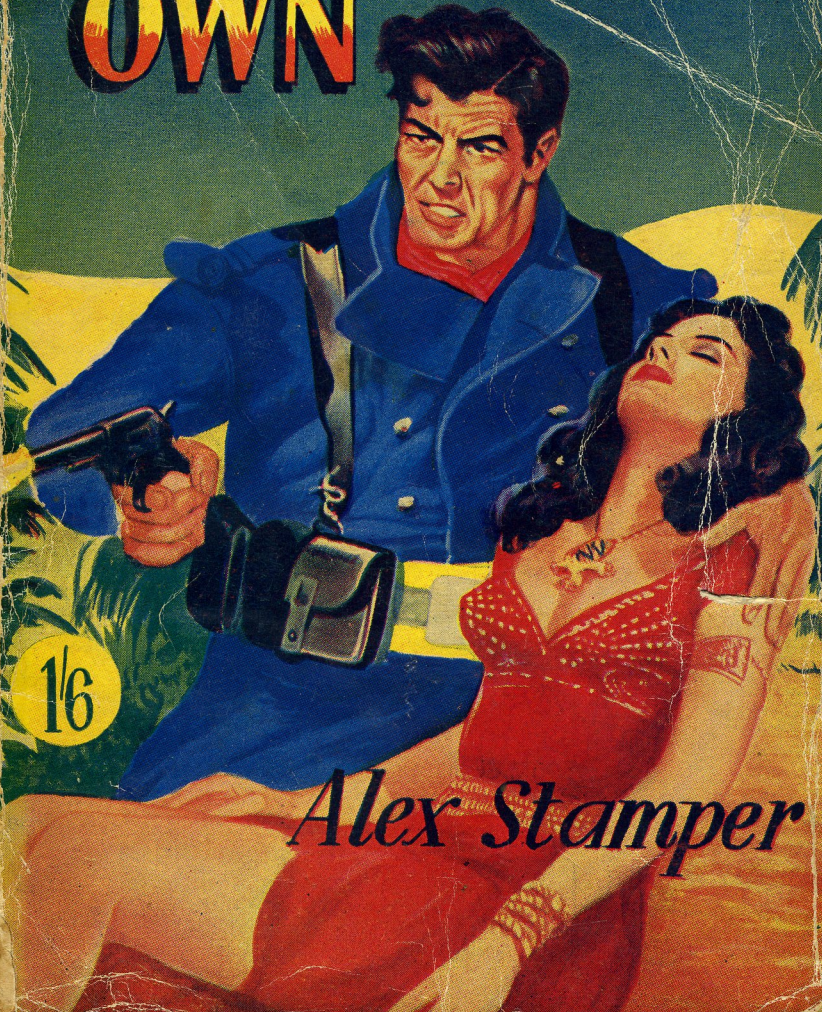


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1/6

Alex Stamper

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H. W. Ross

THE DEVIL'S OWN



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THE DEVIL'S OWN

by

Alex Stamper

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1

jail

BANKS got off the barrack bed and nodded to Buzz. Buzz said: "You're stickin' your neck way out, feller. What's done's done. You go meddlin' and the good Sergeant Lejaune will rap your knuckles—and how that guy can rap knuckles."

"I'm goin' to have one try, anyhow. Just one, Buzz," said Banks. "We're pullin' out at dawn on the rattler, and we gotta have Sen along."

"Yeah, I know," growled Buzz. The big Yank crossed one big foot over the other and gazed up at the low ceiling. The shadows in the barrack room were growing longer. "We're the Three Musketeers. I maybe read somethin' about that way back."

"You read? This is something," said Banks. He buttoned the last button of his tunic. He had to be smart for when he faced Colonel Mentier, one-time commander of the desert fort of Hamad, but who was now temporary commandant of the Siddi Bel Abbes barracks. The colonel was a stickler for the proprieties and an unbuttoned button was tantamount to striking a superior officer so far as the colonel was concerned.

"Okay," said Buzz. "I can read. But you ain't gonna persuade Mentier to let Sen outa the pen. Supposin' you get him out? You think Lejaune will let him alone? Lejaune got him the ninety days' cells, and he'll see he serves 'em. And Sen'll be better off than us anyhow. We got some dam' footsloggin' to do."

"Okay, you give with the ideas," said Banks. "Or

gimme one good reason why I shouldn't have a go at gettin' Sen out of the cells?"

"It'd be easier for you to get *in* the cells with Sen," said Buzz. "Just bust Lejaune on the beak and you'll get an apartment right next to Sen."

"Okay, I will, if it comes to that," said Banks, and he marched out of the barrack room and left a gaping Buzz in his wake.

"Hey——" began Buzz. "The hell if I meant that, Bob. Hey, come back here, you silly son of a gun. Hey, wait a minute! I didn't mean it!"

But Banks kept on walking across the hard-packed parade ground now bathed in the westering light of the sun. Buzz said a nasty word, and started in lacing up his shoes. The crazy Englishman would do just what he said, if circumstances worked that way.

Buzz looked around the deserted barrack room. All the battalion were up town slaking cheap biddy in the Arab cantinas, having their last fling before entraining for the north and east. But Buzz and his English buddy, Banks, had stayed behind to try to work out a good yarn to tell Colonel Mentier in order to get Sen, their half-Chinese, half-English pal released from clink.

Sen hadn't actually hit Lejaune. The good sergeant had been in one of his persecuting moods and had picked on Sen. Sen had taken so much—had taken a hell of a lot—and then had suddenly and deliberately spat upon the good sergeant.

"They's a hell of a difference between spittin' and hittin'," Buzz had told Banks a thousand times. But Lejaune didn't think so. It was insubordination any way you looked at it. It was something worse, according to Colonel Mentier, who had sentenced Sen. It was a defacing and wilfully fouling of the uniform of the French Foreign Legion.

Banks marched steadily on. The heat from the baked ground struck upwards and he could feel the sweat trickling down his spine, and it wasn't all purely from the heat. It was scaredness of what he was going to face.

A charge of Arabs was something less than facing the colonel across his desk. Mentier was sharp and keen and hawk-like, a disciplinarian of the first water, who thought that a dose of cells was a first-class corrective for Legionnaires, administered, of course, in proper proportion to the depth or heinousness of the crime.

At the colonel's door, Banks paused. The sentry eyed him. Banks was just about to give the man his name when Lejaune stamped out of the office.

Lejaune eyed Banks. "*Mon colonel* is busy with *le capitaine*. What is it, my beauty?" he inquired. Banks saw the pig eyes of Lejaune and knew that Lejaune knew that his visit to the colonel had something to do with the imprisoned Sen.

Banks, stiffly at attention, said: "*Mon sergent*, I wish to speak to *mon colonel*! It is necessary that I see him before he departs to his quarters for the night. It is exceedingly urgent, *mon sergent*!"

"I will deal with the request. *Sacré*," said Lejaune, rolling his little eyes, "it is that the Englishman does not trust his sergeant any more?" He eyed Banks again. "I say the colonel is very busy."

Banks didn't answer. To argue with Lejaune was like toying with a kicking mule's off hind leg. You asked for what you got, and you got it! Banks maintained a stubborn silence, and the other's pig eyes narrowed.

"Sergeant!" came a well-known voice from the darkness of the passage that led to the colonel's office. The voice was gruff and irritable. Banks felt a ball of ice down in his stomach. "What does that man want?"

Lejaune immediately stiffened, and silently thumbed to Banks to proceed down the passage. The colonel's door was the first on the left. A door opposite led to Captain Jardin's office, one-time commandant of the distant desert fort of El Keb, now recalled to lead the Nineteenth Battalion upon this mission to the north east, about which there had been a ton of speculation by the members of the aforesaid battalion.

Banks marched smartly into the colonel's office, saluted, and halted the correct two paces from the big

desk. He saw the deep crease between the colonel's eyes; the officer's rather large eyes gazed steadily at him.

Banks wasted no time. On the tide of a deep breath, he said. "*Mon colonel*, I come about Private First Class Sen, of the first company of the Nineteenth Battalion. He is a good soldier, *mon colonel*, veteran of many desert campaigns. Since we are entraining tomorrow, *mon colonel*, I want to plead leniency on his behalf——"

"The man is serving a sentence, is he not?" said the colonel. He was trying to recall the man, Sen. Hadn't he hit or spit upon a superior officer? With so many things weighing upon his mind the colonel could not quite recall the exact punishment he had meted out. *Sacré Dieu*, he had a multitude of important things to do before this contingent pulled out tomorrow, and here was this boor trying to throw spanners into the machine of the Legion.

"Lejaune! Come in here!" called the colonel. Lejaune marched in, saluted, and waited for the colonel's question about this tiresome case.

"*Oui, mon colonel*, the man spat upon the uniform of France—upon my uniform, *mon colonel*. He received ninety days," rapped out Lejaune.

"Ah, so he did," said the colonel, remembering. "And he *will serve* ninety days, *mon enfant*. *Sacré* if I were to release a man just because he had got friends, or because he had served upon the desert, I would need to open all the cells in Siddi Bel Abbes, for every man therein has thirsted and fought for France."

Banks said: "Then, *mon colonel*, I will take ninety days, too."

"You will—what?" rasped Colonel Mentier. What was this? A private telling him that he would take ninety days. And then before the officer's astonished eyes, the mad Englishman spat upon the sergeant—spat upon the brave and smart Sergeant Lejaune.

For a moment there was an awful silence in the office, and then Lejaune began bawling for the guard. They came clumping from the guard room at the end

of the passage. In a twinkling Banks was surrounded. The colonel waved his hand.

"Take him away. To the cells. For *one hundred and ninety days!*" The officer watched the escort march the crazy Englishman out of the office, and had to shake his head. These people from across the English Channel. Why should a twenty-mile-wide strip of water make such a difference to the make-up of a nation? No wonder they had stood up to the hammering of the might of the German Air Force. But that didn't make them any the less crazy. He realised that he had pronounced sentence over this—er—what was the man's name?—yes, Banks. He had pronounced sentence over this Banks almost without thinking, and he had a feeling that he'd done precisely what the Englishman wanted him to do.

The colonel had an inclination to send for the man again and tell him that the offence was deliberately premeditated and that nothing less than the dread Penal Battalion at Bechar would fit the crime.

Then he shrugged away the thought, and turned to the urgent matter that had just come by courier from the station from which his battalion were to entrain at dawn the next morning.

