

# THE STRANGE CASE OF SERGEANT PRON.

A Story of the French Foreign Legion.

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ILLUSTRATED BY ERNEST PRATER.

"I have seen many queer things done in war," writes the Author—himself an old Legionnaire—"but perhaps the strangest of all is that here related, in which the principal actor was my old comrade Sergeant Pron." Mr. Martyn unfolds a most exciting story, with an entirely unlooked-for ending.



HAVE seen many queer things done in war, things that I would never have suspected the doers of being capable of—contradictory actions altogether opposed to my conception of the characters of the men involved, and for which I could find no explanation that fitted the facts.

Perhaps the strangest of all such cases to come under my notice was that in which the principal actor was my old comrade Sergeant Pron, as sane a man, and as good a soldier, as ever sported the one golden chevron of a sergeant of the French Foreign Legion.

Scientific psychologists may possibly account for what Sergeant Pron did on that March night in Upper Tonquin, but explanation of it has always been beyond me. No psychologist could raise for me the veil of mystery that shrouds my comrade's action. To me, no matter what explanation of it science may give, it will be a mystery as long as I live.

Here are the facts. If you can extract any explanation from them that will be in any degree plausible you will do more than I have been able to compass in the twenty-nine years that have passed since the incident happened.

In the spring of the year 1888 we of the *battalion de marche* of the Legion found ourselves at Vinh-Thuy, in Upper Tonquin, massed with a battalion of "Marsouins," or Colonial Infantry, and a regiment of Tirailleurs Tonkinois—native riflemen whom we nicknamed the "Demoiselles," or "Young Ladies," by reason of the feminine cut of their uniforms.

We were a strong flying column, the first

French force to penetrate to that region of wild forests and roaring torrents, and our object was to preach peace to the "Yellow Flag" rebels and the Chinese regulars that were helping them.

They were no slouches at scrapping, those *Pavillons Jaunes*, and they provided me with all the excitement I thought my nervous system would stand, in the ordinary way of business, without my hunting up more trouble from them.

Consequently, I was displeased with Pron when he put my name down as well as his own, without consulting me, in response to the call for a sergeant and a corporal of the Legion to volunteer to accompany a force of "Demoiselles" that was going to hunt up a certain sanguinary person named Mac-Que-An in his native village.

I would rather be alive than dead any time, and I had no patience with a fellow like Pron, who acted as if he only lived for the purpose of getting himself killed.

"You have got the *medaille militaire* already," I growled, "and I don't want it. Why don't you give someone else a chance?"

"Well, old man," he replied, coolly, "if you don't want to go it is easy enough to back out. Just go to the captain and tell him that you have changed your mind."

Of course I couldn't do that. It is one thing to refrain from volunteering for a dangerous job, and quite another to withdraw after one's name is down. If I had gone to the captain, as Pron suggested, my comrades would have discovered that I did not like danger—a secret I had so far kept to myself—and men who shirk danger are not popular in the Legion.

So I went with the party under Captain



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Pouligo, who was charged with the duty of capturing the pirate village of Bac-Quang and rooting out a gang that had considerably annoyed the main body.

For two days we forced our way through dense forest, now groping in the gloom along paths about a foot wide and anon hacking our way through the thick undergrowth, all the time being sniped by invisible foes. It was a beastly experience for a man who had made up his mind that he would rather be found among the missing than be numbered with the slain.

Well, we rushed the village and took it. Then,

I thought, we ought to have "taken our hook"; but the captain was of a different opinion—and he was the man who held the aces. So we built a bamboo stockade and entrenched ourselves.

Then we met trouble with a capital "T." The pirate chief with the Scotch-sounding name was a splendid fighter, and he lost no time. His letting us have the village on easy terms was a mere strategic retreat, and he was a better hand at that game than Hindenburg.

We were only about a hundred and fifty all told, and the Europeans among us numbered

fewer than a dozen, while the followers of Mac-Que-An could be counted by thousands.

They surrounded us and kept us busy day and night repelling their attacks.

And that was not the worst. We were not provisioned or munitioned for a siege, and the food and ammunition began to run short.

