texhard went on, after his audience had murmured their agreement, "there's only one thing to be done and that is to get word to Karvof as soon as it can be arranged."

"Won't that be playing into his hands?" asked one of his colleagues.

Texhard smiled. "It depends on what word reaches Karvof," he retorted. "If we arrange for him to be told that the men are all in favour of hanging on here and he starts shooting off his mouth to that effect, it won't be long before he finds out that he's not quite the blue-eyed boy he expects to be."

"But surely you're not going to let him get away, are you?" demanded the Infantry sergeant.

"Not unless I can help it, but it's always a good thing to prepare a second line of defence in case your first gives way. Karvof under lock and key is a much safer person than Karvof at liberty, and I don't propose to give him any chance to make a getaway. So the first thing to be done is to get hold of his two boy friends and give them all the worst fatigues that can be found, just as a gentle reminder that they've been backing the wrong horse in Comrade Karvof?"

"But how are you going to get word to Karvof?"

"Oh, that won't present many difficulties," Texhard replied. "I want it to be arranged for a really reliable man to go on duty over the prisoners at dinner time. We'll prepare a note purporting to come from Boris and telling Karvof that although he's been taken off the guard for a day or so, things are doing well and the men willing to rally round him if he will insist on staying on here in Saada."

Our own man will pass it to him, and Karvof, being only too willing to follow the popular opinion, will be switched on to the wrong track."

A low chuckle escaped from the little party of *sous-officiers*. They had as little cause as the men to like the bullying Russian and anything that promised to lead to his greater undoing they welcomed wholeheartedly. In a very few minutes final details were settled and the party about to break up, when the sound of angry shouting coming from the men's quarters interrupted the conversation.

"Sounds as though someone was holding an outsize in indignation meetings," exclaimed Texhard. "A couple of you slip across and see what the ballyhoo is about. I think the rest had better remain here because if there's any trouble on foot it'll be just as well for us all to be together. I don't suppose that it's anything to get all het up about."

The two corporals hurried out of the room, and Texhard continued. "I was expecting a spot of trouble to break out sooner or later," he said quietly. "I've realized that tempers have become mighty strained in some quarters."

"*Mais que voulez-vous?*" protested one of his colleagues. "Here we are cooped up in this sweltering rabbit hutch of a place with no hope of seeing the inside of a café for months and months. It isn't human nature for the men to behave like a lot of lambs."

"Agreed," Texhard replied. "But it's up to us to protect their interests for them as far as we can, and the best way to do it is by stopping them from making a lot of damned fools of themselves."

"That's easier said than done," grumbled one of the party.

Texhard rounded on the corporal who had just spoken. His nerves were as jangled as those of his comrades and he was in no mood to put up with any signs of weakness and indecision in those who held posts of authority under him.

"Of course it's not easy," he snapped. "Who the devil suggested it was? But let me remind you that you didn't take office merely for the pleasure of seeing a stripe on your arm."

"I didn't get my stripe for being lazy!"

The American grinned suddenly. "Of course not," he said. "If they gave stripes for being lazy, one or two lads here would look like durned zebras!"

The laughter which greeted this sally had scarcely died away when the two corporals returned.

"It's bad trouble," said one, sitting down on a wooden bench and dabbing at his face with a large red handkerchief. "That fellow Kleuz is at the back of it."

"What, the German?"

The corporal nodded. "That's the lad. He's trying to persuade the others to desert and make a bolt for the coast."

"The fool! Thank God most of the men won't listen to him!"

"That's where you're wrong," retorted the corporal. "He's already won over about twenty of the men; in fact, there are only ten or so who hold out!"

## CHAPTER XI

### REVOLT

A SILENCE followed the *sous-officier's* words. The gravity of the situation was lost on none of the men in the room, and each was busy with his own thoughts. Desertion was not only a mad idea for men to consider when they were cooped up in the Sahara, many, many miles from freedom, it was an idea which if it was ever allowed to become fact would bring shame on the Fourth Squadron. And even at this trying time there were men among those present to whom the good name of their own unit still stood for everything worth while.

Texhard broke the silence. "Two of you go and tell Kleuz I want to see him here, *pronto*," he ordered.

The others were watching him intently. "If all this is true," he said, "we can't stand for any half measures. This guy, Kleuz, is a firebrand of the most dangerous sort, and from what I know of him he won't be too particular about how he achieves his object. It looks mighty like a spot of real trouble for us, and the only thing we can do is to keep together and get those of the men who still hold out against the German to come over and join us. For them to be left alone in the same quarters as Kleuz and his gang would be grossly unfair to them."

The door of the office swung open and Kleuz



himself stalked into the room. A tall, fair man, with the chest and torso of a giant, he stood glaring defiantly round the semi-circle of men who sat watching in silence. It was obvious he feared nothing from the *sous-officiers* in whose presence he was, and on glancing out of the window Texhard saw the reason for his self-confidence.

On the parade ground were massed the men who were prepared to throw in their lot with the German, and he noted instinctively that every one of them carried a rifle or carbine. Clearly they were not chancing their leader being detained against his will!

Following Texhard's gaze, the ringleader nodded complacently. "Exactly," he mocked. "I'm not taking any undue risks, and if you gentlemen are wise you'll not make it necessary for me to order my followers to use force if you detain me against my will."

"You can cut that sort of talk right out," Texhard said, sternly. "It doesn't impress us."

Kleuz shrugged his shoulders. "All right. But don't say I haven't warned you if you find yourself asking for trouble."

"From what I've heard," Texhard commented, "it's you and your pals who are asking for it. You've been in the Legion long enough to know that not one man in fifty ever gets away to freedom when he deserts."

Kleuz laughed. "Let me tell you," he retorted, "there's all the difference between one poor devil struggling along on his own and an organised band of twenty men working according to plan."

"Exactly," Texhard's tone was dry. "In your

case there are twenty times as many victims for the Tuaregs to torture."

"Bah!" The German spat on the floor. "You'll have to get up very early in the morning if you want to scare me with your old wives' tales! If you, and the rest of you, have any sense you'll not hang on in this foul dump until hunger and thirst make you an easy prey for the Tuaregs. Why not show a little gumption for once in your lives and come with us? In a few weeks' time we shall have reached the coast and freedom, while you and all the other stupid fools who decide to hang on here will provide the vultures with one of the best meals they've had for many a long day."

While the German was ranting, Texhard had produced a slip of paper and a stub of pencil. Holding the paper on one knee, under the table so that Kleuz couldn't see what he was doing, he scribbled a few lines without removing his gaze from the face of the German, and then cautiously slipped the paper to the colleague sitting on his immediate right.

As the ringleader of the revolt paused, he asked: "How do you know we're so opposed to your scheme?" He flashed a quick, warning glance at the others.

The German seemed taken aback. It was obvious he had expected to meet with nothing but the most vehement of refusals, and this unexpected change of front baffled him.

"Of course," Texhard continued smoothly, "you could hardly expect any of us to join up with you without first being sure we have a reasonable chance of success. Have you, for instance, worked out your route carefully?"

"Not yet." The German was a little reluctant. "We've not got the ordnance maps, and that's one of the things I want to speak to you about. We insist——"

Texhard held up his hand. "One moment. Suppose that before you burst into another hymn of hate you just listen to what I have to say for a minute. You want to get hold of the ordnance maps, but you know they're in our possession. Very well, then. Just to show you we're not so dead against you as you seem to imagine, we'll have a look at those maps all together here and see what sort of chance there is of discovering a safe route to the coast."

Turning to the man sitting next to him, Texhard gave him a kick under the table. "Jacques, go across to the signallers' hut and bring me the maps, will you? You have the key."

With an expressionless face, the man rose and muttered: "Very good, Sergeant." He opened the door and stepped out on to the parade ground. His appearance was the signal for a yell of protest from the men outside, and Kleuz turned to the window and, leaning out, roared an order to his followers.

"Let the fellow pass," he commanded. Then turning back to face the men in the room, he grinned importantly.

"You see," he said, nodding towards the barrack square, "my men are not the sort to put up with any damned nonsense!"

"Sure, I see," replied Texhard quietly. "Your action has made a mighty deep impression on me."

The other grunted. "That's just as well, for I may as well tell you we're not the sort of men to put

up with any nonsense from you or anyone else. The few fools who refused to throw in their lot with us know that already. We locked them up in one of the small huts until we decide what to do with them."

"You seem to think of everything—or almost everything," Texhard replied, good-naturedly.

The German smirked complacently. "Oh, it's not only you *sous-officiers* who are blessed with brains," he retorted. "However, I'm glad to see you showing some slight signs of intelligence yourself!"

"You flatter me, buddy!" Texhard bowed ironically, but the German failed to see anything but a well-merited compliment in the action, and he continued to grin.

To the men who faced him, the conduct of their leader was entirely inexplicable, but to a man they had absolute confidence in him, and knew very well that he would not be keeping the ringleader of the revolt talking there unless he had some definite plan to deal with the trouble that had arisen.

"Now that we seem to understand each other better," Texhard said, "don't you think it would be a good thing if you brought your men in from the heat and we all got together and discussed this matter in comfort?"

Kleuz glared round the room. "If you think I'm going to bring the men in as long as this gang remains in here, you're mistaken."

"O.K." Not by the twitch of a muscle did the American show a sign of the natural resentment he felt at hearing his colleagues insulted. He turned to the others. "I think it would be as well if you were to leave me to see the men alone."

A young corporal sprang to his feet and began a vehement protest. It would be madness to leave the sergeant to the mercies of the mutineers, he protested. Texhard cut short his impassioned speech with a look, the significance of which was not lost on the young fellow, who suddenly subsided in his seat, his face flushing crimson. It was obvious to him in that moment that his leader knew very well what he was about, and he mentally kicked himself for being such a fool as to have interfered.

"If you'll wait in the inner office," said Texhard, opening the door, "I'll join you as soon as I've finished chatting with this good fellow and his friends."

The faces of the *sous-officiers* were a study as they passed out of the room. Either, their expression seemed to say, the American had taken complete leave of his senses or he was playing a game altogether too deep for them to follow!

As they filed slowly past, Texhard called over his shoulder to the German, asking him to fetch in his followers. As the latter crossed to the window to call, Texhard whispered hastily to the men passing him, "Over to the officers' quarters, the lot of you. I'll join you in a few minutes. Start barricading the place."

The German turned from summoning his followers and saw Texhard softly closing the door behind the last of his colleagues.

The men from the parade ground streamed into the room, filling it almost to overcrowding. It was clear that they were as surprised as their leader at the turn events had taken, but when they saw the

American sitting calmly at his desk waiting to receive them, their apprehension evaporated somewhat and they stared at Kleuz waiting for him to speak.

Their leader puffed out his chest and smiled importantly at the party standing round him. "Comrades," he began, "I'm sure you'll all be glad to learn that the wisdom of our decision to get out of this godforsaken spot once and for all, has been appreciated by others. In fact"—he waved his hand round the room—"our good acting-commander himself has the wisdom to fall in with our plans."

A murmur of approval greeted his words, and Texhard nodded an acknowledgment, but even as he did so his ears were strained to catch any noise that might be coming from the room at the back. The only means of egress, he knew, was through a small window, and if his colleagues did not exercise proper care the chances were all in favour of Kleuz or one of his followers hearing sounds which would undoubtedly arouse their suspicions and send them hurrying into the back office.

But although a few faint sounds did reach him, they were not such as were likely to arouse the suspicions of those who now stood awkwardly facing him. It was, therefore, with a feeling of relief that he turned to the German.

"Now you are all present," he said, pleasantly, "perhaps you would like to give me a few more details about your arrangements for the journey to the coast."

Before Kleuz had a chance to reply, one of the newcomers broke in upon the conversation. "Watch your step, *mon ami*," he advised his leader. "How

do we know that the sergeant is all straight and above-board with us?"

"How do I know?" repeated Kleuz, glaring at his friend. "I'll tell you how I know, and then perhaps you'll have the sense to leave me to manage matters without any interference from you! It is hardly likely that Sergeant Texhard would send across to the signallers' quarters for an ordnance map if he wasn't taking us seriously."

"But that was five minutes ago," protested the man. "Surely the corporal should be back by now."