Meanwhile, Banks was being thrust in the cells. They were open-sided ones. Bars all the way across the front of them so that it was possible to see the occupants of the other cells. Lejaune had accompanied the escort and had seen to it that Banks was not put in the cell next to Sen.

Just the same, it was possible for them to crowd the bars and see each other. After the dust had died down and the guard had gone back to his cubby-hole at the end of the passage, Sen said: "Welcome home, Bob."

Banks sighed. He said: "Sen, what kind of spit do you use? Mine cost me one hundred and ninety days."

Sen grinned. This half-Oriental was always grinning. He was five feet and the odd inches over that didn't matter. He was an Oxford man with an Oriental's cunning, a mean combination. His scrawny body was

whip-cord and sinew, and it had the ability to go without water longer than any other man in the Legion.

Sen said: "We will tell the guard to prepare the next cell. Buzz shouldn't be long." Banks snorted gently and went and lay on the bunk that was held by chains from staples on the wall. The sun went down and the darkness crept into the cell. There was no light except that which seeped through to them from the lantern that hung at the end of the passage outside the guard's cubby-hole.

He came with some greasy soup and a hunk of dry bread that had a touch of the sun, it was so dry. Banks drank the soup and put the bread through the bars for the sweeper when he came next morning.

Suddenly, there in the gloom of the cell, he was conscious that a pair of eyes were watching. Immediately across the narrow passage, he saw the man. Banks peered and saw that the man's eyes were watching him.

Banks got up and went to the bars. The fellow opposite wore rags, and it wasn't for some time that Banks descried that these rags were the remains of an old khaki battle-dress, and also, more startling still, that the man was undoubtedly an Arab. Or more likely a Tuareg, a member of a marauding tribe that usually confined its activities—murderous and otherwise—to the desert.

For a while he and the Arab exchanged stares, and then the man's finger pointed to the soup tin of Banks! The Englishman understood that the man wanted a drink. He also recollected that the sentry had not brought either food or water for the man.

Banks was intrigued—intrigued by the khaki battle-dress the man wore. It was obviously—or had been in its hey-day—the property of the British Army. What was this guy doing wearing an outfit like this?

Banks began rattling on the bars of his cell. It was five minutes before the guard came grumbling down the passage. "Water," said Banks. "Water. This soup is salty. Cells don't mean you should deprive men of water."

The guard looked uncertainly at Banks. For a moment the Englishman thought he was going to prod him with his rifle butt, and then the guard, in order to get back to his cubby-hole and imbibe the quart of red biddy he had smuggled into the prison, grumblingly went and got water.

He brought in a gourd, and then stumped back to his libations. Banks waited a while and then, extending his arm to its fullest, he passed the gourd over to the Arab. The ragged man took and slaked the water to its last drop. None of the other four inmates of the cells took the slightest notice of this by-play that was going on—none, except the alert Sen.

He stood close to the bars and watched. Presently the man gestured his thanks to Banks. Banks said: "What are you in for?"

It seemed that the man did not comprehend, and Banks wondered if he understood Legion language, which was a composite of English, French and German. Then the man said: "To-morrow I die." He said it without emotion, showing true Arab fatalism. "It is that they do not feed a stomach that will have no more use for water and food in a few hours from now."

"What for?" asked Banks.

"It does not matter, infidel," said the Arab. "A man dies for small things. For big things. But the water you got for me puts joy into my stomach once more, and I have nothing to offer in return, except to tell you that you are going north to-morrow to the edge of Libya where the great armies fought four years ago."

"We *were* going, but that's out. We're going to keep these cells warm instead."

"Perhaps so, infidel. It is too bad, for on the edges of the Libyan desert there is a place that was a camp that was left by the French forces that drove up from the south to help the English drive the Germans from the desert. I have seen it. It has all the needs of an army. It also has——" His voice dropped into Arabic. This, Banks could understand a little. But Sen was the authority. He could speak several dialects fluently.

"You understand?" said the man, looking at Banks. The latter nodded.

"My name is Ali Kubi. I am a Tuareg by birth. I fought with the great Eighth Army four years ago. Because of my desert knowledge I was appointed guide to a detachment of an Armoured Car Troop. It was our job to scour the desert for signs of the enemy and to try and link up with the French force that was driving up from the south.

"We met and fought with a Nazi group of tanks. Ah, infidel, that was a fight. We were outgunned. And we fought and ran and ran and fought. We had to run far into the south, and our supplies gave out—our water, our petrol, our food. And our commander consulted me, and I said it was better to try and find the French forces than try and return to the north. We tried. Slowly they died, infidel, and at last I was the only one left. It was a day after the last man died that I came upon this camp."

The man stopped talking as a great commotion began somewhere beyond the guard's cubby-hole. A blare of voices—drunken singing, shouting, and a general raucous hub-bub disturbed the calm and gloom of the prison.

Sen said: "Here comes Buzz. He does not have to spit in the sergeant's eye. Red biddy will always oblige if you want to go to prison bad enough."

Banks suddenly felt an impatience. It had interrupted the man's story. The intriguing part about this story was that it coincided with the rumours that had been going around the barracks ever since they'd got to know about their trip to the north and east. These rumours had been about this fabulous camp that had been abandoned by the southern French forces in their drive north.

It had said that the French command had dumped the stuff there in order to travel more lightly, since the Germans were wearing skates in their haste to pull back before the victorious British Army, which had just come through the great Battle of Alamein, and was rolling the Panzers rapidly back across the breadth of the African Continent.

Now the French Foreign Legion had been given the task of salvaging the supplies left in this camp. The rumour had it that there were tanks, parts of airplanes, food, guns, equipment—everything. Most of which had been discounted by intelligent Legionnaires like Banks and Sen.

But the rumour had also run on to say that a bunch of renegade Arabs were also looking for it. These Arabs, like this guy in the opposite cell here, were the remnants and rag-tag of the native camp followers and general scum that follow all armies.

The drunken noise outside had subsided somewhat. Banks looked at Ali Kubi. Banks said: "You're one of that renegade bunch, huh?"

The man looked at him. "I *was*, infidel. I escaped from them. They had the vision that with the supplies from the camp they could launch a war of their own on behalf of Arabs all over the world to drive the French from Africa. I, Ali Kubi, know better. I escaped and came here and offered to guide your commander to the camp itself. He does not believe me. He does not think there are Arabs crazy enough to pit their strength against the might of France. Truly, the French are as stupid as my brothers, the renegades."

So they had condemned this man as a renegade, which meant that the French authorities were aware, at least, of the presence of renegades in or around the lost camp.

"What are these renegades doing now, Ali?" asked Banks. The Englishman kept a wary eye out for the guard. The hub-bub in the reception room was dying. He knew that the sergeant of the guard would be signing the drunks in to the jail. Probably they had been rounded up by the Legion patrol and more probably still a fight had developed and Legion reinforcements had been rushed up, and the colonel had ordered the whole dam' bunch thrown into the can. For the night, anyway.

"The renegades are using this camp, infidel. They have the material; they have everything. They need men. They need men who can use the abundant supplies of guns and other weapons that the camp possesses. They

need only men. But Arabs seep to them in driblets from tribes up and down the desert—the robbers, the scum, the murderers—they all flock to the camp.”

At that moment the door at the end of the passage that led to the reception, or charge room, burst inward, and a flock of Legionnaires in various stages of intoxication came roistering down between the cells, pushed and hustled by angry guards. Sure enough, the drunkest, rowdiest member of the mob was the giant Yank, Buzz.

The guards crammed them six a time into cells that would normally hold two men in very cramped conditions. In the scuffle, Buzz's drunken figure worked itself into Banks' cell, along with three others. Buzz sat on the bunk and the chains straightened and creaked their protest at the big weight they were suddenly called upon to uphold.

“Well, feller, I made it—the easy way,” said Buzz. “Any guy that uses his brains can make it that way. Only thing is, it won't make no difference. We go north in the mornin', just the same—the sergeant of the guard just spit that information in our faces. Spit? What am I talkin' about?”

In the crush of the drunks' entry, Banks lost sight of the Arab, and when it all had died down, he looked across to the opposite cell and found it full only of Legionnaires. Ali Kubi had gone.

“Where's the Arab gone?” he inquired.

The man nearest the bars in the cell opposite said: “Arab? What you want with an Arab? You think we were gonna sleep the night here with a stinkin' rag-tag like the one that was here?”

So the guards had taken Ali away. Banks went and squashed up alongside of Buzz on the bed. The other three Legionnaires stretched out on the floor. The wine in them didn't care where it slept. A hard cell floor didn't matter at all.

Buzz wasn't as drunk as his noise had made out, but he certainly had looked upon the red wine. Banks allowed the Yank to use his bed. The Englishman sat and pondered upon the story told him by the Arab. But what had lain behind this story? Was it just a story?

Was it the lead-up to something that would have benefited him? The Arab's return for having got him the water he had so needed?

Banks shrugged off the thought. He didn't like unfinished stories. He knew that he would never see the Arab again. Lejaune would have the firing squad bright and early, and the first light of dawn would see the Arab's soul winging its way to Allah.

2

more jail

AN hour before dawn the N.C.O.s came bawling into the prison, despite the protests of the prison guard. There was confusion this morning over the departure of the battalion to the north. A bawling corporal yanked the keys from the guard and came and unlocked the cell Banks was in.

“*Mon caporal,*” protested the guard. “It is that you see the sergeant of the guard. There are prisoners in here that are serving sentences.”

“Is that so!” bawled the corporal, a big German. “And which are they?”

But Banks and Buzz had gone off down the passage. They wasted no time, for already Sen had been released in the confusion. Outside they gathered on the parade ground.

Banks, Buzz and Sen stood in line. Banks muttered to the others: “This is crazy. Soon as Lejaune spots us, he’ll single Sen and me out, and this time we’ll be headed for Bechar and the Penal Battalion.”

Buzz said, side-mouthed: “Can it, stomach-ache. Lejaune’s busy killin’ that Arab you been talkin’ about. By the time he’s through, we’ll be at the station. Let’s take this one thing at a time. If we gotta go to the Penal Battalion we’ll go. We went once before—and we managed to live.”

“Only just, brother,” muttered Sen. “Only just. And now—silence. Here comes the big white chief himself.”

It was no other than Colonel Mentier. They had expected Captain Jardin.

The dawn was lighting the huge parade ground greyly, and even as the colonel came and confronted them, the lines of men heard the bang of rifles beyond the stone wall. Banks knew that the renegade Arab's soul had begun its flight into eternity.