We were "up against it," for a certainty, and it was clear to everyone that unless help came very quickly the subsequent course of that campaign would interest none of us much longer.

The Tirailleurs Tonkinois were plucky beggars, and several of them volunteered to crawl through the forest snakewise; but none of them had any luck. I saw the first one wriggle out on his stomach into the night, and he reported himself to me when he returned next morning. His head caught me full in the face when it came whizzing over the palisades at my corner!

When the same thing had happened to three others it became clear to our captain that there was no way out through the forest.

There remained the River Claire, which flowed past one side of our entrenchment and also touched Vinh-Thuy, where the main force was located.

To all appearance, however, it was more hopeless to attempt to get out by the river than through the forest.

I had previously slid down the rapids of the Winnipeg River, and had shot more than one of the Nile cataracts; but those journeys appeared to me mere pleasure-trips as compared with an attempt to get down the Claire to Vinh-Thuy. The river was all cataract, and it was in flood and running like a mill-race.

But it seemed to be our only chance. If we remained where we were it was a certainty that those of us who could not die fighting would have to kill one another to avoid the unpleasant deaths the Yellow Flags inflicted on their prisoners, and if we attempted to force our way through the forest the result would be the same.

There was nothing for it therefore, as our captain explained to us, than for some intrepid adventurers to attempt to get down to Vinh-Thuy by the river. If only one got through relief would arrive in three days.

"It is almost like asking some of you to commit suicide," the officer concluded; "but I am obliged to do it, for it is our only chance. Who is ready to sacrifice himself to save his comrades?"

I wasn't ready to do anything of the sort—I thought that there were a good many there whose lives were less valuable to France than mine. But that wretched Pron took hold of my arm and obliged me to step out to the front with him.

He didn't drag me out, it is true, because I stepped out as jauntily as he did, but I was none the less forced into volunteering. If I had not stepped out as if there was nothing that I liked better than going to almost certain death I should have advertised myself as being wanting in courage. I knew that I hadn't any courage to spare for jobs like that, but I didn't want anyone else to know it.

There were a great many more volunteers than could be employed on the job, but I had no luck, I was one of the five selected, as, also, was Pron.

We had no boat, and if we had had one it would have been useless, for no boat ever constructed could have lived in that rock-strewn torrent; it would have been dashed to pieces before we had gone five hundred yards, for it would have been an utter impossibility to control it.

It was decided that we should take our chance on a raft, constructed of large bamboos solidly lashed together with flexible rattans. Loops were made in the rattans for us to put our feet and arms through, to keep us from being thrown off, and each of us was provided with a long bamboo pole to enable us to fend the raft off the rocks.

When we were making the final arrangements for starting I observed one of the lieutenants speaking earnestly to the captain. The subaltern appeared to be urging some point which the commanding officer was unwilling to concede, for I observed the latter shake his head several times in denial of the lieutenant's arguments. Eventually, however, the youngster won the chief over, as was evidenced by the glad look on his face.

The nature of the lieutenant's request became apparent a moment afterwards, for he jumped on the raft and assumed command of us. I thought then, and I am still of the same opinion, that the captain showed weakness in allowing the lieutenant to come with us. An officer's life is especially valuable when he is serving with native troops, and we five, who were all non-commissioned officers, needed no officer to direct us.

It seemed as if the end as well as the beginning of that forlorn hope would take place within sight of the entrenchment, for we had no sooner pushed the raft off and got it into the whirling current than it made straight for a big sloping rock in the centre of a miniature maelstrom, and all our efforts to prevent its collision with the boulder were vain.

The raft struck with such force that half of it drove right up on the rock, whilst the other half went clear under water. It looked as if our journey was finished before it had well started.



"It seemed to be a sheer impossibility

To make things livelier for us, a party of Yellow Flags opened fire on us from the bank, and as they were posted so that the fire from our entrenchment could not reach them they had matters all their own way. If it had not been for their practice of holding the butt of the rifle under the armpit, which made shooting even at point-blank range doubtful, they could hardly have avoided bagging the lot of us.