A low mutter of assent broke out, and the German scratched his head in perplexity. "Yes, that's true," he said, slowly. He turned to Texhard abruptly. "What's happened to that fool I allowed to go for the maps?"

The American shrugged his shoulders. "How the devil should *I* know?" he demanded. "You yourself heard me tell him where the maps were. If he can't find the durned things just as quickly as you think he ought to do, why blame me?"

"If you try any funny games on me, it'll be worse for you," growled the German.

Texhard stood up. The pleasant smile had left his face and now he glowered at the men before him so fiercely that more than one of them involuntarily stepped back a pace as though they imagined he was going to strike them.

"So you really imagine I'm trying to pull some sort of a clumsy bluff on you, do you?" he demanded, addressing his remarks directly to Kleuz.

The other shrugged his shoulders. It was plain he was more than a little at a loss to account for

everything that had transpired since first he had entered the office, but not for worlds would he let his followers think he was not a match for this quiet American who now stood confronting him with angry eyes.

"I don't say that," he answered slowly, "but as this fellow says, it certainly does seem funny that the corporal should be so long over the job."

"Very well," said Texhard coolly, "if that's how you feel about things, the best course for you to follow is to search the signallers' quarters for yourself. I must say, though," he continued, "it seems to be a mighty poor lookout for those of us who presumably will have to trust ourselves to a bunch of guys like you who can't even think straight!"

"That'll be enough!"

Encouraged by the whispers of his followers, the German took a step forward, and, placing his great, knotted hands on the desk, leaned forward to stare in Texhard's face. "Just you hand over the other set of keys and be quick about it," he growled. "I've had all I mean to stand from you to-day, master Americano!"

"To hear you run on like that, one might imagine the idea of using the duplicate keys was yours and not mine," Texhard retorted. "Come on now," he went on, with a return to his former cheerfulness. "Be a sportsman and admit the idea was all mine."

A stolid-looking Dutchman now cut in on the conversation. Pulling portentously at a heavy pipe he turned to his comrades: "If what the sergeant here says is true," he grunted, "why does he not stop talking and produce the keys?"



In a flash Texhard had answered him. "That is the first sensible thing you've said for some time. You want me to produce the keys and yet you keep me here arguing round and round as though I were some durned senator at the White House. Very well, you want the keys, and the keys you shall have. They are in a drawer of the desk in the office there, and I'll get them right now."

Before anyone thought of attempting to stop him, Texhard took four quick steps to the door of the inner office. Opening it just sufficiently to allow the passage of his body, he called into the room: "Sorry to worry you, boys, but our friends out here want the duplicate keys to the signallers' quarters." Then, before anyone had a chance to see if the inner room was occupied or not, the American had slipped through the door which he closed and quietly locked behind him.

The next moment he had scrambled through the open window and was running across the parade ground to the officers' quarters, at the door of which the sergeant of infantry stood anxiously waiting for him.

"Bravo, *mon ami!*" cried the latter, as Texhard dashed up. "That was a clever ruse, that!"

The American grinned. "I wasn't wet-nursed on poker chips for nothing," he assured his friend. "But the corporal I sent out first—did he do his job all right?"

The infantryman nodded. "Certainly. He went straight across to the men's quarters and as soon as the fools followed Kleuz into the office, he unlocked the door and let them out. Then, as you instructed,

the men brought all the boxes of ammunition and the case of dynamite over here and stored it safely away in the back room."

"Good work!" said Texhard, in relief. "I don't suppose they were able to lay hands on all the ammunition, but it is sure a great thing to have any of it in our possession, and that, together with the dynamite, should make us in a strong position when they come along to argue the point with us."

Glancing at the building, Texhard saw with satisfaction that the men were already hard at work barricading up the windows and door. They worked feverishly at their task and it wasn't long before they had completed it. But they did not do so a minute too soon, for just as they put the finishing touches out of the office streamed Kleuz and his men.

Drawing his revolver, Texhard ordered all the men to take shelter in the officers' quarters and then himself followed them as far as the door where he turned to face the German, now dashing up to him.

"Swine!" bellowed Kleuz, purple in the face with rage. "You may think you're clever to trick me like that, but I'll show you that the laugh is still with us."

"If you come a step nearer," Texhard barked, "I'll shoot you for the treacherous dog you are."

The German stepped hastily back and held a whispered conversation with his followers. Then without any further word, the whole party swung round and stamped across the parade ground.

"I wonder what their little game is," muttered Texhard, as he watched their retreating figures.

"We've got most of the ammunition and provisions, thanks to Kleuz's lack of imagination, so there's nothing much they can do."

Texhard's thoughts were interrupted by a voice at his elbow. "Hullo, what's worrying the great Machiavelli now?"

Turning, he saw Duncan Baring standing grinning at him. "I might have guessed *you* would show up," he retorted. "It's a wonder to me you haven't joined the suicide brigade out there."

The other shook his head. "I did offer to help them, but they told me I was far too young and beautiful to risk losing my complexion out in the desert with them," he replied.

"So I suppose you've been devoting your time looking after the beauteous Joan Lexham dame," retorted the American.

"Something like that," replied his friend, with an assumed carelessness that did not for one moment deceive Texhard. "Hullo," he broke off, "what are those bright lads up to now?"

Four of the deserters were hauling a heavy tripod into the middle of the square. Setting their burden upright they began to clamp it down to the sockets provided, and Texhard turned to Baring: "A flogging, eh?" he muttered. "I wonder exactly who is to receive the honour of Herr Kleuz's attentions."

They were not kept long in suspense. Some of the rebels appeared dragging Karvof and the other prisoners who had been locked up with him.

"It looks as though our Russian friend must have said something to upset Kleuz," muttered Texhard. "Now I wonder what it could have been!"

The German supervised the strapping of the struggling Russian to the triangle and then strode to the square where Texhard stood. "Unless you hand over the ammunition and rations you have in there," he said, with a nod in the direction of the hut, "your friends here will be flogged to death. And to show that I mean what I say, we're going to start operations on that Russian scum over there."

"Heaven help you if you try any trick like that!" said Texhard.

The German laughed. "Not quite so clever as you thought, are you?" He did not wait for the American to reply, but returned to the centre of the parade ground and, picking up a wicked-looking whip, swung it viciously round his head.

Texhard slipped into the hut and ordered the corporal in charge to hand him two sticks of dynamite. Holding these carefully in one hand, he crawled cautiously through a window at the back of the hut that gave on to the rear wall of the fort.

"Whatever you do, don't leave here," he instructed the men, as he started to scale the wall of the fort. "I'm going to put the wind up these merchants so much that they'll think it's blowing a typhoon, but if you move from here you'll spoil everything."

Lying flat at the top of the fort wall, Texhard cautiously wormed his way along until he came to an angle from which he could obtain a view of the centre of the parade ground. Even as he reached his coign of vantage, the first blow fell on the bare shoulders of Karvof who let out a howl of rage and pain as the thongs bit into his naked flesh. Before the German could repeat the blow, Texhard raised

himself up, and steadying himself with one hand, hurled one of the sticks of dynamite at the wall, some thirty yards away. Before the stick reached its objective he had sent the second charge of explosive after the first and the next moment two shattering reports reverberated round the square.

With a loud yell of "The Tuaregs! The Tuaregs!" he dropped from the wall and darted behind a small shed from where he could see the parade ground without being seen by the rebels who, oblivious of their prisoners, raced pell-mell for the nearest cover.

The next moment Texhard had dashed into the centre of the square, and with a few slashes of his jack knife had cut down the Russian from the whipping post. Then, accompanied by the other prisoners, he half-dragged, half-led Karvof to the officers' quarters. So quickly did he work that before Kleuz and his followers had collected their wits and realized it was a false alarm that had been given, their captives were safely under cover.

Furious at being baulked again, the German and some of his men opened up a rapid fire on the windows and walls of the hut in which the remainder of the garrison were entrenched, but the bullets did no more than flatten themselves harmlessly against the defences.

"Let them blaze away as long as they like," Texhard said. "We shall need our own ammunition for something better than shooting these scum. They can't do us any harm, anyway."

A few minutes later, the attackers appeared to realize the futility of their efforts, for they ceased fire and retreated to the far corner of the square

where the stables were situated. Shortly afterwards, they appeared, mounted on the horses, with Kleuz at their head. Over the saddle of each man was slung a bag containing food and ammunition, and at the back of the party trailed a string of spare horses.

At a command from their leader, two of the men quickly dismounted and flung open the main gate. The next moment the cavalcade clattered under the archway and out into the desert. As the sounds of their exit died away, Texhard gave a brief command and two of the men ran out and hastily closed the gates of the fort which the deserters had left open.

No sound of firing came from the Tuareg lines, and one of the men turned to Texhard with a wry grin. "It looks as though their luck's in," he said. "The damned native sharpshooters haven't fired a single shot at them."

"Don't you be so sure about their luck," the American retorted. "The Tuaregs are no fools, and they know that if they started a scrap right here outside the fort, the chances are the men in the fort would open fire on them from the parapet. It's loot as well as human lives they're after, and I'm prepared to wager they are waiting for those fools to get well clear of the fort before setting about them." He paused. "It's up to us to start re-organising right away."

Karvof strode up to Texhard, an angry gleam in his eyes. "I hold you directly responsible for all that has happened," he growled. "You'll be made to pay for all I've suffered. As your superior——"

"Because I saved you from a hiding you damned well deserved doesn't mean that I recognize your

authority," retorted Texhard. "From now on, I'm in charge here."

A shout of approval went up from the defenders that told the Russian more clearly than any words could have done, the position in which he now stood. "All right, Master American," he growled, "you may be top dog now, but I promise you it won't be long before I teach you a lesson you won't forget in a hurry."

Texhard sighed theatrically. "Well, if that's not human nature all over!" he exclaimed. "Here I am doing the gallant rescue stuff on your account, and all you do in return is to hand me an outsize in raspberries! I blush for you, friend Karvof, I do indeed!"

## CHAPTER XII

### RETRIBUTION

SHORTLY after the departure of Kleuz and his party, Texhard called together the small force still left in the fort.

"I want to thank you all for standing by me when you might have deserted with the others," he said. "I also want to tell you that I do honestly believe you've done the wisest thing, for the deserters have about as much chance of making a safe getaway as a snowball has of rolling through hell. There's one thing I think we can safely count on, and that is the Tuaregs are certain to follow Kleuz and his mob, which means we shall be granted a breathing space from their attentions. Therefore, I think we should seize the opportunity to replenish our water supply and improve our defences as much as possible.

"I don't believe we shall be left here for long because Headquarters will naturally become alarmed when no news of the relief reaches them. If they don't take some steps mighty soon to find out what has happened to their wandering boys I'll eat my automatic."

Encouraged by Texhard's show of optimism, the men set about their work with better spirit than they had shown for some time. The absence of Kleuz and his followers was a relief rather than a regret,



for now there was no feeling of dissension, and the undercurrent of intrigue which had been running more and more strongly during the last few days was mercifully absent.

Of all the men remaining in the fort, only one went about his duties with sullen expression and unwilling steps. Karvof, stripped of his authority (for Texhard refused to allow him to act in any position of command), showed his spite to the American by mumbling criticisms and abuse on every possible occasion and by refusing to pull his weight in the general work. Texhard had wisely decided not to give him the chance of posing as a martyr by locking him up again, but he had made it clear to the Russian that he was to consider himself under open arrest, a state of affairs which not unnaturally led to friction between the two men.

As the parade broke up, Baring and his cousin joined Texhard at a corner of the ground. "I don't want to seem a wet blanket," Duncan Baring said, "but honestly old man, I'm worried about that blighter, Karvof."

"What's he been up to now?" demanded his friend. "Sticking scorpions in your bed or something?"

"It's nothing very definite," Baring replied, with unusual seriousness, "but his general conduct is getting more and more strange. If you ask me, I say he's on the verge of going *cafard*, and when that happens, look out for squalls!"