Then Banks was suddenly conscious that Mentier was speaking. "It is unfortunate," the colonel was saying, "that the Arab crews on the trains have suddenly struck—for some inexplicable reason. Among you there must be train technicians. It is imperative that our train move out as soon as possible. I require that any men who have had railway experience to step forward immediately."

For a moment no one moved. Then, as one man, Banks, Buzz and Sen stepped forward. A moment more elapsed and then the fat German corporal also stepped forward.

Mentier's eye alighted upon Banks, and he felt sure the colonel remembered him from the night before. But Banks was surprised to see no hint of recognition. "The four of you will report to my office at once." Mentier turned smartly and marched back to the buildings. The German corporal, whose name was Saxe, and who had fled to the Foreign Legion after the Hitler purge of the early thirties, assumed command of the little group, and stiffly led it towards the barrack offices.

En route, Buzz said in a whisper: "Didn't know you guys knew anything about choo-choos?"

"We know as much as you, Yank," said Sen. Banks said the same.

"I know you haveta put coal on to get any results, hat's all," said Buzz.

"That's as much as I know," said Sen.

"I don't even know that much," said Banks. Buzz blew a big razzberry. "Then we really are headed for the Penal Battalion. How in heck you think we're gonna get by?"

"I'd sooner be in my own train wreck than have Lejaune on my tail, or sweat it out in those dam' cells.

Keep your fingers crossed. I'm pinnin' my faith on old Himmler here," said Banks, thumbing towards the elderly German corporal in front of them.

The old German called for silence in a guttural growl, and then smartly ushered them into the colonel's office. The great man was not there, and they had time to sort out their stories of their bogus experience on the world's railways.

Buzz said: "Don't forget we owe Himmler a whole booze-up. You do, Bob."

Banks stared sideways at Buzz. They had relaxed from strict attention. Saxe, alias Himmler, had gone puffing in search of the colonel. Buzz went on: "Saxe did the bamboozling to sift you outa the cells. If he was hauled over for releasing you he was gonna get out of it—try to get out of it—by saying among so many in that dark hole he didn't know who was who."

"So it was all fixed up, huh," said Banks. "I ain't gonna ever say you ain't got no brains, Buzz."

"You got a Yank accent as good as Himmler's," said Buzz acidly. "When did the Limeys have the corner in brains? You're out, aintcha? Get the——"

His words were cut off by the approach of footsteps. The colonel swung into the room, and Banks held his breath. How would the colonel come at this? Would he refer to his sentence of the night before? Saxe came waddling stiffly in the colonel's wake. The officer eyed the three ramrod-stiff figures before him. The new sun was probing yellow fingers into the office, and Banks caught the cold gleam of this elegant officer's stare. Banks' stomach didn't feel any too good. It felt worse when, coming down the passage, they heard the big crunching tread of the only man in the Legion who could tread a crunching tread. Lejaune!

The sergeant swung into the office, a fierce light in his eye. The pals knew that he must have heard of their break-out from the cells. Lejaune was red-hot upon the trail of righting a wrong. These swines must be ushered back into the cells to serve their penalties. All this was apparent in the good sergeant's eye.

“*Mon colonel,*” he began. “These men—these are the men——”

Mentier waved him to silence. “*Mon sergent,* you will step outside!”

“But—*mon colonel!*—these men——”

“Outside!” Colonel Mentier’s voice rose no higher, but a sharp note had crept into it, and Lejaune was not brash enough to take any further liberty with the colonel’s patience. The burly sergeant withdrew with equal parts of thunder and astonishment written large upon his ugly face.

When he had retired, Colonel Mentier looked at the men before him.

“Well, *mes braves?*” he said quietly, his tone quiet and confidential and utterly suave. Banks’ stomach did a loop. The colonel’s suavity was as much to be feared as his anger. It usually meant a higher, vicious form of anger. “I require to hear of your experience in the direction of manipulating engines and trains and so forth. You realise that this is a single line we travel on—as far as the end of the railway?”

“*Oui, mon colonel!*” they said. Banks was already realising more than that. He was realising what dam’ fools they’d been to step from the frying-pan into the fire. Each in turn conjured up a story of having spent some of his career manipulating trains in different parts of the world. They relied upon the Frenchman’s ignorance in rolling stock matters to help them get their stories over.

Heinrich Saxe then told of his considerable experience upon the German State Railways. “I haf been engineer and trainman for years and years, *mon colonel,* and I belief dat dese men also haf preddy good knowledge of der engines.”

Colonel Mentier said: “Why do you endorse these men, Saxe?” Banks saw the astute colonel’s question throw Saxe into some little confusion. Saxe was not much good, figured Banks, at trying to hoodwink authority. But the old German stuck to his statement. Banks guessed the corporal had suddenly become highly important to the Foreign Legion because of his technical

knowledge, and that his judgment, false or otherwise, where his fellow-men were concerned, would be bowed to by Mentier and his staff.

Banks saw Saxe's face relax slightly. "*Mon colonel*, a few years ago dese men and a lod of oders like dem said dey could bead a man who said he vould conger der vorld—dey did bead him—dey bead him goot."

Colonel Mentier didn't look impressed by the longest Legionnaire's speech he had ever listened to. He stared at Saxe for a long time, and then he switched his pale, steely gaze to the pals.

"You are promoted herewith to train technicians. You will proceed at once to the depot and prepare the engine for travel. Instead of the battalion we will take only the train full. One train. One car will be used for equipment purposes, and the other nine for troops—"

"But—but—*mon colonel*—ten cars—id is too much for der engine. She is only meant to draw six cars at most."

"You will draw ten cars, Saxe, or I will have you buried up to the neck in sand for twenty-four hours. Your engine will draw ten cars, understand?"

"*Oui, mon colonel!*" said Saxe. "I understand—ten cars!"

Then Mentier looked up again at the other three. "And you three will serve your sentences when we return from this expedition. One hundred and ninety days each——"

Buzz exploded: "*Mon colonel*, I was not sentenced—I mean—I was shoved in the cells overnight only for being drunk, *mon colonel*. I was not sentenced——"

An icy smile hovered around the colonel's thin lips. "You have just been sentenced *mon brave*, and there will be an extra ninety days for every word you say from this moment!"

3

the woe train

THEY marched out of the office and passed under the lee of the glowering Lejaune. At the moment that they passed him at the door of the passage, they heard the colonel's voice calling Lejaune into the office. This officer knew every dam' thing, Banks thought to himself; knew that Lejaune must have been waiting with hooked claws for the coming out of the Legionnaires.

"Mentier's gonna tell Lejaune hands off for the time bein'," growled Buzz.

"Hands off for the time bein' only—after that he'll really go to town on us——"

"How'd you know he'll not go to town on us before we're out from under the colonel's wing?" asked Banks. "Especially if Lejaune is picked to accompany us to the railhead."

Sen said: "Perhaps something can be done about Lejaune?" Banks looked at the Chinese. Sen was a man of ideas, only the ideas were apt to be drastic. They were in the hole for one-ninety days apiece. Banks didn't want any more "improvements" on this deal.

The battalion had gone to the station under the command of Captain Jardin and so they traipsed through the narrow streets of Siddi Bel Abbes in the morning heat and arrived to find half of the force guarding the station from possible sabotage by the native workers.

Jardin, as soon as they had reported themselves as the substitute train crew, assigned them to the locomotive sheds wherein were stacked an odd selection of some of

the most broken-down junk that Banks had ever clapped eyes on. Corporal Saxe let his experienced eye rove over the motley collection of motive power, and then looked glumly at Banks.

“Ve vill end up in der Penal Camp, sure. Mit dis gollection ve vill nod ged twenty miles!” Saxe threw up his hands in despair. Buzz had already mounted the footplate of one of the engines. It had steam up—in a fashion—and it was the one that had apparently been readying for the trip. Two others were in some part ready, but they left these alone, for it would take all their energies to get this one readied for the road.

Under Saxe’s supervision they worked like trojans, sweating and swearing under the jaundiced eyes of the burly Captain Jardin. Two hours later they ran the train onto ten cars and then drew them into the sun-swept and dusty station premises.

As they watched the N.C.O.s herd the men into the cars or coaches, Banks dwelt upon the sudden and inexplicable strike that had temporarily paralysed the railway. Why? Usually the natives worked well with the French authorities and disputes were matters of complaint and swift remedy. But this had the ear-marks of something that was deeper and more lasting.

He realised now that Colonel Mentier’s preoccupation of the night before must have been over this predicament. At that moment Sen came up, and even his yellow skin showed sweat. He had had the dirty job of coupling up the cars and making sure the ancient vacuum connections were as right as they would ever be.

Banks said : “ You and Buzz play guard, Sen. I don’t trust these natives and I’ll be stoker for Saxe here.”

Buzz said : “ Hear the guy dish out the orders, will ya? He takes the easy jobs and we do the runnin’ around.”

Banks said : “ Okay, big boy, hop up on this footplate and start heavin’ coal into this firebox. Me’n Sen’ll do the train-guard business.”

Buzz had his mouth open ready for the answer when they saw Colonel Mentier coming towards them. In

his rear clumped Captain Jardin, and the latter's face did not show much confidence in this train crew.

Mentier ran his eyes over the locomotive and then it came to rest upon Saxe. The German corporal was back in his element. "Id is nod in very good runnink order, *mon colonel*. Ach! Dese natives do nod know the machine ad all. Dis engine has der knock——"

The colonel held up his hand. Saxe's rumble ceased. Mentier said: "You will drive this thing and you will get this force to the railhead by tomorrow midnight at the very latest. I have information that secret forces are conspiring to sabotage this expedition. But we will go on just the same. There is also a possibility that we may have interference along the line. *En avant, mes braves*, do your best!"

He turned away and then, as though remembering something, turned back to them. "And remember, *mes enfants*, for every stop that is not on the schedule a further ninety days goes upon your sentence."

He stalked away. Buzz looked at Sen and Banks in turn. "That is just fine and dandy. The way things are stackin' up, we're gonna lose any way you look at it. Come on, Sen, let's git to the hind end of this train."

Banks wasn't sure, but he thought that round about four hundred men had entrained. Obviously, Colonel Mentier was depending on swift movement, and was willing to take half his force in order to get to the lost camp quickly. What was stacking up for this force—for them, himself and Sen and Buzz?

"Vot ist?" suddenly bawled Saxe. "Der fires go out vhile you stand dere gazink into space!" Banks jumped to it and began feeding coal onto the fire. This fuel was not like the coal he remembered back in England. It was dull crumbly stuff and its steam potential looked zero.