As it was, they killed one of the tirailleurs, who was in the act of climbing on to the rock to try to shove the raft off. His death was in all probability the thing that saved the rest of us, for as he pitched backward on top of us, and then rolled off the side of the raft, the sudden shock of his falling weight lifted the stranded end of the raft and let the current grip it again.

As we resumed our journey I heard the faint sound of cheering from our entrenchment, and

the thought occurred to me that our comrades would hardly have cheered if they could have known our real situation. The strain on the raft caused by its collision with the rock had so loosened the lashings that it seemed to me that it must inevitably go to pieces on the next obstruction we met. Moreover, although we had been lightened by the death of the unfortunate tirailleur, our weight was too much for the raft in the rough water we were going through, and as we lay prone—the only way to keep our places—our bodies were more often under water than not, and we were, consequently, frequently in a state of semi-asphyxiation. We were, in fact, much in the position of five flies going down a mill-race on a cork.

Every now and again the raft would strike against a rock that we had either been unable to fend it off from, or that was submerged, and after



that one of us could escape their fire,"

every one of these shocks the lashings became looser. Before we had covered five miles the raft seemed to be breaking up.

It was Pron who remedied that state of affairs. The lieutenant contented himself with addressing words of encouragement to us and exhorting us to have courage, but we needed neither the encouragement nor the exhortation. It is deeds and not words that give men the feeling that things are not so bad as they look. And it was Pron who supplied the deeds here.

He could not give us any orders while the lieutenant was effective, but he could and did set us an example. He quietly set about rebuilding the raft with one hand whilst holding on with the other. It was a self-evident necessity, and yet he was the only one to think about it.

We were grouped in the centre of the raft,

which was much too large for its purpose, and Pron commenced his work by unlashings the outside bamboo on one side.

The lieutenant asked him what he was about, and Pron answered meekly to the effect that he did not want to die sooner than was absolutely necessary, and that he thought the best way to keep alive would be to make the raft stronger by reducing it to half its length and using the bamboos thus made available to double its depth.

Taking the initiative when an officer is present is not the sort of thing that is tolerated in a non-commissioned officer in any army, and the lieutenant told Pron somewhat sharply that he ought to have waited for orders. Pron humbly agreed—and went on with the work.

The officer apparently felt hurt, and he ordered Pron to replace the bamboo,

"*Pardon, mon lieutenant,*" said the sergeant, respectfully. "Those others up there are depending on us to save their lives, and we cannot do it unless we strengthen the raft."

Then he handed the bamboo to me and set about unlashng the next one.

The officer stood up, apparently with the intention of enforcing his command, and just then the raft struck a submerged rock and tilted. The lieutenant fell over Pron and was rolling off into the water when the sergeant caught him by the bottom of his jacket.

"That was a narrow squeak, *mon lieutenant,*" he said, calmly.

"Thank you, sergeant," said the officer. "I think it will be well if I take the other side. You take the corporal here and I will take one of the others, while the other man keeps a look-out."

That was all. The officer set to work with the other corporal—a "*marsouin*"—leaving the remaining *sous-officier* of the "*Demoiselles*" to watch the poling and warn us of our approach to obstructions.

In about half an hour we had so altered the raft that it was stronger than it had been at first, and the officer was so nice to Pron that it was impossible the sergeant could have thought that anything more would be heard of his insubordinate conduct.

By this time our enterprise looked to us to be a great deal less desperate than it had appeared at first. We even began to speculate as to the time we should arrive at Vinh-Thuy.

We felt much less sanguine, however, when the raft took us round a bend in the river and we saw before us a narrow gorge, only about fifty feet wide, down which the water rushed and roared in a manner that suggested the finish of our attempt—and of us.

And the dangers of the rapid were not the only perils we had to face at that spot.

As we got nearer we saw that the rocky bank on our right was lined with Yellow Flags, armed with rifles. *It seemed to be a sheer impossibility that one of us could escape their fire.*

But the apparently impossible is always happening in war. They *did* make some good shooting, but they chose their target badly. The remaining *tirailleur* was killed by a bullet in the brain at the first discharge, and then he was hit about a dozen times after he was dead. The lieutenant, the "*marsouin,*" and myself got through without being touched; but poor Pron had his elbow smashed.