"Thanks for the tip-off," Texhard said, as he nodded comprehendingly. "I had put his behaviour down to the natural charm of the brute, but now

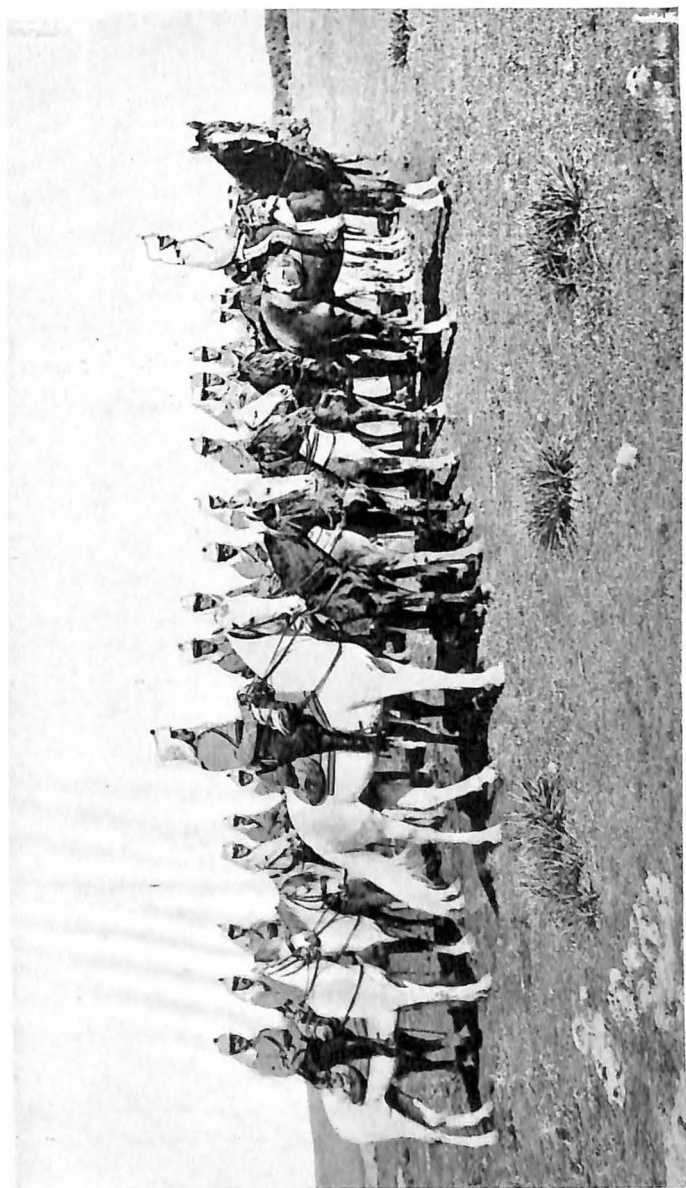
you mention it, I'm inclined to think you are right. Anyway, I'll keep my eye on that guy and take care not to let him take part in any job to endanger the safety of the others."

Night fell, and the fatigue party set out for the oasis, anxiously watched by the defenders on the firestep of the fort. As Texhard had predicted, they were able to make the journey to the well and back without a shot being fired, and by working in shifts all through the night the garrison collected an adequate supply of water.

The following day was one of absolute quiet. No shot came from the Tuareg lines, and all day the burning sun beat down on the fort that stood, a grim sentinel, in a world of silence. The very quietude began to tell on the nerves of the garrison, and as the day dragged slowly on, the feeling that they were buried alive here in the vast rolling solitudes, grew apace. To many it had become almost impossible to imagine they would ever see the outer world again, and more than a few found themselves wishing the Tuaregs would give some proof of being back in the vicinity for, unwelcome though the attentions of the natives were, at least they served to show there still were other living beings in the world beside themselves!

On the following night, Texhard again sent out a party to bring in water, and once more the work was carried out without hindrance.

"If there is still no sign of the enemy to-morrow," Texhard told Baring, "it really will look as if the Tuaregs have packed up here for good and all. Maybe they think the fort completely deserted now."



[Photo: Exclusive News Agency]

MOUNTED LÉGIONNAIRES ABOUT TO SET OFF INTO THE DESERT

[Face page 192]

"If they think that," answered his friend, "it's hardly likely they would be content to leave the place alone. There would be some nice pickings for them here, and I've never yet heard of a Tuareg who said, 'No thank you' when the chance of doing a spot of easy looting occurred!"

Texhard nodded. "I guess you're right. If there's still no sign of them by sunset to-morrow, I think it would be a good idea to send out a scouting party to give the enemy's lines the once-over. This absolute silence of brother Tuareg is all wrong. If there's a trap being laid, we certainly don't want to go sailing gaily into it, so we'll just see if we can find out how the land lies."

So, at sundown the next day, a party of twelve picked men under the command of the infantry sergeant, who had the reputation of being one of the finest scouts in the Legion, formed up on the parade ground. The prospect of once more doing some active work appealed to the men greatly after their spell of enforced inactivity, and they were all eager to get going on their tour of exploration.

But before Texhard had finished giving details of the way the work was to be undertaken, a shout from one of the sentries on the firestep interrupted the proceedings.

"Come quickly, Sergeant," he called, - excitedly, and pointed to the desert.

"What's up?" demanded Texhard. "I can't see anything unusual out there."

"Over on your left. I'm sure I saw some movement."

Staring in the indicated direction, Texhard suddenly gave a low whistle. There was now no doubt

that the sentry's eyes had not played him false. The American distinctly saw three slowly crawling figures approaching the fort. Without removing his gaze from the spot, he called over his shoulder to the men to stand to their posts, and himself drew the automatic from its holster.

"If the Tuaregs are trying to work a surprise attack," he said, grimly, "they'll find the surprise will come from *this* quarter!"

Nearer and nearer came the crawling figures, and the defenders waited tensely for the order to fire. However, that order never came, for, suddenly, one of the shadowy figures raised itself on its elbows and a faint cry came across the sand.

*"Aidez moi ! Aidez moi !"*

"Good God! They are white men!" gasped Texhard. "Here, you at the gate—out with you at once and bring those guys in just as fast as you can."

The next moment the doors of the fort swung open and a little party dashed out into the desert to assist the men who were dragging themselves slowly and painfully nearer.

Calling to the medical section to prepare bandages and dressings in case they should be needed, Texhard followed the others out and within a few minutes three limp figures were carried into the shelter of the fort and the gates firmly secured after them.

Starving and exhausted, their once smart uniforms hanging in tattered shreds from their emaciated frames, the three men presented a very different sight from that when, three days earlier, they had ridden out so confidently in the train of the German,

Kleuz. They were so exhausted that they were scarcely able to speak, and it was not until hours after their return to Saada that they were in a fit state to tell their story to Texhard.

Little by little he pieced together the account of what had befallen Kleuz and his band. At the start, the expedition had prospered, for there had been no sign of the Tuaregs and camp had been pitched that evening after a good distance had been covered during the first hours of the march. The night had passed uneventfully and it was a light-hearted band that had set off on the following morning on the second stage of the journey.

Toward noon, when the heat was so intense that any form of exercise became unendurable, Kleuz sighted a large oasis which appeared to be the very place at which to halt for the noonday rest. Accordingly the cavalcade pressed forward as fast as possible towards the welcome shade of the trees which clustered round the water-hole. Horses were unsaddled and the men on the point of throwing themselves down to rest when one of them made an alarming discovery.

Two or three sacks of provisions had inadvertently been left behind at the camp where they had spent the night, and, being strictly limited as to rations, the loss was too serious to overlook. Consequently, it was decided that four of the party should ride back to the old camping ground and retrieve the lost sacks.

Naturally, no one was at all anxious to undertake the work, but finally the matter was settled by the men drawing lots to see who should do the job, and

finally the four men who were unlucky remounted their horses, amid the laughter and chaffing of their comrades, and turned slowly back in the direction from whence they had come.

They had gone about four miles on their journey when the sound of heavy firing from the direction of the oasis made them turn their horses once more. Urging their steeds forward they breasted a high hill from which a view of the surrounding country could be obtained, and gazed down towards the camp. The sight that met their eyes was so horrible that, after sitting spellbound for several minutes, they wheeled round like one man and galloped off in the direction of Fort Saada.

A large body of Tuaregs had attacked the resting white men, and had fallen upon them so suddenly that anything like an armed resistance was impossible, and even as the four white men watched, the firing ceased and the camp was in complete control of the Tuaregs who must have allowed the expedition to get well clear of Fort Saada before they fell on the party when attack was least expected.

To attempt anything in the nature of an attack on the Tuaregs was out of the question, and the one thought in the minds of the watchers was to escape from the horrors they were witnessing. Driving their jaded horses along at as fast a pace as they could manage, the men headed for Fort Saada. Without maps or compass it would have been absolute madness to try to carry on towards the coast, even if the Tuaregs had not been barring the way; as it was, the only possible course open to them was to return to Saada and make the best of a bad job.

In due course they approached the oasis where the rations had been left, and with sighs of relief headed for its welcome shade. They were within three hundred yards of their objective when, without any warning, a volley of shots came from the direction of the trees, and the leading Légionnaire swayed from his horse and crashed to the ground. At the same moment, two of the following three horses staggered and fell, shot by Tuareg bullets. Aided by the fourth rider, the two men scrambled clear, and by a hasty examination satisfied themselves their comrade was dead. Then, taking to their heels, they ran for their lives, followed by another volley of shots from the Tuaregs in the oasis, who were doubtless the rearguard of the attacking force that had swooped down upon Kleuz and his men.

The three men plunged wildly forward, their one idea being to escape from the Tuaregs as quickly as possible. By good luck rather than by judgement, they eventually hit the old camel trail that led to the fort, and along this they staggered. The heat burnt down on them, scorching their skins and inflicting such agonies of thirst that they were driven nearly mad. But all the time, the fear of the terrible veiled men of the desert drove them forward, sometimes walking, sometimes, when they were too exhausted to walk, crawling on their stomachs. With lips and tongues black and swollen they pressed on as well as they were able, though they could not move at much more than a snail's pace. Time and again they were on the verge of giving up, but somehow they managed to rally and carry on.



When they were so exhausted it was impossible to stand, and they were compelled to drag along on all fours; one of the trio croaked faintly, "The Fort!" and pointed ahead with trembling hand to where the walls of Saada loomed up in the shadows. That proved to be the end of their long ordeal.

When the medical orderlies had made the three men as comfortable as possible in one of the sick bays, Texhard paid a brief visit to the men. "It's no good saying anything to you now," he told them. "You're too ill to be any menace to the men under my command, but I must remind you you are liable to be treated as deserters, and as such, must consider yourselves under open arrest until I have an opportunity to decide what will be the best thing to do with you. Let me warn you, though, that at the first sign of any further insubordination from you I shall have you put up against a wall and shot without further delay."

Leaving them to ponder over his words, Texhard went back to the officers' quarters and told an orderly to summon all the *sous-officiers* to come to him immediately.

When they reported to him, he told as briefly as possible the story of the ill-fated venture of the German and his men. "As I look at it," he concluded, "it can signify one thing only. The Tuaregs deliberately made Kleuz and his followers walk into a trap, and now they have been wiped out, the natives will return in full force to attack the fort."

"I agree," said one of the corporals. "Once they taste a little success there's no holding the devils, and it won't be long before they get busy."

"In that case," Texhard spoke slowly, "it looks as if it will be our last scrap in *this* world, for it would be useless to pretend that the situation here is anything but critical."

"It's this utter isolation that's so ghastly," exclaimed one of the group. "If only we could get in touch with Headquarters in some way we should feel there was some hope. But as it is——" He left his sentence unfinished.

"What about the wireless?" asked the infantry sergeant. "Is there no one here who understands the contraption?"

"Vollmar, the Dane, has been working desperately hard to get it mended. The Tuaregs managed to put it so completely out of action that it is likely to be a long and difficult job getting it working again, but he told me a few hours ago he hopes to have it functioning within a little time now."

"And a good thing, too," grunted the quartermaster-sergeant, who until now had taken no part in the discussions. "I've been checking up on the rations still left in my stores, and even by cutting them down to just below half, we've only enough left for about two more days."

"Phew!" groaned Texhard. "I knew we must be running mighty low, but I'd no idea things were as bad as all that. Well, boys, we must just carry on and hope against hope that Headquarters will suddenly wake up to the fact that we're in need of help; mighty badly in need of it too!"