The engine began to clank away from the station, and suddenly Banks' world was narrowed to a hungry fire that devoured everything he could shovel into it. His arms and legs and shoulders were one big ache.

Saxe worked the injector and the throttle and drove like the veteran engineer he was. The ten cars behind this old engine dragged like anchors. Work as Banks could, he could not get the pressure more than half way to the red mark that showed the blow-off capacity.

Saxe helped him occasionally. At the grade that began to rise up into the higher plateaux, Saxe was constrained to confide in Banks. "Id is no use, Banks. Dis engine vill nod pull all dese cars up dis grade. Ve mus' take some of dem up and den go back for der oders."

Banks leaned on his shovel. "And how'n the name of Sam Hill are you gonna do that when there's only a single track?"

Saxe gave a gesture of despair. "Oh, I am so used to der two-track Sherman railways. *Gott in himmel!* I stob and I earn myself ninety days in clink!" Gradually the steepness of the grade increased. The old engine coughed and wheel-skidded and inevitably the long train began to lose way. Banks realised that in a matter of yards they would be stuck. He looked along the train. The officers had the front end of the leading coach, and it didn't help Banks' frame of mind to see the glowering face Captain Jardin was showing around the corner of the window.

The grade was now winding through a steep cut in the mountain-side—big rolling hills all around them, covered with nothing but camel scrub and thorn bush, and Banks speculated on how good a place it was for an ambush. But nobody would be foolish enough to try anything this close to Siddi Bel Abbes, he thought.

And then, three hours after they had pulled out of Siddi station, Saxe let go with a whoop of fear. The train had managed to haul itself at a walking pace up the grade between the high hills, and was now gaining a little momentum on a flat stretch before starting another painful climb.

Saxe shut off the throttle almost before Banks could straighten his aching back. "Look!" Saxe was shouting. "Look. Ve are sunk, yes!"

Banks looked and there ahead of them he saw no rails! None at all!

He should have been surprised, but he knew he wasn't. It was the answer to what had been in the back of his mind ever since he'd got to hear of the native strike. Here was more of the handiwork of people who were apparently also interested in getting to the lost camp, getting ahead of the Legion, that is.

Saxe pulled up the locomotive easily, and yards from the wrecked line. The troops piled out of the train, glad to be released from their crowded, cramped compartments. The wily colonel was just ordering the N.C.O.s to order the men back into the train when a hail of fire came stuttering down among them from the cover of some dense camel brush high up on the hill. Banks and Saxe were already viewing the torn line.

As the bullets began to fly, Banks and Saxe dropped to the ground. They were a hundred yards from the panting engine when the bullets came for them. "Ve gotta ged back," Saxe kept saying as they tried to bury their heads in the rough ballast of the line. "Ve godda ged back to der engine, Banks!"

They rose and began a twisting run back to the train and the gun started tack-tacking. Banks knew that whoever was handling the gun had had experience of automatic fire-arms. Then he saw Saxe suddenly throw up his arms and go down. The big Englishman stooped and hefted the German to his shoulder and the bullets came pinging on the loose rails and slapping into the railroad sleepers. A bullet whipped his *kepi* from his head.

Finally he made the hither side of the engine and was, for the moment, safe from the flying lead. He found most of the battalion, unable to climb back into the coaches because of the fusillade, crouching on this side.

Examining Saxe he found the German had a shoulder wound. The man was unconscious from shock. Colonel Mentier came up, disdaining to crouch, disdaining to even hasten as he came to the couplings between the coaches and was clearly visible to the ambushers.

"How bad is the wound?" he enquired of Banks. The latter told him.

"You will take the train on when we have repaired the track?" he said. It was put in question form, but it was undoubtedly an order. Banks saluted and said he intended taking over.

"We will now have this hillside cleared," said the colonel, turning to Captain Jardin and issuing the orders. "The ambushers are amateurs," he went on loudly. "They use only one side of the hill when they could have used both sides. We will charge the *canaille, mon capitaine*. Take a company and clear the hill."

Jardin saluted and began bawling orders. Meanwhile, Banks had bandaged Saxe up. One of the medicals had come forward and helped with the red-cross stuff, and now Saxe had become conscious. He insisted that Banks lift him onto the footplate. "I vill drive der train through your hands, Banks," said the old German. "Odervise ve haf her runnink away from us."

Buzz and Sen had come up from the hind end of the train, and the three of them hoisted Saxe to the footplate. Banks said: "Okay, Buzz, I want your muscle in on this. I'm drivin', you're stokin'."

"Yeah," commented Buzz dryly, "when we get some track to run on."

Meanwhile, a company had gone swarming up the hill under Lejaune and Captain Jardin. They came down after a while, having seen nothing but a few tracks of the ambushers. Horses' tracks. Plainly, the ambushers must have ridden ahead some time during the night or early morning, scattered the track over the hillside and then sat down to wait for the train.

Banks wondered if he should apprise the colonel of the Arab who had confided in him in the jail the night before. He concluded that the colonel was well aware of what was going on, which was why he had elected to draw out of Siddi with but half a force. Obviously he coupled the strike with the small but powerful unseen force of renegades who were determined to prevent the French from getting to the camp until they had had time to enlarge their manpower and thus make full

use of the murderous and modern weapons that must be in the arms dump there.

Banks tried not to envisage what a well-armed force of Arabs could do to a mere four hundred Legionnaires, far from their home base. Especially if they had a hard core of World War II veterans among them who could not only handle automatic weapons, but also teach their wild and ignorant brethren the gentle art of making war in the modern manner.

"Yeah," said Buzz, as though he had read Banks' mind, "just imagine us fightin' a bunch of Arab-driven tanks, brother. This ain't gonna be no picnic. This is not fightin' Abdel Krim with a lotta men and only muzzle-loading muskets to fight us with. That's play alongside o' what's comin' to us if we don't git to that camp afore them renegades get set for us."

Banks said: "You heard that gun, Buzz? Correct me if I'm wrong, feller, but that gun that was stuttering sounded like a Vickers, didn't it?"

"It was. And it'll be from that dump we're heading for, feller. We'll probably bump into some more like 'em afore along. And the guy could handle it too, Bob," growled Buzz. The Yank always made a growl out of everything he said. He concealed kindness, good-naturedness, anger—all under that characteristic growl of his.

Then Buzz said: "Don't look now, but Sergeant Lejaune's got promoted to track superintendent. They're gonna have a go at relaying the rails. Brother, is the colonel in a hurry to wreck this dam' train!"

Buzz watched the gangs of Legionnaires laboriously relay the sleepers and then bring into position the rails. Fortunately, the ambushers, being few probably, had had time only to tear up the track, and had been unable to twist or render the lines unusable, and it was just a matter of relaying the lines, drawing the holding spikes and then knocking them in again.

All except for one important thing, overlooked by everybody except Buzz.

They were watching the work going forward under the afternoon sun, when the big Yank suddenly gave

vent to a snort of contempt. "That ain't the way it's done," he said loudly.

At that moment Colonel Mentier waved the train on. He and the gang that had been relaying the track were going to watch the train over the relaid portion—some twenty yards or so in length—and then board the train as soon as it had negotiated the bad stretch.

Buzz said: "No, Bob. Don't open that throttle. We'll have the train all over the track—it'll be anywhere except on the lines."

Buzz got down and Banks followed him. Lejaune surveyed them with a dark eye. These swines had missed the back-breaking work he and his men had been subjected to. Missed it because the colonel thought that they could handle a railway engine. Pah! They were hoodwinking the colonel—Sergeant Lejaune could see that if nobody else could. But the day would come when they would be reverted to his great care. He, Sergeant Lejaune, would welcome that blessed day, *sacré*, he would!

Buzz confronted the colonel. "*Mon colonel*, it is necessary that the track be ballasted!" He saw the blank look in the man of war's eyes. "Otherwise the ties—sleepers, *mon colonel*—will sink and the joints will snap!"

Mentier eyed the Yank keenly. The great man had the idea that this American knew what he was talking about. The American did. Way back in his chequered career before any of the forty-eight States declared that they did not want any of this rapscallion, Buzz had at one time worked on a railroad construction job. Mentier gave the necessary orders, and Buzz organised squads of men—two to a squad and two squads to a sleeper—and had them pack the ballast under the sleepers. Had them pack the knobby gravel tight under the sleepers. All the time the Yank retreated a distance and laid his eye along each line in turn and noted the levelling-up process, so that the line came up to the level of the rest of the stretch.

Sen, up beside Banks, said: "The great construction

engineer instructs the high command how to run its railway. Buzz will talk about this *ad infinitum*."

"It's somethin' to talk about, Sen. We were headed for the ditch. It didn't occur to me," said Banks. He found the Chinese regarding him with that inane and wholly deceiving grin. It was a grin that wore you down—like water dropping eternally on one spot on your forehead—another old Chinese custom!

"No, Bob, it wouldn't occur to you," said Sen. "After all, you are only an engine driver, and what do they know about railroad tracks?"

Sen had gone down the train before an answer occurred to Banks. The gang under Buzz's supervision used shovels and the butt ends of tough camel thorn branches. It was almost an hour later before Buzz was satisfied that the ballast had been securely rammed beneath the sleepers in a secure manner.

Colonel Mentier had ordered all the troops out of the train, and just before the sun sank, Banks, under the gasped directions of the wounded Saxe, eased the train over the tender spot in the line. Banks found the train fairly easy to handle. But he had to be sure it didn't skid and snort over the spot, otherwise the rails might spread and thus derail it.

Banks managed to waylay Mentier as the troops re-embarked. "*Mon colonel*, perhaps we could bivouac for the night? The ambushers might have a night surprise higher up the track. It is possible."

Mentier looked at him. "Get on the train, *mon brave*, and drive it!"

Banks didn't argue. Mentier's gaze followed the Englishman up the engine steps and onto the footplate. Banks let in the throttle, and Buzz began handling the shovel. Huddled in a corner on the seat usually occupied by the fireman was the exhausted Saxe. He gave instructions between bouts of pain and semi-consciousness.

As he drove and peered anxiously into the darkness, Banks thought upon the colonel's strategy. Maybe the officer was relying upon the ambusher's thinking that

they had stopped the train for good. But that idea wouldn't wash. The old locomotive was making a noise that could have been heard clear across the Sahara.