Coolly remarking that his arm would never again be any good for soldiering, he let go his hold of the loop he was hanging on to and tried

to unwind the blue legionary's sash that was about his waist.

I went to his assistance and asked him what he wished to do.

"I just want to bind the arm to my body," he said, "so that it will be out of the way."

"I shall propose you for the Cross, sergeant," said the officer, warmly, "and I am sure that you will get it."

"Thank you, *mon lieutenant,*" replied Pron, simply. He was just the sort of man to regard the Cross of the Legion of Honour as ample compensation for the loss of an arm, and the promise of the officer, given at that moment, must have filled him with pride.

It was a bit premature to talk about honours, however, as we found shortly after we had got out of range of those good American rifles that the Yellow Flags had managed to get from somewhere.

That gorge was several miles long, but we managed to navigate it without a mishap, although it was thickly strewn with rocks. We found trouble awaiting us at the end of it, however.

We knew what was in store for us before we came to it, and we shook hands with one another in the conviction there was no chance whatever of any one of us getting to Vinh-Thuy.

The roaring of falling water and the ever-increasing speed of the raft told us that we were coming to a long drop, and we did not see how we could possibly win through.

In another minute or two we were going over the fall, with our feet and arms hooked into loops in the rattans. I filled my lungs with air and mentally cursed Pron for dragging me into the adventure.

It seemed to me that the raft turned right over on the downward passage, but if that was the case I do not see how it could have righted itself again.

I had the feeling of falling through space and then that I was suffocating for a long time.

But we could not have been under water for more than a minute, for when I had recovered my wits sufficiently to look about me the fall was only so far behind us that we were enveloped in the spray thrown up by the falling water.

The raft was spinning round and round, but it was much more buoyant than it had been. The reason for that was apparent. The lieutenant and the "*marsouin*" were gone.

Pron would have gone, too, in another moment, for his head was hanging over the side and the loop through which he had passed his unwounded arm was broken. He was just clinging to the

raft by his feet, and he was quite unable to help himself, for he was unconscious.

Exhausted as I was, I managed to drag him on board again, and then I must have lost consciousness myself, for when I next looked round the fall was out of sight and we were travelling through comparatively smooth water.

Pron had recovered consciousness, but he seemed to be dazed, and it was some time before I could get anything out of him in reply to a question as to how he felt.

When he did speak he took no notice of that question, but simply remarked that it was hard luck that the lieutenant had been drowned after promising to recommend him for the Cross.

"It does not matter much," I said, grimly, "for if Vinh-Thuy is not very close at hand we shall never get there. The raft will not hold together for another half-hour."

As a matter of fact, however, the raft kept afloat much longer than that. It was still carrying us onward when darkness fell with the suddenness of the region, and left us more hopeless than ever. We could not hope to attract attention in the dark, and it was difficult to see how we could land by our own exertions.

But the luck that had preserved us so far did not desert us. Suddenly we felt the raft ground, and right above us I saw the loom of a bluff that stuck out into the river.

We were saved for the present, but the melancholy cry of a tiger in search of prey told us that we had probably only exchanged one danger for another.

Luck had befriended us more than we dreamed of, however, and the perils of the journey were over.

So near as almost to startle me sounded the "*Sentinelles, veillez*" of a French sentry.

"*France, ami, a l'aide!*" I shouted, with all my might. I turned round to congratulate Pron, and, to my amazement, I saw him running to the top of the bluff.

"Sergeant! Sergeant!" I shouted. "Did you not hear? We are at the French lines!"

But he took no notice of me.

With a vague feeling of coming disaster I rushed after him; but I was



"I was only in time to see him deliberately jump off the bluff into the river."

only in time to see him *deliberately jump off the bluff into the river!*

What caused him to commit suicide? That is the mystery surrounding Sergeant Pron that has always puzzled me, and always will.

Three days afterwards Bac-Quang was relieved, when the garrison was practically at its last gasp.