"There's a limit to optimism," grumbled another man. "I would as soon expect manna to drop

from heaven as expect those overfed, fat, lazy swine at Headquarters to do anything useful."

"Perhaps so," retorted the American, "but just understand here and now that although you are quite entitled to your own opinions on the subject, I'll not have the men made any more worried by being told of such things. In fact I want you guys, everyone of you, to grasp this fact; it is our duty to do all we can to cheer the men, and if it comes to my notice that any of you is undermining discipline by telling them that there's no hope for any of us, I'll come down on him like a ton of bricks—and I don't mean maybe!"

"Have you any idea as to when we can expect another little visit from our friends out yonder?" asked the infantry sergeant.

"Well, from what those deserters say, the Tuaregs must still be some distance away. Of course, they can move up much more quickly than they could if they were on foot, but even then I don't think they'll be ready to attack us before dawn to-morrow. They'll want to rest first and organize their different bands. On the other hand, they're not the people to sit quiet for long once they've tasted a little success, and I very much doubt if they'll wait longer than they can possibly help before having another smack at us."

"There doesn't seem to be much for us to do except to sit tight and hope for the best," said the infantry sergeant. "When the attack *does* come we shall have our work cut out with a vengeance, and with the fort undermanned as it is, and the supply of ammunition nearly exhausted, it looks as though

we shall be up against a stiff proposition this time."

Texhard nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "The prospect is anything but rosy, still there's one thing I think you've forgotten and that is the dynamite the English girl discovered down in the cellars. Rightly handled, it may yet turn the scales in our favour. The Tuareg hasn't come up against it yet, and it's certainly a nasty thing to meet for the first time."

He went on to talk of what he proposed to do when the Tuaregs did attack.

"We must judge the right moment carefully. If we use the stuff too soon it may inflict only a few casualties and, on the other hand, if the enemy once succeed in fighting their way into the fort, the opportunity will be lost. You must explain to the men under your command that in no circumstances whatever are they to throw a stick of it until they get word from me. I'm telling you all this in case I get laid out before the right moment comes to give the natives a dose of high explosive. Whoever may have to take over command if I am out of the game, will know exactly what to do. And now," Texhard finished, "you will all return to your troops or sections, and arrangements will be made for all the ammunition that is left in the fort to be rationed out."

"Are we to tell the men it is the last?"

"Certainly," replied Texhard. "It's absolutely essential that you impress on them the need for not wasting a single round, and if they realize that their lives may depend on the way they make the most of every shot they fire, our chances of keeping the enemy out will be greatly increased."

The *sous-officiers* returned to their posts, and Texhard set about making his final preparations for the attack which was sure to be made before long. In a sheltered corner of the square, close to the medical hut, he had a large empty crate placed and then sent round word that all wounded men were to drop into it all the cartridges they had left in their pouches. The medical orderlies were instructed also to take the ammunition from the badly wounded and the dead and put it in the crate whenever they had an opportunity.

The medical orderlies themselves were warned they would be expected to do their share of fighting if the necessity arose, and were allotted to various troops to which they had to report. A hasty inspection of the wounded men was held and those who were considered capable of performing light work were allocated to different tasks, which would leave the others free to concentrate entirely on the job of keeping the Tuaregs at bay when the attack was made. The seriously wounded were carried to a hut which seemed to Texhard to be the safest building in the barracks, and Joan Lexham, now the only woman left in the fort since Kleuz and his men had ridden off with the others, undertook to look after the sick bay.

The cooks were ordered to have a meal in readiness, and Texhard, realizing it was essential to stake everything on the success of the next fight, told them to prepare full rations instead of the half portions that had been served for days.

Men fight many times better when their stomachs are well filled, and if the defenders were to be compelled to go into action half starved, both their mental

and physical powers would be undermined to an extent which might easily result in the Tuaregs forcing a breach early on in the battle.

The sentries were posted and special orders given to them to keep their eyes skinned for any unusual sights and noises. Nothing remained to be done but to wait with such patience as they possessed for the Tuaregs to launch their attack. Knowing he would require all his wits about him when the trouble broke out, Texhard decided to snatch a few hours of much needed rest while he had the opportunity. Crossing over to his hut, he flung himself on his bed and fell into the deep sleep that comes from complete physical exhaustion.

In what seemed but a few minutes later, he was brought back to reality with a start by a knock at the door. Looking at his watch he saw it still wanted some two hours till dawn, and as he called out the order to enter he speculated as to what could have gone wrong, for the Tuaregs were seldom known to attack at that hour.

The corporal who entered the hut and crossed over to where Texhard sat on the edge of his bed buttoning his tunic was obviously worried over something. Plucking at his belt with nervous fingers he looked apprehensively round the room as though expecting to be attacked by some unseen foe that might be lurking in the shadows.

"Pull yourself together man, for the love of Mike," Texhard rapped out, "and tell me what's worrying you."

"It's Karvof," blurted the corporal. "He was attached to my section for duty, but when I went to

fetch him and the others to take over guard-duty half an hour ago, there was no sign of him."

"Do you mean to tell me you've had the almighty nerve to come and wake me up just because one of your section is missing? What the hell do you think I am, a wet nurse?"

The corporal coughed apologetically. "I wouldn't have worried you, Seregant, in the normal way, but we've searched everywhere for him,—the stables, the canteen, the latrines, the cellars—but there's no trace of him anywhere."

"Well, he can't have gone far," retorted Texhard. "If he'd tried to leave the fort he would have been spotted at once. Anyway, I'm not going to have the whole place turned upside down for a four-flushing son of a cow like that. Go back and carry on with your section and let me know when he *does* condescend to show up and I'll give him such a lesson that he won't forget in a hurry!"

The corporal withdrew, still mumbling apologies, and Texhard, sleep being out of the question, set out on a tour of inspection. If the Russian was up to any mischief, it wouldn't be long before he reappeared, and now that Joan Lexham was in the sick bay with plenty of people to give the alarm should the need occur, he had no worries about her safety.

Shortly before dawn broke, the Tuareg snipers once more came into action opening a fairly heavy fire on the fort. When dawn broke the sentries reported considerable activity on the dunes near the Tuareg encampment where a screen of scouts mounted on their fighting camels was moving slowly to the fort.

In silence the defenders awaited the attack. It was obvious that the enemy were determined to come to grips with the defenders once more, but whether it would be merely a skirmish designed to test the strength of the garrison, or a serious attempt to capture the fort, remained to be seen. As the men gazed over the parapet at the line of mounted Tuaregs, a sudden shout from the square behind made them turn round to see what was amiss.

Across the parade-ground ran Vollma, the Dane, shouting at the top of his voice. As he came nearer the men on the firestep were able to make out what he was yelling, and as the significance of his words dawned upon them, a cheer rose from every throat.

"The wireless is working! The wireless is working!" he cried, exultantly.



## CHAPTER XIII

### BLUFF

THE news that contact with Headquarters had at last been re-established, acted like a tonic on the little band of men in the fort. Outnumbered they might be, but now that their plight was known to the authorities they could look forward with hope to the not far distant moment when the long delayed help would arrive.

Handing over the command to the infantry sergeant, Texhard dashed to the office with the Dane who was now almost crying with excitement and relief at having been able to get his beloved instrument working.

"Send this message over at once," the American ordered. "'Position at Saada desperate. Ammunition and food exhausted. Strength only about fifty men. Being heavily attacked.' Got that? Right, get busy!"

Seating himself at the keys, the operator tapped out his message while Texhard stood by, anxiously waiting. When the message had been despatched the two men remained in an agony of apprehension. Had Headquarters received the message or were they unable to get it? On the success of the transmission depended the life of every man in Fort Saada.

Then the instrument began to tick, and fixing his earphones yet more securely, the Dane took down the message coming through. After a few moments he picked up the pad on which he had been writing and handed it to Texhard.

Texhard read: "Hold on at all costs. Strong relief on its way immediately. Arranging for rations to reach you to-day."

"Well, that's the best bit of news I've had in an age," he exclaimed, cheerfully. "Keep in touch with G.H.Q. and I'll go and hand on the glad tidings to the lads outside."

When he reached the firestep, Texhard found that the line of Tuareg skirmishers showed no anxiety to come to close grips with the defenders. Circling slowly round the fort at a distance of some four or five hundred yards, they contented themselves with taking occasional shots at the walls. It seemed that their intention was to force the defenders to reply, and thereby gain some idea of their strength. But if this was their intention, they were to be disappointed. Not a shot was fired from the fort, and none of the defenders gave any sign of being aware of the existence of the enemy.

Crossing to where the infantry sergeant stood gazing at the enemy lines, Texhard explained the situation to him. Then, calling up the other *sous-officiers*, he instructed them to inform the men that Headquarters were now aware of the plight of the garrison and making all possible arrangements to relieve them at the first opportunity.

When the *sous-officiers* had hurried out to their sections with the comforting news, Texhard turned

to the sergeant. "This puts rather a different complexion on things. Now that our hand is strengthened so much, we can afford to put up a heavier bluff.

intend to do all I can to keep the enemy from attacking until the relief arrives, and the best way to do it is to make him think we're in a position to give him a hell of a time if he storms the fort."

"I agree," said his companion. "But how do you propose to set about it, *mon ami*? We haven't many opportunities for putting up a show. But there," he smiled, "I'm an unimaginative Basque; doubtless the far-famed American imagination will prove equal to the occasion."

"You bet it will!" retorted Texhard, cheerfully. "In fact, I've already got a few little ideas which might help to bluff the simple sons of the desert out there."

"What do you suggest?"

"In the first place, I want you to get hold of half a dozen of the slightly-wounded men who are capable of doing light fatigues."

The infantryman didn't wait to question his colleague further. He set off on his task, and within ten minutes returned with his little party. When they were all assembled Texhard explained what he wanted done.

"Go to the stores and bring up all the band instruments you can find," he ordered. Seeing a look of surprise in their faces, he added: "You needn't think I've gone *cafard*, because I'm as sane as I ever shall be. I'm going to let the Tuaregs see that far from being scared stiff of them and their little games,

we're having an Independence Day celebration of our own."

"But, Sergeant," protested one man, "we've scarcely a man left who is a musician!"

Texhard grinned. "All the better. If you've ever heard the sort of gosh-almighty row that passes for music with these guys you'd realise that the worse the noise you make the more they'll be impressed. Now get a move on and see what you can find."

Half an hour later, the party returned carrying a weird and wonderful collection of musical instruments, all shapes, all sizes, and in all conditions of disrepair. Side drums with broken parchments, wind instruments with several stops missing, two pairs of very discoloured cymbals, and a mixed bag of bugles, trumpets, fifes, and a battered old bassoon formed the star pieces in the collection which was placed in an angle of the walls close to the main gate.

Texhard handed out one instrument apiece to the grinning Légionnaires and instructed them to make as much noise as possible when he gave the word.

"I'm afraid there's no time to hold a rehearsal," he said, "but I'm sure you'll all be able to make up in noise for what you may lack in technique. Anyway, it's noise I want, and plenty of it, so I don't want to find any of you coming over all temperamental when the time comes to strike up!"

One of the men stepped forward. "I was wondering if these might be useful, Sergeant. I found them at the back of Number Three Store." He held out an armful of heavy wooden rattles, such as are used to represent the sound of machine gun fire when troops are on manœuvres.

Texhard's eyes glowed. "Say!" he exclaimed, "many a guy has got the Legion of Honour for less! If we can't put up a good bluff with these, I'm a Dutchman! Hang on to them, my lad, and when you get the order, climb up on the firestep and rattle like the very devil. They'll help to make a few shots sound like a barrage, and should certainly make the enemy think we've as many rounds of ammunition as a Hollywood film star has husbands!"

Encouraged by the silence in the fort, the line of skirmishers drew slowly nearer. Texhard, viewing their approach with growing anxiety, was on the point of sacrificing a few precious rounds of ammunition in the hope of driving them back, when one of the men gave a shout and pointed away to the south-west.

"Look—up there!"