Now, though, Banks had worked the train up out of the hills and they were jouncing along the upper plateau. Buzz sweated and swore at the ever-hungry maw of the firebox. And then a horrible suspicion began to gnaw at Banks' mind. The ancient locomotive was going well—too well. Much too well. He shut off the throttle and applied the wheezy vacuum, and his inexperienced hand jarred the train to a stop. Before Buzz could utter a word of surprise, the Englishman had climbed down and was running along the length of the train.

Heads came out of the windows. Banks stopped and gaped at the train—there was only half of it there! Somebody had cut off the last four cars somewhere along the route!

4

sabotage

HE heard Captain Jardin's bawl come from the leading coach, and slowly retraced his steps. Halfway along he met Colonel Mentier. Wordlessly, Banks gestured towards the end of the train. Captain Jardin came lurching up. "*Canaille!*" he spat. He hit Banks across the face with the back of his hand. Banks went red-necked and managed to choke down the ire that rose hotly within him. "Stupid!" said Jardin. "*Mon colonel*, it is the stupidity of this man that has caused this. Had he known all about train-driving he would have divined that something was wrong from the first moment the end of the train left us!"

Banks knew the captain was right. Had Saxe not been in a semi-conscious condition, he assuredly would have noticed the easier running of the engine. Now, the colonel had lost, not only his equipment and rations for his force, but also about a third of his men. And with them, Banks realised, was Sen.

Mentier pondered for a moment. Then he said calmly: "We will go back for the rest of the train!"

"But, *mon colonel*," protested Jardin, "it will be madness to run a train backwards. The hind coaches have not the compact weight of the locomotive, and they would jump the rails over this poor track."

"We will go slowly," said the colonel. "Tell me, *mon capitaine*, how you propose to take nearly three hundred men without supplies—food, water, ammunition—on to Kela, a hundred miles or more away?"

Captain Jardin's big jaw dropped. Mentier turned his back on his second-in-command. "*Mon enfant,*" he addressed Banks, "what is your opinion as to where the lost part of the train is?"

Banks said: "*Mon colonel,* we entered upon this fairly flat plateau roughly fifty miles back. Only on the flat was it possible for the saboteur to release the couplings, since owing to the strain put upon them by an uphill gradient, it would be impossible for him to uncouple the train. So it must be during the past two hours that he uncoupled the last four cars. He must have ridden under the train—probably boarded it during one of the slow ascents we made up on to this plateau—or even got on in Siddi."

"We will proceed backwards slowly," said Mentier quietly. His manner brooked no argument. Banks heard the Jardin mouth snap shut.

Banks trudged back to the engine, and when he told Buzz and had managed to din the knowledge into Saxe, the latter spluttered painfully: "Id is impossible, yes! Der train vill derail."

"Mentier says back," said Banks dryly, "and so back it is. We can't go any place without grub and ammo., and we ain't speaking of water."

"Vater! Vater!" said Saxe. "Der boiler vill not last. It must have vater, too." The thought brought Banks up with a start. He hadn't thought about the engine wanting water. And water was a must, even if the troops had to go without it! Banks shoved over the huge reverse lever and slowly eased in the throttle. At about five miles per hour they began to feel their way backwards. Gradually it was borne in upon Banks that this was just about the craziest expedition he had ever embarked upon. Desert fighting was one thing, but playing at trains was just plain crazy—especially for a man whose previous experience of trains had been only to ride on the cushions of a carriage!

They had not gone far at this snail's pace when Banks, chancing to look around, saw a dark figure come over the tender, and it came sliding down the coal on to the footplate. Banks snatched at his Lebel that he had

jammed in a corner. But as the light from the firebox caught the figure, he recognised it as Captain Jardin. The captain's dark visage glowered at them. Banks put his Lebel back.

He turned to the throttle to increase the supply of steam to the pistons because the train was now entering upon a very slight gradient that led up a slight fold of the immense plain.

And then he suddenly felt the cold, hard bore of a gun in his neck. It was Jardin's Mauser. For a moment the Englishman couldn't believe that it was a gun prodding his neck.

"Reverse the engine!" said Jardin loudly, so that his voice carried clearly over the racket made by the driving rods. "I said to reverse the engine, pig-dog! Reverse it or I blow you to heaven!"

Banks saw Buzz start to raise his shovel. "Why you——" Buzz began.

"Strike and I squeeze this pistol off, *canaille!*" shouted Jardin.

Banks slowed the train down. "You'll not get away with this, Jardin. So you're the saboteur. Colonel Mentier is going to be pleased about this. As soon as I reverse this train the colonel'll come over that tender."

As the train came to a stop, Banks threw over the lever into forward position and let in the throttle. The engine lurched and he heard a tearing, clanking rattle behind the tender, and then he knew that Jardin had uncoupled the engine from the coaches. The Mauser dug deeply into his neck.

"Drive, *canaille*, drive!" growled Jardin. Banks increased the speed, and soon the ancient locomotive was jouncing and swaying and banging along the track, her noise drowning the cries from the men in the abandoned cars. Buzz sullenly fed the fire. The giant Yank knew that any letting up on his part would be Banks' death knell. Jardin wasn't kidding.

Meanwhile, some of the pattern of this jig-saw puzzle began to take shape in his mind. Jardin must have succumbed to the attraction that there was big money waiting for the man who could get that dump, with all

it contained, into the hands of the holy leader Abdel Krim. Krim would pay a lot of money to get those arms into the southern desert. He would pay a lot also to get Europeans to train his natives in the use of these arms. Jardin was probably going to be that man. It would be better than risking his life for the Legion and then, if he survived, drag out a miserable existence on the pension that the French would grant him.

Jardin wasn't the first European officer to put his knowledge at the disposal of the Arabs. But, so far, this type of renegade had been unlucky. Either the Arabs had assassinated him, or he had been caught by the Legion and summarily executed.

The puzzle was—was Jardin in with these renegades? Or was he acting purely on behalf of Jardin? The renegades, Banks was convinced, were an outfit completely on their own, and beholden to nobody—not even to Abdel Krim. That was the way it looked to the Englishman.

Jardin was bawling in his ear: "Faster, pig-dog, faster!" He dug the Mauser viciously into the pulp of Banks' neck. Over on the fireman's seat, huddled Saxe. Banks was doubtful if the man was conscious. Frequently he rolled in the chair and groaned, but somehow he managed miraculously to keep in the seat.

"It will jump the rails!" shouted Banks above the racket. Then, suddenly, Buzz lurched into Jardin. Banks never knew whether it was intentional or not. But he swept around as the Mauser went off. The bullet whistled past his ear, and then he reached for Jardin just as Buzz began to come to his feet. Jardin backed away. A piece of hurtling coal from Buzz hit the Mauser a lucky blow and it flew from the captain's hand. And then the Frenchman suddenly turned and leapt from the speeding engine into the darkness. It was some moments before Banks could reach the throttle and shut off and slow the train to a stop. Buzz threw himself from the engine and Banks knew he was after Jardin. Banks looked over at Saxe.

In the flickering beams from the firebox, the Englishman noticed something strangely quiet about the old

German. Then, peering closely, he saw the red hole just under the man's ear. The shot that had come from the Mauser had drilled a hole right through Saxe's head. He had just finished his examination when Buzz came dragging back to the stationary engine.

"The heck if I can find the guy. Come on, let's git back to the cars——" His words tailed off as he saw Saxe's body. "Holy smoke, the old German catches it all ways!"

"He caught it for the last time," said Banks slowly. "Better heave him overboard; we got no time to bury him."

"What d'you know about that Jardin feller?" said Buzz. "He's the guy that's in behind the renegades all right."

"No. I don't think so. I believe there's another party in on this. The Krim party, and Jardin's acting for him. I guess he acted a little prematurely. He wanted to wait until we got to the dump and then start something from there. But he must have had an idea that this engine hasn't much water left, and he figured that severing it from the train would give it a chance to reach Kela. After that, he'd probably meet with the mob that's gonna help him get that stuff to Krim, or at least take the dump over until Krim moves a *harkah* up to it."

"Okay, you have your angle, bud," grunted Buzz. "Jardin's in for what he can get, and he'll sell it to anybody that'll come across with the dough. How you know he won't make a deal with the renegades?"

"Because the renegades won't have the dough, though they have the men—some men at any rate. Anyhow, whatever his angle, he's somebody to be reckoned with, and that means he ain't no fool——"

A gun banged in the darkness and they heard the bullets spang! spang! spang! into the engine. For a solid second both Legionnaires looked at each other and then ducked down into the cab out of range. It was a Mauser shooting, and that would mean friend Jardin had a thing or two to say still, and that he was saying

it with lead music. They waited, and then half-a-dozen more shots spanged off the engine's steel skin.

Buzz said: "Cripes! How many Mausers does that guy carry?"

Then Banks rapped: "Holy smoke, Buzz! You know what the guy's doing?"

But as Banks looked up he found that Buzz had slipped out the other side of the cab. Buzz had taken his Lebel rifle. Banks waited. But there were no more shots. He had an idea that he might be wrong about Jardin's intentions regarding the engine; that he might try to board the thing and drive it away from under their noses if he, Banks, once got out of the cab and went searching for the Frenchman in the darkness.

There was no more shooting, and Banks climbed out of the cab. Immediately an ominous gurgling came to his ears. It came from the region of the tender. Their precious water was running out! The water that the engine needed to get to its destination! Then he heard the hiss of steam.

Banks ran then to the front of the boiler, and managed to descry the thick jets of vapour as they leaked from the holed boiler. The engine was completely busted, he knew. Buzz suddenly appeared out of the gloom at his elbow.

"Heard the guy takin' off over the plain. Ain't no use in this blackness. He holed the engine huh?" he said. "Maybe we could take her back to the cars. Maybe she's got enough head of steam to do that, Bob?"

"There's no pressure. The gauge's down to zero dam' near," said Banks. "I wonder how far we came after leaving the cars?" He tried to estimate roughly the distance. "Buzz, we're sunk. This expedition is down by the stern—and how!"

"I guess we bounced the old locy along around five miles or so from the cars. Maybe they heard the shootin'?" said Buzz. And then both of them suddenly stiffened. Down the track they heard a noise. Jardin? Banks gripped Buzz's shoulder. They had their Lebel's at the ready. The tropic darkness clung around them,

thick as a blanket. They peered steadily ahead. Was Jardin laying for them?

Banks whispered: "Okay, Buzz, go off to the right and come in carefully to the line about two hundred yards down. You'll have to judge the distance the best you can. Maybe we can get him from the front and rear."

Buzz disappeared into the darkness and Banks began moving down the line. He walked tiptoe upon the sleepers, so as not to scrunch upon the noisy ballast. What in hell was Jardin up to? He should have been away to the woods. More and more Banks believed that this renegade captain's sudden deviation from the straight and narrow had been impulse—that he had seen a chance to work things out for himself. Maybe he had contacted a Krim agent and had got a promise that he would be well paid if he could get the Arabs arms and then train the numerous *harkahs* in readiness for an Abdel Krim holy war that would drive the infidels from North Africa.

And then, suddenly, a spear of light came searching along the metals, and in a twinkling, Banks found himself pinpointed by the torch. "Up with your hands, Legionnaire!" The voice was level and had a foreign intonation. Banks knew it was no Arab voice. *And it was not Jardin's either!*

Banks put his hands up, allowing his Lebel to fall to the ground. Footsteps sounded, and presently he was surrounded by a group of figures whom he could not identify because of the brilliance of the torch. This torch was an electric one—an electric torch on a desert and in a country where goat-fat and mutton-fat lamps were still largely used for lighting purposes. It was from that fabulous lost camp all right.

The torch went out, and for a while Banks had nothing but blackness before his eyes, and then slowly his sight got accustomed to the gloom. He counted at least half-a-dozen figures around him. Somebody grabbed his hands and deftly lashed them behind his back.

Then he was shoved away from the track and over the plain. He was shoved perhaps half a mile as near as he could judge, and then he came to a group of horses. On the ground lay a big figure. Buzz! Buzz said: "Howdy, stranger, long time no see."

"Keep your mouth shut!" said the same voice that had commanded Banks to elevate his hands. "Keep your Yank mouth shut or I'll fill it with lead. Which of you is Banks?" Neither Legionnaire spoke. The voice asked again. The voice said: "I will ask again, and if I do not receive a reply within three seconds, I will shoot first one and then the other."

Banks said: "I'm Banks!" The man who had spoken said: "That is good." There seemed to be plenty of horses and Buzz and Banks were each shoved aboard a mount. Then the party moved off, taking, as far as Banks could judge, a north-easterly direction.

They rode without speaking until the sun began to burst redly from the cover of the far eastern horizon, and then Banks got a glimpse of the men around him and Buzz. The Englishman's eyes nearly came out of their sockets. This was no rag-tag mob. There were six men and each was dressed in khaki outfit—shorts, khaki shirt and hob-nailed army boots. Each carried a sten gun on his shoulder and on a pack horse was a Vickers' machine gun.

The man who had held the torch upon Banks was a chunky, round-faced individual, his skin the colour of old leather, but the long hair was sleek and black and betrayed the man's nationality. He was an Italian!

This man had a slight smile upon his mug as he surveyed his two captives. "All right," he said to his troop. "We will camp here for a time." He assigned a man to guard the two Legionnaires and then, as the rest began to break out the rations which, Banks also noted, were the regular army type, the Italian came over and stood, wide-legged, regarding them.

"So, we entertain the Legion, eh?" His English was quite good. He spoke it with a slight American intonation. Banks coolly returned the man's stare. He looked a little smug, self-satisfied.

Banks said : " How come you know my name?" The man didn't answer. Banks went on : " This will get you nowhere. You've side-tracked the Legion for the time being. But you should know the Legion—they get their man."

" I wouldn't know that, Banks," said the Italian amiably. " At the camp we have English magazines as well as American. They are old, but they read in the same strain you're talking it. The do-or-die stuff. I'll admit they're old and published during the late war, but——"

" Never mind that. How did you know my name, and what's the idea?"

" I should think you know the idea by now, Englander. And I should think the whole country knows your name by now after the bawling you've been doing up and down the countryside. The desert has ears."

Banks realised that he and Buzz *had* bawled each other's name up and down during the shemozzle with Jardin. The captain's name brought another thought into his head. He looked at this chunky Italian.

The Italian said : " How is it your engine left the rest of the train?"

" I thought you'd know that," said Banks. " You know just about every other dam' thing about us." Pleasantly the man repeated the question and added, still pleasantly, that he would be pleased to blow the tops of the Legionnaires' heads off if they did not answer his questions.

Banks finally told him of Jardin's defection. The Legionnaire thought that the news might upset the Italian. The latter laughed shortly. " He won't get far. One of our patrols will pick him up. Patrols? Sure. We have patrols—well-armed ones. Gradually the mob learns discipline."

Banks looked around the small camp perched here in a fold of the big plain. These other members of the Italian's party were obviously Arabs. But they moved with none of that nomadic lethargy so cultivated by undisciplined Arabs. The renegade army, Banks told him—

self, was building itself up. Why hadn't this party just blasted them with their automatic weapons?

Why had they gone to this trouble to capture him and Buzz? The thought nagged at Banks' mind. And he thought he knew the answer—part of the answer anyhow. He said: "So you got left behind when Montgomery used the big broom from Alamein on, huh?"

For the first time the Italian's smile wavered. Banks knew he had hit a bull's-eye. Banks said: "I'm right, huh? You dropped out of the war picture, got in with some Arab tribe and rode it out on camels and donkeys until you were sure the war was over, and then you had some luck. You were either told about or stumbled upon this camp, and then decided you'd be the Mussolini around these parts. All you need now is men—trained men."

"This Jardin," said the Italian. "He has deserted from the Legion? He is on the run?" Banks nodded. Then the Italian said: "This is a beautiful story you're putting up. Why don't you tell me the truth? That you are running away from the Legion yourselves? That you have heard of the camp beyond Kela that has fabulous stores?"

Buzz began to fly the danger signal, and Banks jumped in with: "Okay, smart man, so we did a run from the Legion. So we're fed up with a sou a day and the Legion N.C.O.s. We got a right to be. We want out of this country anyhow."

The Italian looked them both over. Banks knew now that the man did not believe them about Jardin's defection. Okay, thought Banks, it's all right by us. We can start off on the right foot with this outfit. He said: "Why the strong-arm stuff down on the railway last night? You looked ready to blow our tops off."

"Precaution saves lives. We heard you fall out with somebody on the train and heard you exchange shots with the engineer or somebody and then a figure took off in the dark. We thought there were more of you than there were. That is why we made sure that you didn't outnumber us. True; my men had automatic weapons, but they do not handle them adequately yet.

They will. My own training isn't too bright. I need assistance. I think you two can help—particularly Signor Banks."

The new politeness was not lost upon Banks. The man signed to one of the Arabs and he came over and cut Banks and Buzz free. Banks flexed his wrists and tried to get the blood working again. He looked at Buzz. He didn't want the big Yank to start busting out at the seams. It would be worth while riding along for a time, even though they were travelling away from the Legion—and from Sen. Apart from this, of course, they were too well watched. One half-move and those sten guns would start tattooing their bodies with singing lead.

They were fed upon the bully beef. It reminded Banks of England as the long-remembered taste tickled his palate. The Arab members of the party still stuck to their wine skins. Banks learned that the Italian's name was Viconi Calito, sometime member of the Imperial Motorised Division under Marshal Badoglio. Calito had been a subaltern. and his baptism of fire had been very unpleasant. "You British," he told Banks, "fight when it is not necessary. You do not fight and rest, you insist upon scrapping until you have no strength left. You are like the Germans. You are like the flea. No man can put his thumb upon you but that you jump some place else—quick!—right from under the thumb."

Banks said: "That is so, Calito. But you mentioned my name. How come you knew it? You knew it before you heard it shouted around that engine last night?" He kept his eyes upon the brown ones of Calito.

The Italian was smiling again. "As I have said—the Englishman keeps on keeping on. It is amazing." Banks didn't answer. He just kept watching the other. Then: "Yes, Banks, I knew your name. It came to us in Siddi. It came from the prison. You gave one of our men some water. It doesn't matter how we got to know. We always get to know. We are a growing organisation. We shall survive only by keeping our agents living on the Legion's doorstep. We started the strike. It was easy."

Buzz said : " Ya don't have to recite all that. We can tell you !"

" It was easy, Yank. Anything that will hamper the accursed infidel is in line with the native help around any African railroad, and especially when a few gifts are distributed to the head men—the straw bosses who are the union dictators so far as the Arabs are concerned."

" It was that easy," said Banks. Then he pondered upon his next words, unsure as to how this Italian would take them. " We have a friend who would be only too glad to join us. He's in that rear portion that one of your native helpers cut off from the main train about fifty miles back."

" That was smart work. The native rode the rods. And then he crawled up between the coaches. He was hoping to cut the train into nine separate pieces, but you apparently divined what the matter was. As for this friend of yours. That's out. I have orders to get back to camp. I cannot spare the time to rescue him. In any case, the Legion will be alert and on guard for us now. I hope your friend will see fit to make his way to us. Because, believe me, a lot of people are going to hear about this new force. Do not mistake me, we are not just a bunch of marauders. We have the material to sweep the French out of Africa, and to make terms with Krim himself !"

5

hard steel

“YOU need only the men,” said Banks slowly. The Italian nodded.

He said: “We need the men—the right men. There is a lot of power for the right men. You gave your water to one of our agents. He died full of Legion bullets. The Devil’s Own are not ungrateful.”

Banks said: “The Devil’s Own. That’s a fighting title?” But the Italian had turned away and was ordering his band to horse.

Buzz said: “You sure worked yourself in with this organisation, Bob. Me—I don’t like it. I think we oughta make a break for the Legion.”

“Yeah, and what do you think these guys are gonna do?” said Banks. “We have to string along and watch points. Also we’re going to see this big camp. Remember the Legion are only hazy as to its whereabouts. And how do we know that these guys might not have shifted it?”

“There ain’t enough of ’em,” grunted Buzz. “You gotta have a lotta men.”

“These aren’t all they’ve got. The Legion’ll have only compass bearings to work on, left by General Leclerc’s mob after they lit out for the Mareth Line to help Montgomery bust through it. But these guys here know the exact spot; they *live* there! Or they have shifted it to some place that Mentier wouldn’t find for a long, long time.”

“We’re shinnin’ up the wrong tree, Bob, I got a feelin’. We wanta wait for the first chance and light

out for the railway. You realise we're practically deserters? How're we gonna prove we got took?" said Buzz.

This had already occurred to Banks. Nobody knew that Jardin had forced them to work the engine clear of the train. All that the colonel knew was that Jardin had gone over the tender, presumably to hurry the scratch train crew up, and then the next thing that the colonel would know would be when there was no engine attached to the train. What was to stop Mentier from deducing that he, Banks, Buzz and Saxe were lighting out with the engine? To get far in front of the train and then either join up with the rag-tag—this *new* force that Calito called it—or just plain desert? But Banks had determined to get next to this camp.