High in the cloudless blue sky had appeared three tiny dots which, even as the men stared, grew rapidly bigger. Soon the deep notes of aeroplane engines came to the ears of the men in the fort as the machines sped straight as an arrow toward Saada.

The Tuareg skirmishers appeared not to have heard the sounds, for they continued to move slowly to their objective, firing as they came. Perhaps it was the heavy wrappings which the tribesmen wear round their heads that obliterated the sound for them, but for some time they appeared not to notice anything.

Nearer and nearer came the machines; soon the defenders recognised they were three medium-sized bombers of the type in general use in France's colonial branch of the Air Force. When they were

within a mile of the fort, the machines dipped sharply and swooped towards the ground just as the Tuaregs, now all too well aware of the approach of this enemy from the sky, turned their camels and headed with all speed for their own lines.

But swiftly though their steeds moved over the sand, the fighting ships of the air moved faster. Long before the riders could reach cover, the machines swooped down upon them. In the cockpit of each machine stood an observer, his hands on the controls of a machine gun, and as the pilots skilfully steered their 'planes in such a way that they were able to enfilade the retreating enemy, they poured a hail of bullets into the ranks of the natives.

And before the Tuaregs had an opportunity to fire more than a few scattered shots at the machines, the pilots had swooped upward, circled rapidly, and once more brought their machines flashing down to where the Tuaregs, now in a state of widest confusion, struggled to reach any sort of cover that would shelter them from the rain of bullets decimating their ranks. Again and again the bombers spiralled and then dived, and each time the bullets from their machine guns found easy victims. In a short space of time not one Tuareg of the line of skirmishers was left alive.

Flying so low over the fort that the defenders could plainly distinguish the features of the pilots and observers, the machines circled twice and as they did so the observers signalled to the men below to take cover. A mad scramble for shelter followed, and as the last man vacated the parade ground, the machines dropped several heavy sacks which fell

with dull thuds on the barrack square. Then with a farewell wave of the hand, the pilots turned their machines toward the Tuareg encampment.

The next minute three deep roars informed the garrison that the machines had unloaded their "eggs" on the Tuareg encampment, but with what success it was impossible to say. Desert bombing is a tricky business for, unless a direct hit be scored, the chances are a bomb will do very little damage, since the yielding sand into which a mis-aimed missile falls, breaks the force of the explosion effectively.

As the bombers, their job completed, headed for their aerodrome, Texhard ran out on to the barrack square, followed by the men. Knowing that the temptation to loot bags of food must be strong in the minds of the half-starved garrison, he called to the bugler to sound the "Alarm." As its notes rang out, the men wavered, then, as the call was repeated, their sense of discipline stood them in good stead, and as one man they hurried to their stations on the firestep.

Calling a corporal, Texhard ordered him to collect a fatigue party and carry the sacks of provisions to the store and place them in safety behind locked doors. As the *sous-officier* busied himself with his task, Texhard next beckoned the master-cook and told him to serve up, without further delay, the double rations he had prepared.

The men, finding it was a false alarm that had sent them running to their posts, started to grumble, and as Texhard walked across to where they stood to their arms, he was treated to many black looks. Ignoring these completely, he took up a position from which he could address the men conveniently.

"Listen to me," he said. "The first thing I want to tell you is that there's no need for you to behave like a lot of spoilt babies. As long as I'm in charge here, I mean to see that discipline is enforced, and if you think that this fort can be run on the smash-and-grab principles some of you seem to favour, you can get that idea right out of those thick skulls of yours. The rations which have just reached us will be divided up fairly among all of you. Meanwhile, I've arranged for you to be served with double rations for your next meal, which will be ready immediately."

The infantry sergeant, who stood beside him, whispered in Texhard's ear: "*Mon ami*, I'm starting to think you're something of a genius. A little time ago someone said we might as well expect manna to drop from heaven as hope for any assistance from Headquarters, and now, behold! The manna!"

Texhard laughed. "Well, the first part of the miracle's happened, but I wouldn't count too much on the second part coming true, if I were you."

He turned again to the men. "As you've just seen, G.H.Q. has come to our assistance with some much-needed rations, but you must realize that it's bound to be some time before the relieving force can reach us. After the treatment the Tuaregs received a few minutes ago, they'll be realising that if they're to get possession of the fort they'll have to put their skates on and not waste any time.

"Earlier to-day, I told you there was a good chance of the enemy attacking soon, but now I tell you it's a stone cold certainty that they'll get busy before many hours. And you can count on it, that



after the surprise-packet they were handed this morning they'll be as mad as hornets with no sting. We're in for one hell of a time, and I wouldn't be doing my duty if I told you otherwise. If we can only knock them for a home run we shall be O.K., because, before they can get going on a second attack, the relief will be here and everything jake."

Giving the order for all but the sentries to stand down and return to their quarters for the meal which the cookhouse orderlies, even now, could be seen carrying over to the men's quarters, the American went across to the office and asked Vollmar if any further news had come through.

The Dane nodded. "A message has just come through," he said. "I've just finished taking it down. A battalion of infantry is on its way with half a squadron of cavalry to act as a covering screen on its flanks. Headquarters is not taking any more risks of a surprise attack, and they're determined that the infantry shall not be held up on the way or obliged to fight before they reach Saada."

"And I agree with them," said Texhard, feelingly. "They'll have quite enough to do when they do get here without having to go careering about the desert chasing the nimble Tuareg."

Cheered by the information, he returned to his own room and taking out his automatic began to give it a thorough overhaul. He was in the middle of doing so when Baring's cousin knocked and entered.

Texhard noticed at once the deep lines of worry that had furrowed the sides of his eyes and lent his face a drawn, anxious appearance that told a tale of mental distress. The young man seemed to be

in a highly nervous state for he shifted restlessly from one leg to the other and his eyes flickered round the room.

"Hullo," said Texhard, cheerily. "You look as though you were going to be taken for a ride by the Black Hand Gang! What's biting you, son?"

The Englishman cleared his throat. It was easy to see he had no liking for the interview which he had sought, and he seemed to find difficulty in coming to the point. At last he gave a shrug that was eloquent of the distastefulness of the task that confronted him. "I'm sorry to barge in on you like this. I want advice—badly—but I don't know anyone else I can turn to for it."

"Well, suppose you cut the cackle and come to the 'osses," suggested the American.

"It's about Joan Lexham," his visitor blurted out.

Texhard sighed. It seemed to him that one girl could cause more trouble in the fort than fifty Légionnaires, and although it was improbable she could be held actively responsible for any of it, the fact remained that life in Fort Saada would be freed of many complications were she not there.

"Come on, Romeo," he said, "let's have all the horrid details!"

The Englishman coloured. It was plain that he disliked the American's matter-of-fact attitude, but he put a good face on the matter. "Since I've been in the fort I've seen a lot of Miss Lexham and I've been able to help her occasionally I think—but the long and the short of it is that I've fallen heavily for her——"

"What the heck do you think this is?" Texhard cut in angrily. "A fort in the Sahara or a petting party in Beverly Hills?"

The other shrugged his shoulders. "You needn't imagine I want any sympathy from you. I don't. But what I do want you to do is to understand the position. I don't know what her feelings are, although I've a shrewd idea that if it came to a test she'd go all out for Duncan. But I'm telling you this because after the scrap I mean to have a shot at getting her for myself."

"Why tell *me* this?" demanded Texhard. "I should have thought Baring was the guy to inflict with your stories of a true man's love."

"Normally, I would have agreed with you. But as it's impossible to say which of us, if any, will come out of the scrap alive, I didn't want to worry old Duncan. If we both come through it'll be all right. I mean to do my best to cut him out, and if he gets a bullet with his name on it, I'll still try to win her. As you're his best friend, I feel it's only fair to you that you should know what I plan. I don't want you to think I'm taking a mean advantage of him by going for Joan after he's been wounded or killed."

Despite himself, Texhard could not suppress the grin that came to his lips. Although his knowledge of English was fairly extensive, he'd never before met a man so true to the type portrayed by sentimental women novelists of the Middle West. He was on the point of making some facetious remark when he realized suddenly that this young man who stood so awkwardly before him, was doing the

right thing according to his lights, at no easy cost to himself.

One of the things the Legion can teach a sensible man, is to respect the moral, social and religious codes of other people, and although Texhard personally had no use for what he mentally dubbed "this durned Galahad stuff," he was sufficiently far-seeing to realize what it cost the man to speak to him in the way he had done.

"Well, son," he said, in more sympathetic tones, "I guess you know your own business best, and I promise I won't do anything to spoil your youthful fun, but it beats me why you should be so mighty certain that you, at least, will be here to tell the tale after the Tuaregs have finished their flying *matinée*."

A boyish grin spread over the face of the young man. "You seem to forget that only the good die young, Sergeant."

Texhard shook his head in mock reproof. "Son," he replied, "that rule of yours may apply in civilian life, but I'm durned if it holds good in the Legion. If it did, the average age of mortality would be somewhere about a hundred and ten! No, a short life and a gay one, seems to be the more suitable motto for all of us, so don't count on getting through the scrap with a whole skin!"

He bade the young man good-bye, and watched him walk out of the room a much cheerier person than when he had entered it. "Durned if I know what to make of these Britishers!" He picked up his automatic and once again began to clean the barrel with a deftness that spoke of much practice.

The task completed to his satisfaction, Texhard thrust the automatic back into its holster and threw it on to his cot. He had decided to go in search of the quartermaster-sergeant, and found that worthy engaged in a heated discussion with the master-cook as to the amount of dried peas which the latter had used for the men's meal, an amount which the sergeant insisted was beyond all reason. Before the row could develop, Texhard buttonholed the irate *sous-officier* and marched him off in the direction of the store in which the newly-received rations were being kept.

"I believe you'd argue about the amount of rations you serve even if it took your last breath to do so," laughed Texhard.

"But naturally, my friend. I am answerable to *le bon Dieu* for my soul only, but to the Quartermaster's Department of G.H.Q. I am answerable for every ounce of dried herbs under my care!"

"You fellows are beyond me!" The American turned the conversation. "Anyhow, come and give the new stores the once-over and tell me how long you think the food'll last."

The quartermaster-sergeant, as quartermaster-sergeants so often do, managed to get in the last word. "That, *mon ami*, depends entirely on how many of our men you allow the Tuaregs to kill." He waddled after his companion to the store.

After the inspection, as Texhard made his way slowly back to the hut, he was stopped by one of the corporals. "Will you come over to the sick-bay, Sergeant?" the man panted.

"What's wrong?"

"I'll show you soon enough," called back the man as he hurried across the square.

On reaching the door to the sick-bay he turned right and Texhard followed to the back of the building. As he turned a corner, which gave on to a narrow space which separated the back of the hut from the wall of the fort, the man stopped abruptly and pointed to the ground a few yards ahead.

Following the direction of the pointed finger, Texhard gave a low whistle of surprise. Face downward upon the ground lay a Légionnaire, a red stain soaking through his blue tunic in the centre of his shoulder blades. And by the silent body lay an automatic pistol which the American recognized as being his own!

"How the devil did this happen?" he demanded.

"It is impossible to say exactly," replied the corporal. "I was in the sick-bay visiting my friend, Metaxa, when I heard a shot at the back of the hut. I dashed out here at once, and was just in time to see a wild-looking figure vanish round the corner and this poor fellow lying on the ground. I'm prepared to swear that the man who escaped was Karvof. But what he was doing here, and what he wanted to kill this chap for, are things I don't profess to understand."

Texhard gently turned the dead man over on to his back.

"So only the good die young do they?" he whispered, softly, as he gazed down at the features of the young man who had left him only a short while ago. "Bad luck, kid. But it may have been all for the best. You seemed to be heading for trouble as hard as you could ride."

The American told the corporal to fetch a stretcher and have the body removed right away. He bent down and picked up his automatic. "This looks like a piece of Karvof's work right enough," he mused. "He must have seen the kid leave my hut and then, as soon as I'd gone out too, slipped in and collared the automatic and gone after the youngster. Karvof must have known the boy was in love with that dame, so he shot him in the back. Well, there's only one thing for it, that is to send a search party for master Karvof and when we find him, put him against the nearest wall and shoot him for the mad dog he is."