Calito signalled to them to mount their horses. Virtually, they were free—free to do anything but make the wrong moves.

Banks was feeling the effects of the night train drive and began to doze in the saddle. The sun hit down at them, but, fortunately, big clouds came up to shut out its direct heat, leaving in its place a muggy humidity that was only one whit less than the sun's effect. Buzz resembled a coal heaver. Somehow, the giant Yank's skin had managed to collect a lot of coal dust. Banks was comparatively clean beside Buzz.

Steadily they headed east by north, and the suspicion grew upon the Legionnaire that his deduction about the camp's having been moved to a more inaccessible spot was well founded.

Alternately dozing and waking in the saddle, the band rode steadily. As the swift dusk drew down, the clouds began to weep. One of the rare desert rain storms suddenly hissed down upon them. Banks and Buzz greedily splashed in the puddles, washing and drinking their fill. They rested the horses several hours, and then the Italian ordered them forward again.

The rain thinned down to a fine drizzle. They splashed forward in the darkness. At no time were the two Legionnaires ever from under the eagle-eyes of the Arab renegades. Banks guessed that these men, like

the man to whom he had given water in the Siddi jail, had followed on the heels of the European armies, and had been attracted by the European way of life.

This, coupled with their desert-wisdom, made them formidable soldiers. Around a nucleus such as these men provided it wouldn't be long before an army would spring up. Banks also remembered that the Italian had not mentioned any leadership to this mob. Was Calito the sole leader? Or——

A shot blew a hole in the night silence around them. Instantly they were off the horses, and both Buzz and Banks saw the dark figures around them unsling their stens and start to spread out in open order and approach in the direction from which the shot had come. Calito remained close to the two Legionnaires.

"Stay put," said the Italian quietly. He betrayed no Latin excitability. "Stay right here. The boys will sort this out." Further firing broke out to the left of them. Suddenly there came the rapid stutter of stens nattering. Banks and Buzz and Calito lay down to minimise the risk of stray bullets. The horses would have to take their chances. Then, in a few more minutes, dark figures began to materialise out of the gloom. Banks saw Arab burnouses glistening in the rain.

Calito said: "We must have bumped into a bunch of Tuaregs. They sometimes bother us. They think we are the Legion. We don't like the comparison." Calito shone his torch upon the dozen or so Arabs that had been rounded up by his men.

To Banks' surprise, Calito broke into the Tuareg dialect. He caught snatches of the ensuing conversation. Calito said in English: "These fellows are after joining us. I told you—every day adds to our numbers. They want training, and it'll be your job to supply that."

"Why'd they let bang at us then?" asked Banks, eyeing the motley collection of Arabs, standing there with their muzzle-loaders grounded in the mud.

"Arabs always shoot first and ask questions after. We could have been a Legion patrol or a party of Arab merchants ripe for robbing," said Calito.

Banks felt a trifle silly. He realised he should have known the Arab technique by this time. They always fired first—Tuaregs especially.

The enlarged party mounted. Banks said to Calito : “Your men kill any of the Tuaregs?”

“Who cares?” said Calito. “If they’re dead it doesn’t matter—least of all to the Tuaregs themselves. Come on, we’ve wasted enough time already.”

They went forward in the rain. Dawn found them among high ground. Banks realised that he and Buzz were now in unknown country. The increasing daylight showed them nothing but barren hills—hills covered with camel scrub and thorn bush. The Saharan sand was non-existent. And then, as the sun showed redly through a thin skim of rain clouds at horizon level, the band halted on the rim of a rocky ridge, and there, spread out before their eyes, was a veritable town of tents and huts, Nissen and otherwise.

To Banks it looked like one of those temporary camps he knew so well back in the old war days. Calito said : “There she is. We moved the camp, lock, stock and barrel. Just in case the French suddenly got around to the fact that they had left some stuff out in the rain and came to claim it.”

They urged their tired nags down the rocky slope. Banks said : “Then why go to so much trouble to upset the Legion—the train and everything?”

Calito grinned. “Because people like Mentier keep groping until they find something. There was—and is—always the chance that a patrol or an expeditionary force would stumble upon this camp—before we are ready. Come on, we’re expected.” *And Banks realised that it was much nearer Siddi than even the Legion realised.*

As they rode down from the eminence, Banks saw the tarpaulined lumps in two straight lines. “Tanks,” he whispered to Buzz. “Light whippets. They can cover the desert like gadflies, and they got plenty of sting.”

Calito hadn’t been exaggerating at all. There was enough equipment here to serve a sizable army. He

counted twenty tanks. Half of them could decimate a Legion regiment. With these as a spearhead, it would be possible to slice through the Saharan chain of Legion forts, isolate each one and then go to work on it with mortars and the twenty-five pounders—the famous Montgomery artillery which the general had used with so much success in shoving Rommel out of Africa.

Buzz wiped the sweat from his big face. "Holy smoke! Boy, Krim's wars are gonna look like firework night alongside what these boys are gonna do."

They found themselves riding down an orderly street. The night's rain had muddied things a little, but nevertheless the street was as orderly as a Legion bivouac. Banks saw plenty of men around, all dressed in shorts and khaki shirts. All with the inevitable sten guns on their shoulders.

It was significant that they were all Arabs, too! Or mostly. In the khaki garb it wasn't possible to place the nationality of the individual right away. The troop halted outside a bigger place. It was built of wood sections, and Banks gasped a little when he saw curtains at the windows. Their entry into this shanty town seemed to excite little curiosity.

Banks was following Calito up onto the minute verandah when a figure stepped through the front doorway. Banks looked, swallowed hard. "Holy mackerel, a woman!"

She was dressed in khaki jodhpurs, and she wore a khaki shirt open at the brown throat. Banks guessed her age to be around twenty. It was hard to tell with a Eurasian female. But his gaze clung to that heart-shaped face—she could be sixteen for all he knew.

Now her big brown eyes were sizing himself and Buzz up. Out of his eye corners he saw Buzz's thick six feet six inches begin to swell. The Yank was opening up at the seams at the sight of this beauty like a flower in the morning. Or a skunk bush, Banks laconically said to himself.

"Karta, I've brought a netful this time," said Calito, grinning. "Can we come in?"

"Surely," said the vision. "This way." Banks caught

the clipped speech of her English. He guessed she was multi-tongued—able to speak any of a dozen languages, as these Eurasians so often could, and probably had as many Arab dialects off as well.

She led the way into a long room that was floored with goatskins and that even had an imitation fireplace at the far end. By the window to Banks' right as he stepped into the room he saw a bundle in a chair. At first he thought it might be a bundle of washing, or a bundle of Arab garments tossed there until their owner resumed them. And then the bundle moved. It cackled, and then he saw a bony hand uplifted.

"Ah, the Legion uniform. It is good to see the uniform of the perfidious French," came the high-pitched voice. Banks could see now that from the bundle of robes poked the bony, hairless head of a man—an old man. The skin was seamed and pitted like a honeycomb. A thin gap of a mouth broadened and split in what Banks took to be a welcoming smile.

Buzz blew a big breath. "Jeepers, Methuselah, by all that's holy!"

The old man cackled. "Not quite so old as Methuselah, son. Take seats, I beg you. Please take a seat. Karta, bring drinks for the gentlemen. I am glad you have come. My name is Mirad Abula. Karta is my wife!"

Wife! The old man's treble hit Banks between the eyes. He'd expected the ancient to say daughter. At that moment Karta came back bearing drinks on an ornate tray. The tray itself was of Arab workmanship, but the Scotch was—Scotch. Whisky that should have graced some French or British officers' mess, way back in the dead-and-gone.

Banks realised that all this stuff, the guns, equipment—everything—had come in from Daka on the west coast and had then been laboriously flown in, part of the distance at least, and then mule-packed, camel-packed to this remote place in the desert—or to its original place, Banks corrected himself.

Buzz was sipping appreciatively at the Scotch. "I never tasted anythin' like this in years, by golly." The

ancient motioned for the Yank to drink up, and Karta minced over with a refill. She slopped the glass to the brim.

"There is an ocean of this drink of the infidel," said the old man. "But it is like Allah's sun. In moderation it is the light of the world—in excess it——" He shrugged expressively. The movement in some strange way brought Banks' gaze to the man's nether limbs. He saw the Arab robes draped emptily from in that region of the skinny body.

Mirad Abula had no legs! What sort of an outfit had they stumbled into? This—this ancient spider ruled this roost of plenty. An old, crabbed man—another man who fancied himself as the leader of the faithful.

And then into the room strolled a being that took the Legionnaires' breath. A willowy Arab beauty came gliding in. She was unveiled and her enormous eyes stared bodily at them. Mirad waved a skinny hand.

"This is Sula, my second wife, gentlemen." And then the old fellow waved a hand and both women retired from the room. Banks saw Calito's eyes follow the slender form of Karta. "*Oh-ho,*" he said to himself, "*the old serpent was on the prowl in this iron Eden. Interesting!*"

"I understand that you wish to help us train these men, gentlemen," said Mirad. "That is good. We have two hundred men here. It is too much for one man to handle—for Calito to handle. He has aides but they are efficient only in their own account; they have not the ability for teaching others. Time is growing short. The French are sniffing around for the location of this camp. I do not want them to find it. It is ours, and I intend it to remain ours."

"What's in it for us?" said Buzz. "We ain't stickin' our neck out for sea-weed only."

"I'm coming to that, gentlemen," said the ancient. "You will train our men and become officers in our new army. We have equipment enough here to enable us to sweep Africa clean of the French, by which time I will be in a position to bargain with the surrounding

nations—the Egyptians, the Sudanese, the Cameroons—bargain with all these for supplies.”

Banks took a sip of his Scotch. He said: “But Krim—what of him?”

“An astute question, infidel. I will bargain with the holy leader also. I shall be in a position to bargain even with Krim. You see, gentlemen, I am willing to bargain with everybody. I shall be *strong enough* to bargain with everybody.”

“But the faithful?” said Banks. “How about them? Will they recognise you as a leader on a par with their god, Abdel Krim?”

“I repeat—I shall be strong enough to bargain with even the great Krim. The faithful have respect for the strong. The French Foreign Legion have worked on that principle for half a century, and they are not half so strong, infidel. True they are attacked because they are foreigners. But I am not a foreigner. This is my country. I have, shall we say, been civilised according to Western standards, chiefly in the gutters of Algiers and other north African ports. No, gentlemen, I can handle the faithful.”