Texhard gave the stretcher bearers brief instructions and then went in search of Baring to warn him to be on the look-out for the Russian, who was obviously mad with jealousy. But before he could find his friend, a volley of shots whistled low overhead and the bugler sounded the "Alarm" from the firestep.

The attack was on!

## CHAPTER XIV

### DESPAIR

ACROSS the desert moved line upon line of mounted men. Riding their camels with the immobility of so many graven images, their stillness was awe-inspiring. There was an air of relentlessness about those fierce desert fighters that bespoke the fanatic who would not spare himself in his efforts to drive the infidel from the land where he had no lawful part, and where his very presence was a contamination.

To Texhard, watching the approach of the enemy with anxious eyes, this slow advance was not without its special significance. He appreciated that it not only signified a determination to come to close grips with the defenders of the fort, but also it denoted an unusual respect for the enemy. Clearly the Tuareg were not aware of the true position in the fort, and were anxious to test the strength of the enemy before running any needless risks.

"When I give the word," the American called out, "let them have five rounds rapid. But no more, mind; we can't afford to waste a single bullet."

He called up the slightly wounded men whose duty it was to manipulate the rattles, and posted them at intervals along the firestep, giving final instructions. "As soon as we open fire, work your rattles for all they're worth. There's no need for you



to show your heads above the parapet, but keep your eyes on us, and the moment we cease fire you stop also. Got that?"

"Yes, Sergeant," they replied, taking up their positions and waiting for the order.

The enemy drew nearer and nearer. "Open sights! Five rounds rapid-fire!"

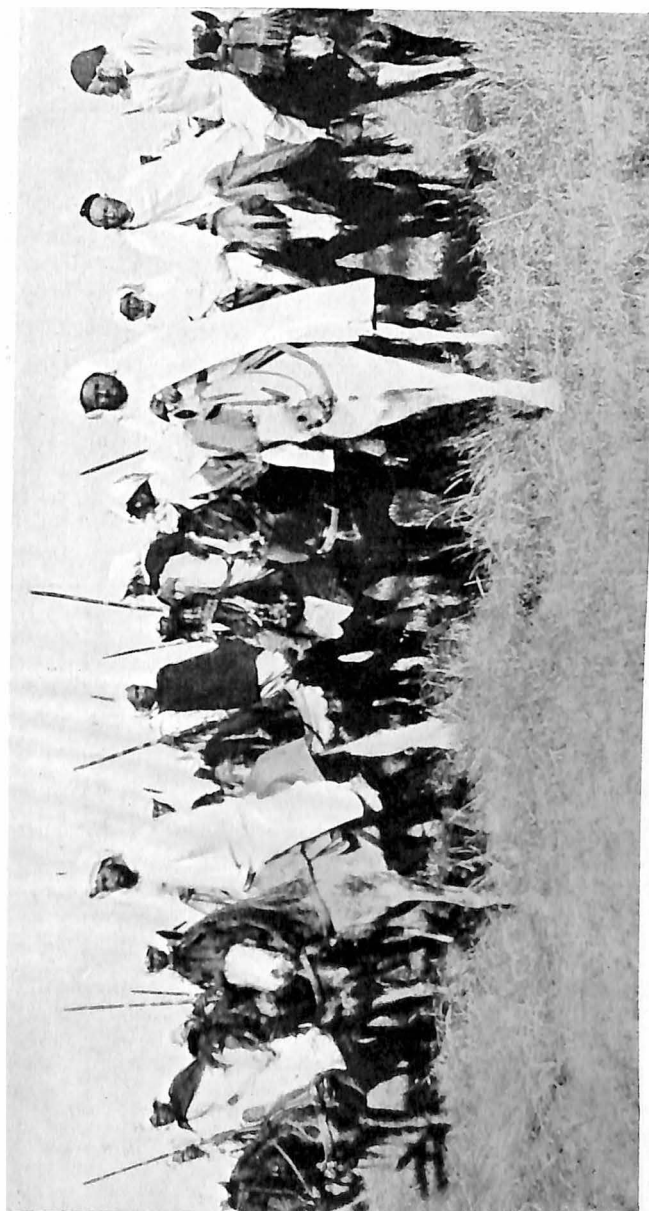
The rifles of the defenders barked and spat their defiance, and the men seated on the ledge of the firestep brought their rattles into action. It was at once evident that what appeared to be so determined a resistance had come as a surprise to the enemy, and before the smoke had drifted away, it was seen that the leading ranks were disordered.

Carrying out instructions, the men had aimed at the camels rather than at their riders, with the result that many of the animals were now lying struggling on the ground and impeded the progress of those who followed. Hastily giving the order to re-load, Texhard sent word up and down the line that the next five rounds were again to be fired at the steeds rather than at the riders.

"Sergeant, don't you think we should aim at the men themselves?" diffidently volunteered a corporal.

"Not on your life!" retorted the American. "When the men are het-up they always fire high without realizing it. If they're told to go for the riders the chances are a lot of shots will fly over their head but if they fire at the camels the high shots stand a mighty good chance of bagging the riders!"

Word came down the line to Texhard that everyone was re-loaded, and as the second line of riders moved



[Photo : Exclusive News Agency]

... THE ENEMY DREW NEARER AND NEARER

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forward over the struggling men and camels, Texhard raised the whistle to his lips and gave a loud blast.

Again the rifles of the defenders spoke, this time with even more telling effect, for by now the men had settled down to their work and that first moment of nervousness which comes to even the most experienced soldier at the start of an engagement had worn off, leaving them cool and deliberate in their work. The advancing line wavered and at last stopped as more and more riders went plunging and struggling down to the sand.

The defenders saw that the first round of the fight was in their favour, but it had been bought at no small price. Eight men lay sprawled out in the most incongruous attitudes that death so often imposes on its victims. Another six had received head or shoulder wounds, and already orderlies were ripping away tunic sleeves and patching up the wounded as quickly as they could work.

The Tuaregs retired slowly towards their lines, but Texhard was not deceived by their apparent submission to fate. Born fighters, they know exactly when to change their mode of attack, and he knew that although the defenders had been accorded a breathing space, it was only because the enemy were prepared to accord it to them of their own free will.

Texhard called to the medical orderlies: "Look mighty sharp and collect ammunition from those who won't be able to use it again. All wounded men capable of carrying on, rest on the firestep till I give the order for them to take up their old positions."

The Tuaregs, having withdrawn to a safe distance, were reforming their ranks with a deliberation that

suggested they were acting in accordance with a pre-arranged plan. Even as Texhard, oblivious of the bullets that the mobile sharp-shooters continued to fire at the walls of the fort in the hope of inflicting stray casualties on the garrison, peered toward the massed ranks, the main body of the enemy divided up into two sections, one circling slowly to the left, the other moving over to the right. As he had anticipated, the enemy on finding that a direct attack would prove too costly, were preparing to move upon the fort from the flanks, leaving their best marksmen to keep up a rapid fire from the oasis and thus force the defenders to keep under cover as much as possible.

Over half the casualties already sustained by the Tuaregs, had been inflicted on the machine-gun crew posted on the highest part of the wall by the main gate. The two bursts of fire from their gun had wrought most damage.

Calling up the corporal of the section, Texhard told him of the plan he proposed to put in operation. "The enemy will try to put you and your crew out of action as soon as they can. And they've a mighty fine chance of doing it while you're in that exposed position. What's more, to judge by their new move they're going to give you as wide a berth as possible while leaving it to their pet marksmen to treat you guys as a bunch of Aunt Sallys."

The corporal nodded. "That is one of the privileges of working a machine-gun," he said, gloomily. "We become the special target."

"Cheer up, misery," grinned Texhard. "You're going to get a break in this game, even if you've never had one before."

"I wish I could believe it."

"Have you a spare gun in the fort?" the American asked.

The other shook his head. "Not one that is of any practical use. There's the one we use for demonstration purposes when instructing new members of the section, but it's not in working order and can't be fired."

"Tell your men to get it in position and bring down the other one that works, as quickly as you can."

"What's the idea, Sergeant?"

"If you'll keep quiet for a couple of seconds, I'll tell you," retorted his superior. "When you've got the dummy gun in position, fix three of the dead men round it in as lifelike positions as you can, and then place two of the walking-wounded on the firestep with their rattles. Tell them that as soon as the fighting starts again they're to keep up as much noise as they can, and if either of them stops for a minute I'll make it my personal duty to go over to them and cut their damned guts out. Then, you will assemble your gun on the wall at the east end of the fort and try to camouflage it as much as possible. The enemy won't expect to be fired on heavily from that quarter, and if you wait your chance, you'll be able to enfilade them at close range."

The corporal nodded, comprehendingly. "A damned good scheme," he said, fervently. "It's the first time I've known the machine-gun section to be handled with real intelligence!"

"Save the bouquets till later," advised Texhard. "Now get busy. When the trouble starts again I

shall leave it to you to use your own discretion when to open fire, but for the love of Mike don't get excited and start up too soon or you'll muck everything up! Right. Now scram!"

Soon the machine-gun section was working feverishly on the erection of the dummy gun, and removing the other to the place selected by Texhard. Fast though they worked, they finished only just in time, for even as the final touches were placed, the Tuaregs once more moved into action.

This time they did not advance slowly, but, sweeping into two flanks, they wheeled rapidly and then bore down on the fort as fast as their camels could carry them. It was obvious they hoped to catch the defenders guessing by the rapidity of their advance, and thus force an entrance before the garrison were able to decide on which flank to concentrate their fire.

In a few moments it would be impossible to keep any detailed control over the defence, and Texhard passed the word down the line that the men were to hold their fire until the whistle gave the signal to open up on the enemy, and then they were to carry on independently. If the enemy were successful in forcing an entrance, the defenders were to concentrate on the entrance to the main office adjoining, which was the wireless room, which Texhard decided to protect till the end.

The Tuaregs swept nearer, and the men opened fire as the whistle sounded. They succeeded in inflicting heavy damage on the enemy, but the riders had now adopted a more open formation which enabled them to avoid the fallen Tuaregs. As they

charged irresistibly forward, Texhard noted that their sharpshooters kept a heavy fire on the machine-gun post which had been abandoned, and the riders appeared to be giving a wide miss to that part of the country which was in the immediate line of its fire.

Meanwhile, the corporal in charge of the remounted gun, wisely held his fire, and it was obvious to Texhard that he was waiting for the advancing riders who were swooping in from the left flank to get between the sharpshooters in the centre of the line and his own gun, before letting drive at them. By doing so he would screen his men from the riflemen, who would otherwise have been enabled to register a steady and accurate fire on the position.

Suddenly, yell upon yell broke from the advancing hordes as they found no further resistance seemed to be coming from the fort, and at that moment Texhard gave the signal to fire. The enemy to the left flank, finding they had got out of position sufficiently to enable the defenders at the far end of the fort to enfilade them, swung across to the opposite flank from which quarter the fire from the fort had been almost non-existent.

Seizing his opportunity, the corporal in charge of the machine-gun opened a withering fire on the massed raiders. In a moment the scene became one of confusion. Caught in a trap of their own making, the Tuaregs were mown down at such a rate that the ground became a veritable shambles, and for one moment Texhard's hopes rose high. If only the enemy could be thrown into sufficient disorder, the attack might yet be beaten off before it developed

into a hand-to-hand encounter, which must inevitably tell heavily on the weakened garrison.

This was not to be. Another large body of riders, taking advantage of the tumult on their own left flank, had executed a wide encircling movement behind the front ranks, and even as the thought passed through Texhard's mind, a warning shout from the far wall told him the enemy were already at its foot.

Calling to a party of *Légionnaires* on his immediate left to follow him, he dashed across the square and on to the opposite firestep, just as the first of the white-robed figures clambered into the fort. Firing his automatic into the centre of the group of Tuaregs, he was soon in the thick of the fight, and, wresting a wicked curved knife from the hands of one of the natives, he laid about him with such a vigour that it was an example and inspiration to his comrades.

Backwards and forwards the fight swayed, now the Tuaregs and now the white men pressing their opponents back. Out of the corner of his eye the American saw the machine-gun corporal and his squad dashing across the ground with their gun, which they hastily brought into action on the opposite wall.

The yells and cries of pain from the enemy told its own tale of a surprise attack that had all but succeeded. Even as he struggled and fought Texhard found time to offer up a silent thanksgiving for the initiative of the corporal that had saved the situation, anyway for the time being.

Startled by the noise from the wall behind them, the Tuaregs halted in alarm, and in that moment the panting *Légionnaires* flung themselves on their



enemy with a renewed vigour. Using their bayonets as daggers they slashed mercilessly at the natives, stamping on the fallen bodies of the foe in their wild determination to inflict as much harm as possible to them. Mad with the lust of battle, they yelled wild threats and imprecations at the Tuaregs, who gradually backed to the wall over which they had clambered so vigorously a few minutes previously.

The natives, with their backs to the wall, attempted to make a last stand, but one of the wounded machine-gunners on the parapet behind them, raised his rifle, and swinging it over his head brought the butt crashing down first on one skull then on another. As he attempted to lay low a third, and swung up the rifle once more, he suddenly lurched forward and, with blood gushing from his mouth and ears, crashed to the ground and lay still. But his sacrifice had not been in vain. His action was enough to put the seal on the fate of the other natives. They turned to scramble out of harm's way, but were battered to the ground in the attempt.

Meanwhile the main attack had lessened in its severity. The Tuaregs had obviously counted on being able to force an entry, not only from the rear of the fort but also from the front, and had it not been for Texhard's initiative in moving the position of the machine-gun, there could be little doubt but that they would have succeeded. As it was, their plans had miscarried and they were now wavering perceptibly.

Texhard realized the position. "Play, you swine!" he yelled frantically. "Play as you've never done before."

The wounded men seized their instruments and launched into a vast wave of appalling discords and broken notes that must have carried for miles in the still air of the desert. The effect on the Tuaregs was electrical.

That their enemy was nearly at the last gasp had been obvious; that they should choose this of all times to hold a religious thanksgiving to their heathen gods, filled the superstitious hearts of the natives with terror. Brave and fearless fighters as they are, the Tuaregs have all the pagan beliefs of their race, and as the appalling notes rose louder they were seized with panic. That they would recover from their alarm too soon for the comfort of the defenders, was inevitable, but at this moment no power on earth could have driven them to those walls from which issued such terrifying sounds.

As they turned tail and fled back to their own lines, a hoarse cheer came from the little band who still remained standing. They had had heavy losses, but had at least succeeded in keeping the enemy from capturing the fort.

Again Texhard rallied his men and gave orders for the dead to be searched for ammunition, and a huge tarpaulin placed in one corner of the barrack square. The dead Tuaregs he intended to throw over the walls, and was indeed on the point of giving the order when an idea siezed him. Gruesome though it was, he could afford to ignore nothing that might mean added hope for the garrison.

He ordered two men to cut off the heads of the dead Tuaregs. As the men stared at him in horror, he rounded on them, a note of hysteria sounding

in his voice. "Do what I tell you, fools and sons of fools," he cried. "Don't you see it may save your own greasy skins. Here, come on, I'll lend a hand."

In a short time the grizzly task was finished and then, crossing to where the dead of the Legion lay, he collected the requisite number of kepis which he planted firmly on the heads of the dead Tuaregs. Having sent the men to bring him all the discarded rifles they could find, he placed a head, complete with its strange headgear, on the barrel of each rifle.

Now he called up some of the wounded. "Take these," he exclaimed, pointing callously at the rifles with their strange ornamentations, "and as soon as I give the word, walk up and down the firestep with them, but take care not to hold them too high; I just want the top half of the heads to show."

Without waiting to see what effect his orders had on the men, Texhard hurried back to the parapet overlooking the enemy lines. Of the *sous-officiers* only one corporal remained. The infantry sergeant, half his face blown away, lay propped up against the parapet as he had stood when death claimed him. The corporal of the machine-gun section had found his gloomy forebodings had, after all, proved correct, and now, with two shattered arms, hovered between life and death in the sick bay. The gun itself had been put out of order by a stray bullet that had smashed its way into the chamber; and of the original crew only one remained unhurt.

Fifteen of the men remained who were able to carry on when the next attack came, and despite the fact that Texhard had done all he could to

preserve his precious store of ammunition, there were not five rounds a man remaining.

Vollmar, the Dane, acting on instructions, was helping to carry the wounded to shelter, but Texhard, calling him away, bade him return to the wireless room and get in touch with G.H.Q. immediately to tell them of the desperate position in which the garrison stood. The Dane hurried away, but a few moments later he returned, his face white as a sheet.

"The wireless," he gasped. "It has been smashed to atoms! Someone has been in the room and battered the apparatus so that it can never be used again. But I know who did it!" He held out a large clasp knife in its sheath. "I found this on the floor."

Texhard turned it over in his hand, and as he did so muttered an oath. "Karvof!" he muttered, pointing to the scratched initials on the sheath. "I'd forgotten all about the man. He must have been hiding somewhere and then slipped in to do the damage. The swine is mad. Give the order that he's to be shot on sight if he shows up again."

"And I hope I'm the one to spot him first!" said a familiar voice at his elbow.

Duncan Baring stood there. He had come up while Texhard was speaking, and now stood glaring in the direction of the wireless room. "The swine did in my cousin. A quick death would be too good for friend Karvof."

"Well, son, you'll have to take your chance with the rest of them. I can't save Karvof specially for you!"

"What shall I do about the wireless?" the Dane asked.

"What the heck *can* you do?" Texhard retorted. "You'd better rejoin your section, if there's any of it left to rejoin, and carry on with the other men on the parapet."

Baring assisted Texhard to distribute the sticks of dynamite to the men capable of throwing them. The American took pains to explain that on no account were they to knock the sticks in any way, but to protect them carefully, for if they exploded prematurely it would destroy the last chance left to the defenders of keeping the enemy out of the fort till the relief force arrived.

Almost before the task was finished, one of the three sentries on guard gave warning that the enemy were once again massing at the oasis, and the men were commanded to stand to their posts. It was a pitifully small and weary little body of men who prepared to face the Tuareg hordes once more; there was not a man among them but knew that if the enemy were to attack with determination, there would be little hope of keeping the natives out of the fort any longer.

Once again Texhard called on the wounded men to make all the noise possible on their band instruments, and, at the same time, ordered others of the less badly wounded to bring up their ghastly relics and parade up and down the parapet at irregular intervals, turning this way and that so that the heads of the Tuaregs gave the impression from a distance of being those of a strong body of men guarding the firestep.

Through his field-glasses, Texhard saw the manœuvre *was* making a marked impression on the enemy.

Pointing and gesticulating, the Tuaregs viewed these demonstrations of strength and determination with clear signs of alarm, and the American noticed, with satisfaction, that they appeared anything but eager to join battle once again with an enemy who seemed to have unlimited supplies of troops in reserve, and far from suffering from the previous onslaughts were even now celebrating among themselves.

Texhard told the men as briefly as he could of the success their ruse was having. "Carry on as long as you can," he urged them. "Every second we can delay the attack is of vital importance, for it means that if we get a lucky break—and God knows we deserve one if ever a bunch of guys did—the relief will be along before the durned niggers can make a home for themselves here. Keep it up, boys, and we'll still live to see the inside of a café again!"

The men redoubled their efforts, and every one on the firestep gazed anxiously at the enemy, who still showed no sign of wanting to join issue with the garrison. The delay was welcome in more ways than one, for, apart from the mental strain, the men had suffered physically, and these precious moments of lull enabled them to rest as well as they might on the hard firestep on which they stood.

At last, a small band of riders moved slowly forward from the oasis and Texhard determined to make one final effort to keep them in check by giving them the impression that the fort was still heavily manned. Serving out every round of unspent ammunition that could be found in the fort, he assembled the men with the rattles and bade them stand by in readiness to act as before as soon as the word was given.

"When I give the word, I want you to open up on those guys over there," he said to the men on the firestep. "I shall give the command to open fire when they're still a good way off, so take your time between each shot. The men down behind you with the rattles will do their best to make the Tuaregs believe we're putting up a hot fire, and if you can make every one of your shots find a mark it will be an enormous help. The enemy are not a bunch of suckers, and if they realise it's all thunder and no lightning they won't be scared to play in the rain for long. Remember, then, every bullet must find a billet"—with a faint smile, he added—"even if that last remark isn't a hundred per cent original, it is a hundred per cent important!"

The men loaded their rifles carefully and waited quietly for the word of command to open fire for the last time. The majority of the men of the Legion are expert shots, and among the handful of defenders were some who had earned their marksman's badges at some time in the past. And never would their skill stand them in greater stead than at this moment of their lives when bullets were more precious than gold to all of them.

The Tuareg party came slowly and cautiously forward across the desert. Texhard looked down to where the men with rattles sat waiting his order. Even at that moment he couldn't help thinking how like members of some philharmonic orchestra anxiously watching for the first movement of the conductor's baton, were these ragged, dirty scarecrows, to whom nothing remained but the will to fight on at all costs.

But there was little time to indulge his fancy in such a way; the enemy were already half-way to the fort,<sup>9</sup> and he had no intention of letting them get close enough to know how affairs in the fort really stood. He waited for thirty seconds, then gave the command to fire.

With a crash the rifles of the defenders spoke. The men had fired with as steady a deliberation as though they were safely on the rifle range of their own barracks. Texhard saw their shots finding their mark with telling effect. The Tuaregs fell like ninepins, and before the last shot had been fired they were in full flight once again.

"Bluffed 'em, by jiminy!" yelled Texhard, exultantly. "There's nothing like holding out on a busted flush if your opponent is afraid to see you!"

Even as he spoke, one of the wounded men who had been carrying the head of a Tuareg on his rifle, gave a wild yell and before anyone could stop him had sprung from the wall of the fort, and, shrieking at the top of his voice, dashed headlong towards the Tuareg lines, his ghastly burden waving wildly as he ran.

Texhard turned a white, drawn face to the man standing next to him. "My God," he said, slowly, "I spoke too soon!"

The other looked at him in surprise. "But he's no use to us. The poor devil's gone *cafard*."

"You durned fool," Texhard almost sobbed, "don't you realize that when the enemy see what he's carrying they'll know we've been doing nothing but putting up a mighty bluff? Well, we're for it now, all right!"



## CHAPTER XV

### TRIUMPH

THE Tuaregs made no sign of seeking to molest the poor devil who advanced towards them, screaming and waving his rifle above his head. Like all Eastern people, they regard the mad as being in some way sacred, and are very loth to lay hands on them for fear that the devil, which is possessing the victim, will, when deprived of a home, seek refuge in their own bodies. But when the man came nearer, a sudden shout went up as they saw that the head he bore was not that of a Légionnaire but one of their own number.

The next moment they had drawn out of range behind the low sand dunes that bordered the oasis and it was evident a council of war was about to be held.

When the firing from the fort had stopped, Joan Lexham stepped out of the sick-bay in the hope of finding what was happening to the defenders. The strong light dazzled her after the comparative darkness of the hut, but as she began to see more clearly, she stopped walking and stared with eyes round with horror at the firestep upon which the defenders, wounded and fit alike, stood gazing anxiously at the Tuareg lines.

Creeping stealthily across the parade-ground was a wild, unkempt figure which she recognized with a

cold shock as Karvof. In his hand was a wicked, long-bladed knife, and even as she stared in horror, he drew up close behind the figure of Duncan Baring and raised his arm to strike. Realizing, in a flash, that if she called out, the Russian would act before Baring, or any of the others had a chance to prevent him, the girl grabbed hold of the small automatic in her pocket that Texhard had insisted on her carrying in case of desperate emergencies. Quickly, but steadily, she levelled it at the back of the Russian.

Never before had she fired such a weapon, but she managed to control her fright sufficiently to take aim and press the trigger. The next moment a scream came from the Russian, and as the men on the parapet swung round to see what had happened, he flung up his arms and crashed to the ground, the knife gleaming in the sunlight, as, flying from his hand, it curved through the air.

Joan sank to her knees with a little choking cry, and buried her face in her hands. The next moment strong arms were round her and she was lifted gently to her feet again. Looking into the eyes of the man who stood regarding her with grave concern, she shuddered.

"I—don't know—how I did it!" she gasped. "It's too awful!"

"It was either his life or mine," Baring said, gently. "Karvof has been insanely jealous of me for days, and I knew he meant to get me sooner or later, as he got my poor cousin. Still," he went on, rallying her, "if you would really rather he'd killed me, it's a different matter!"

Joan smiled weakly. "You mustn't say such things, dearest!" she whispered, reprovingly.

Baring laughed. "I'll prove I didn't mean them as soon as ever we get out of this infernal fort," he told her. "Now that my cousin has set my mind at rest over a matter that might have affected my whole life, there's no obstacles to prevent my asking you an important question."

"And you need not fear what my answer will be," whispered Joan. "So all there will be left for us to do is to live happily ever after!"

A warning shout came from the battlements, and Baring pushed the girl gently back to the sick-bay. With a confidence he was far from feeling, he assured her he would soon rejoin her. The next moment he was with Texhard on the firestep.

"Well," drawled the latter, "I'll certainly withdraw my remarks about the trouble dames are about the place. If it hadn't been for that girl of yours, comrade Karvof might have added you to his bag, and things are so desperate that I can't spare even a useless guy like you!"

As though in confirmation of his remarks, the watchers saw a large body of Tuaregs ride out from the oasis and head straight for the fort. Their general bearing was much more confident than it had been on their last two sorties. It was clear they feared nothing more from the defenders.

"There's nothing for it but the dynamite, boys," Texhard called. "After that, back with you all to the officers' quarters. We'll make a last stand there, and remember that to surrender means a durned sight worse end than to die fighting, so it'll pay you

all to do the gallant young heroes act to the bitter end."

Straight to the walls of the fort rode the Tuaregs; there, dismounting from their camels, they advanced to scale the stonework of the outer defences. Their powerful knives grasped between their teeth, they stood glaring up at the walls upon which no defender was to be seen.

"Let 'em have it, boys!" Texhard seized a stick of dynamite in each hand and hurled them down on to the massed ranks of the Tuaregs. His men followed suit, and, as the sticks of explosive burst with a roar and the acrid fumes of the nitro-glycerine rose choking and half blinding the defenders, the yell and howls of rage and agony that rose from the base of the walls told of the havoc they had made.

Peering cautiously down, Texhard saw that very few of that vast attacking party remained alive. The dynamite had exacted a fearful toll. Some maimed and blinded struggled painfully from the ranks of the dead and staggered away to their own lines.

Had he but known the potency of the explosive, it would have been quite sufficient to have used half the amount and reserved the remainder for any further attack that might materialize. "Well, we certainly made a durned good job of it," he muttered. His eyes travelled over to the main gate. "A durned sight too good a job!"

The force of the explosion had been so great that the heavy gates now swung drunkenly on their shattered hinges, leaving the entrance to the fort

wide open. Even as the significance of the situation dawned upon him, a party of some fifty riders appeared from the direction of the oasis and bore down upon the fort, shouting and yelling as they came. The Tuaregs were throwing their remaining men into the battle, and it seemed that, after all the garrison had suffered, they were to be defeated in the end by sheer weight of numbers.

There was no time to attempt any proper defence. The wounded had begun barricading up the sick-bay in which all the serious cases lay, and now that the wireless was completely out of action, there was nothing to be gained by dividing up the tiny force. Texhard called to the men to follow him over to that building and assist in improvising such defences as could be arranged at a moment's notice.

Mattresses were hastily thrust into windows and beds piled against the doors. The men worked like maniacs to secure the hut from direct shots, and as they struggled and sweated, Baring crossed over to where Texhard stood encouraging them and giving instructions.

"What's the use of doing all this?" Baring demanded, pointing to the crude defences that were springing up. "We can't hope to hold out here for more than an hour at the outside."

Texhard nodded. "Personally, I should have said fifteen minutes was the maximum," he replied, coolly, "but don't let me seem unduly pessimistic."

"Then why on earth——" began the Englishman.

"Listen, son." Texhard placed a strong hand on the other's shoulder. "I know as well as you do that we haven't a hope here. As soon as the Tuaregs

find we're going to fight to the last ditch they'll take steps to stop us from doing so."

"How will they do that?"

The American laughed gruffly. "Smoke us out, old son, but I've taken the precaution to see that there're no fires, matches, or other useful things left in the place, and as the Tuaregs are certain not to have any with them, it will mean some of them will have to go back to camp for what they require. Then, if the guard they leave behind is sufficiently weak to give us a chance, we'll make one last desperate attempt to come to grips with them."

"It's a damned risky proposition," Baring said, "but in the circumstances I don't see what else we could possibly do. The gambler's last throw and all that sort of thing, eh?"

"Don't talk to me about gambling," growled the American. "Only a short time ago I said I'd won with a busted flush, and then the joker popped out and put the kybosh on the hand!"

The sound of hoarse shouting brought the defenders to their feet. Texhard, who had stationed himself quickly at a crack which had been left in one of the windows, called back to the men: "They've ridden into the square and are nosing round to see where we've got to. They'll find out soon enough."

The sound of shuffling, slipped feet sounded on the hard earth outside the door of the hut, and guttural whispers could be heard. The next moment a shout, sounding unnaturally loud to the white men inside, rang out, and fists beat upon the door which, luckily, held strongly against the tattoo that increased

in violence as more and more of the Tuaregs flung themselves upon it.

At the same time, other of the natives made a determined attack on one of the windows, the defences of which suddenly gave with a crash of splintering wood, and the next moment a strong brown arm thrust through the narrow gap and groped wildly round in search of the catch to the window. As the men stared spellbound, Texhard crept forward, a bayonet in his right hand. He plunged the weapon with all his force into the arm, midway between the elbow and the wrist, with such force that the sharp point of the bayonet, driving its way clean through the man's arm, transfixed it to the woodwork of the wall behind.

A yell of agony came from outside the window as the bayonet drove its way through flesh and sinew, and the shouts of excitement from other natives mingled with the howls of pain from their comrade. The sounds of hammering on the door and window ceased, and there were sounds of loud and heated argument.

"That shows them they can't come and break up a quiet family party without having to pay for it." Texhard withdrew the bayonet from the arm, and the next moment the arm was slowly withdrawn.

"Next customer, please," called one of the men, and, despite the terrible plight in which the defenders were caught, a grim laugh greeted the sally.

"The trouble with those guys is that they're such mighty slow thinkers," Texhard said, as the sounds of argument went on unceasingly. "It takes them about ten minutes to decide what to do next!"

But this proved to be an over-statement, for barely two minutes elapsed before the American reported half the band outside had ridden from the fort leaving their comrades to mount guard over the hut.

"What do you make of things?" asked Baring.

"About as bad as they can be," returned Texhard, shaking his head. "In ten minutes' time the Tuaregs will be back with their fire materials and then we shall be smoked out."

"Is it worth trying to tackle those fellows left on guard out there?"

Again the American shook his head. He was plainly feeling that time was the thing to fight for, since the only hope of salvation lay in the arrival of the relief force now on its way to Saada.

"How much revolver ammunition have you left?"

Baring then enquired.

Texhard made a brief inspection. "About twenty rounds, but I'm not going to waste it on those brutes out there. We may need it for ourselves when the time comes."

One of the more seriously wounded of the *Légionnaires*, who had been steadily growing more feverish, suddenly broke out into a wild delirium, shouting, singing and yelling as he struggled to escape from the cot in which two of his comrades held him down. As the sound of his high-pitched voice increased in volume, the Tuaregs outside ceased their excited chattering and sudden silence descended upon them. They must have been alarmed by the sound of the wretched man's hysterical ravings, and at a loss to know what to do now they were in the presence



of one who was obviously possessed of so powerful an evil spirit.

Texhard, peering cautiously through the narrow aperture, in one of the windows, saw the natives were standing in a silent, scared group, their eyes rolling whitely with fear as they glanced at the hut from which the sound proceeded.

"Wait till the other Tuaregs come back," Texhard said to his companions, "then, when I give you the word, set up as loud a howling as you can."

"But," protested Joan, "what about my patients. Some of them are terribly ill, poor men, and the noise——"

"Sister, I know just how you feel about those poor guys," said Texhard, placing his hand gently on the girl's shoulder, "and believe me I sympathize too. But at a time like this, we can't afford to be considerate of the comfort of other people. If we can do anything that'll benefit the majority, well, it's up to us to do it, and if some suffer, it's just the luck of the game."

Joan nodded. "Yes, you're right," she said, slowly. "But it does seem hard."

"It is hard, but you can take it from me, these men would be the last to stop us. One of the few useful things the Legion teaches a guy is to think of the safety of his comrades sometimes."

From the direction of the main gate, now came sounds of clattering and shouting. The Tuaregs were returning, bringing with them probably the materials to light the fire that was to smoke the defenders out or suffocate them where they hid.

Texhard turned to his friend, a wry smile on his face. "This looks like the last verse of the song," he said, ruefully. "Every one of you guys have put up a mighty good show, and if you hadn't backed me from the word 'go' we certainly wouldn't have been able to hold out as long as we have done. It's a mighty tough break that all our efforts have gone for nix, but that's the luck of the game. Well, we can console ourselves with the thought that we've put paid to a mighty big bunch of niggers."

"Yes," Baring agreed. "This looks like the end right enough. But must we stop here like rats in a trap? Why can't we go out and have one last scrap with the swine, Texas?"

"Because it wouldn't be a scrap. It would be slaughter! And once you're dead it's no good trying to come to life again. It just can't be done, son!"

The Tuaregs were now talking together outside the hut, in short, excited sentences. Whether they were debating on the advisability of setting fire to the hut immediately or waiting till the poor fellow had ceased his delirious ravings, it was impossible to say, but the natives certainly seemed to be in no great hurry to get busy with their task.

Abruptly the talking ceased. The silence was startling. Texhard peeped through the little hole in the wall from which he could gain a restricted view of the parade ground outside, and gazed out at the invaders. They stood perfectly still in the strained, tense attitudes of men who are listening with all their power to some faint sound, and he wondered if they were waiting for the remainder of their party to arrive before starting operations.

Then, so faintly that he could only just hear them, came the notes of a bugle. What it sounded he could not tell, but even from that distance he recognized the tone.

The Legion was here at last to aid its sons!

The Tuaregs dashed for their camels, but before they could mount, a clatter of horses' hooves sounded in the gateway and into the square dashed two troops of cavalry in their blue uniforms. Charging down on the enemy, they made short work of cutting down the Tuaregs, but before they had so much as sheathed their sabres the door of the hut flew open and Texhard staggered out, followed by the five remaining men who were still able to stand.

The officer in charge rode up to where the little group stood. "Who's in charge of this abbatoir?" he demanded, gazing round at the battered, corpse-strewn walls.

"I am, sir," Texhard saluted as he spoke.

"And where is the garrison?"

A grin spread over the American's face, as he pointed to his bedraggled, weary, little group. "This, sir," he said simply, "is the garrison!"

"*Mon dieu!* And you mean to say you and this handful of scarecrows are responsible for all this carnage? Well, if only there were twice the number the rest of the Legion might return to France—you seem quite capable of dealing with the entire native population of Africa on your own!"

At a table set in a quiet corner of one of the best restaurants in Tunis sat a little party of three—two

men and a girl. In that atmosphere of snowy napery, gleaming silver and scented flowers, Fort Saada seemed to belong to another world.

The *sous-lieutenant*, in the conspicuously new uniform which carried the ribbon of the Croix de Guerre on the left breast, raised his glass to the other two. "Well," he said, "here's wishing you two all the happiness and good luck you wish yourselves."

"Thanks, old man," replied the Englishman in the dinner jacket, "I only wish you'd taken your discharge, too, when you got the chance."

Texhard laughed. "I'm not as brave as you," he retorted. "You aren't afraid to dip into the sea of matrimony, but I'm so scared of it I prefer the sand of the desert—it's a durned sight more healthy!"

"Including Fort Saada?" Joan Lexham demanded, with a little reminiscent smile.

Texhard nodded. "Say," he exclaimed, "if I can hold out against a Grade A dame like you, I guess holding out against all the Tuaregs in Africa is 'pie to me! Yes, I'm safer in Fort Saada!"

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