“You were talking about the benefits for your hired help—us,” said Buzz.

“They are many. When the task is done, you will have the option of going to your own countries, and if that is not practicable——” he smiled a cunning smile at this point “——to anywhere you may choose with a pocketful of whatever currency you desire to the tune of five hundred thousand francs each!”

Banks brushed a hand across his eyes. Maybe it was the Scotch. But all this savoured of the pipe-dream. He felt slightly drunk. Mirad Abula’s seamed face waved back and forth before him like a cobra’s head.

Banks shook his head vigorously. He needed all his brains right now. In this ancient crab before him reposed a hell of a lot of wisdom. This old guy was playing for big stakes, and he’d trample down a lot of men to get what he was after. Trample? That was a good one, Banks reflected, when you thought about it. The guy had no legs! But neither had T.N.T.!

“Five hundred grand, huh?” said Buzz. “That’s a lotta dough, mister.” The big Yank had been a trifle hazed by the sudden appearance of Mirad’s beautiful wives, but he was no fool. Buzz said: “You’re after big stakes, and so are we. But the French. You don’t think they’re gonna let you play dictator around here—especially with their lease-lend material?”

“That is another war risk, you might say,” said the old one. “It is necessary to know the French colonial mentality. They have a Foreign Legion which they run as cheaply as they can. Hence the force is fitted only with the most moderate weapons. Apparently the French think that Legionnaires’ lives are cheaper than buying modern weapons for them.”

“That’s why they’ve suddenly decided to take over this dump,” put in Banks. “They figure it will set up the Legion in new armament. But they can call in their air force and it would soon or later spot this camp and maybe even, in the last resort, bomb it.”

“True, true, my son,” trebled the ancient. “Your glass—please fill it. Calito, perhaps you’d better set the men on their tasks, and then get some rest. I have a feeling that we may not have much longer to rot in this place.”

Calito rose; he seemed reluctant to leave the Legionnaires with the old one. Before he departed he gave the old man the report on the dismemberment of the train. Banks noticed that he did not tell Mirad about the Jardin story, obviously believing, as he did, that Banks and Buzz had concocted the tale to excuse their own defection and desertion from the Legion. In other words, Calito didn’t think that Jardin was worth bothering about. He stamped out of the room, his chunky figure swaggering with Italian pomp and pride. There was a faint and enigmatical grin on the old man’s face as the door closed upon the Italian.

Banks thought for a moment that the old one would say something about Calito, but he didn’t. Banks had the feeling that this old wise-acre was hep to all the human emotions and goings on; that he played around with people like a chess player used his pawns and kings

and bishops.

Banks said: "The train, as Calito has pointed out, has been practically wrecked, but the Legion will reform; Colonel Mentier will probably march his men over the desert once he salvages his supplies from the abandoned rear portion of the train."

"Exactly, infidel," said Mirad. "It is the lethargic Legion way. I know that Mentier has no wireless—another French economy. The good colonel will be all the more determined that when he reports back to Siddi, he will have liquidated this camp—either by salvaging the supplies, or by surrounding and taking it. I know that his information is that we are only a rag-tag-and-bobtail group that will run at his approach."

"Supposin' you do wipe him out," said Buzz. "Then the French are gonna bring in their air force, ain't they? You got planes here but nobody to fly 'em, aintcha?"

"Airplanes do not matter. They cannot capture one inch of territory. That was proven in the last war, my son. True they can use parachute forces, but I tell you again that the French Colonial Department is more concerned with wars elsewhere. They will rely upon their faithful few—the Legion. Men are cheaper to come by than tanks and planes—material which they sadly need for that war elsewhere I have just spoken about. You see, my sons, I bank upon the time-honoured *laissez faire* of the French. By the time they come to realise that I am a force to be reckoned with, I hope to be in a position to bargain with them—or else."

"Panzer stuff, huh?" grunted Buzz. "Whyn't you usin' the tanks and motorised stuff you got here, Mirad?"

"Fuel, son, fuel. I have plenty of it. Do not mistake me. But I must be cautious until I can bargain for supplies. What I have is carefully hidden deep where bombs can't get at it. I need it for practice and also for my drive upon the French forts. I am always cautious."

"You sure got it all figured," said Buzz. He had refilled his own glass. The Yank was missing no drinking bets. The almost-forgotten whisky taste reminded him of a host of saloons and beer parlours back in a

country that wanted to ask him questions about skulduggeries that were still unsolved.

Banks' admiration for this legless ancient rose in leaps and bounds. This old guy was using psychology. Banking on the Frenchman's notorious *laissez faire* so far as its African holdings were concerned. Hitherto, the Legion authorities had had only the raw, fanatical Arabs under their equally fanatic holy leader, Krim, to deal with. Then he thought about that four-hundred-man force under Mentier, armed with nothing more than a Lebel rifle per man and a few machine guns.

Why, these two hundred semi-trained men here could surround and cut the Legion force into little pieces. An urge began to surge through the Englishman's blood. Something had to be done and very quickly. It wasn't from any reason of loyalty to the French; it went deeper than that. In that force under Mentier were men he had campaigned with over a number of years—six, to be exact. A motley collection of men, welded together by fire and thirst and hardship. They would face these tanks and armoured cars and blast away with their pitiful and ineffectual arms until the last man dropped.

Banks' mind harked back to that fierce German drive through Belgium and France, where men fought with puny rifles and light mortars whose bullets and shells bounced off the armour of the Teuton tanks. It would be the same kind of massacre. Toughness and courage was no match for hard steel.

He suddenly realised that the Scotch and fatigue were hazing his brain over. The old man was speaking again, and the words struggled through the haze into his brain. "You are technicians, I presume?" Mirad was saying.

Buzz said: "I can handle anythin' with an engine, mister. My pal's almost as good. He's the gunnery expert—almost as good as me."

Mirad smiled. "Ah, the western humour. In the Algerian gutters one learns to appreciate the western humour, gentlemen. Calito has picked well. I am not ignorant of the help that you extended to my agent in Siddi prison, Banks. I hope we shall work well together!"

6

the Devil's guests

MIRAD clapped his scrawny hands, and almost immediately the one called Karta came. "Yes, my lord?" she said. Banks noticed that she accorded the old husband all the deference that the Arab female accords to her man.

It was incongruous to the Englishman. This strange family lived by an equally strange mixture of Western and Eastern standards.

"Karta, these gentlemen are my honoured guests. They stay under my roof. Show them to their rooms. For anything you require a native servant will be at your disposal. On my head be it." He waved dismissal, and the Legionnaires followed Karta from the room.

They strode down a narrow passage and Banks divined that it connected two buildings, one the sleeping quarters and the other the living place. He wondered whether Calito was an honoured guest of this old Arab dictator.

Off this narrow corridor opened rooms. Karta showed them into a couple of rooms next door to each other. Banks entered and found a regulation army cot in the cell-like place. A skin rug was spread beside the bed.

There was no other furniture in the room. Banks figured he would have difficulty swinging a tail-less cat around in this box without touching the walls. But it was luxury after the Legion bivouac tents, and only the hard stony desert to lie on.

Karta lingered by the door, her dark eyes watching him. As she watched him she clapped her hands, and

presently an old crone shambled up. Karta ripped off a few words in the native patois, gesturing to Banks and then to Buzz in the next room. The Englishman guessed she was dishing out the look-after-'em slogan to the old witch, who bobbed up and down, and then trotted away.

"This is service and a half," said Buzz. His big voice rumbled through the thin partition, which, Banks saw, was American beaverboard. He saw the smile come to Karta's face. Had he seen a vein of boredom on this beauty's face? He went to the door, expecting her to leave him and Buzz to their new abode. Instead, she draped her form in a way that threw her curves at him. Banks remembered the way Calito had looked at her, and he wondered what the Italian would say if he saw this exhibition she was putting on for the new guests. Banks gently hazed her through the door. Then he saw Buzz's grinning mug as the Yank put his head around the lintel.

Karta went her willowy way down the passage. Buzz came into Banks' room, kicking the door shut behind him. Before he could open his mouth, Banks put a finger to his lips. He whispered: "Take it easy, Buzz. This is a place where walls have mouths as well as ears. Mirad ain't shoving us in with the family just because he likes us, feller. Here he can keep an eye on us—and an ear."

"Boy, are we in the middle of the pot?" said Buzz. He yawned mightily.

"Okay, Buzz, go and get some shut-eye. If we were dime-novel heroes we could start hellin' our way around this place—start cleanin' up the place with a tank in each hand. We're not. We're two lonely Legionnaires with a big cloud just over our heads, and we have to sleep just like other guys back home do."

Came a knock on the door, and the crone came in, grinning, her toothless mouth wide and red. She had a tray and upon it was a concoction that smelled like food. She left it and returned with gourds of wine. The sweet-sharp taste of the wine quelled the queasiness left by the Scotch. They ate and then Buzz went back to his room. They had no arms. Their Lebel's had been taken over by Calito.

Banks awoke to the sound of musketry and the tack-tack of machine guns. He came surging out of bed, sure that Mentier must have arrived by some miracle and begun to attack the camp. He went to the small window and saw nothing but the brown hump of the hill that rose behind the hut. Then he realised that it would be the Mirad men practising with their weapons.

He was wearing only pants and rubbing the sleep out of himself. The door suddenly opened and Karta stood on the threshold. "Hey!" bawled Banks, making a dive for an army blanket on the bed. Karta did not move or bat an eyelash.

She said: "The lion is ashamed of a body that he shouldn't be ashamed of."

Banks whipped the blanket around his middle. "I was brought up in a lift, ma'am. It's an old Western custom to wear clothes in front of women—especially beautiful ones like you!"

"It is a stupid custom," she said evenly. Buzz appeared in the doorway behind her, towering like a colossus. Buzz wore a mock grimness about the face. He wore only pants, held up by a hand.

"This guy annoying you, ma'am?" he said. For the first time Banks saw the Karta smile flash on, and it did wonderful things to her sulky beauty. "I will pull his arms out if you say so, ma'am."

"My lord Mirad is expecting you. It is evening, and he retires soon." She drifted away. Buzz watched her float up the passage, and then he turned to Banks.

"That gal's claws are all ready to hook on to you, brother," he said.

"That's one thing we *have* to be afraid of," said Banks, climbing into his clothes.

They were dressed and on their way out to the living quarters in a few minutes. There they found Calito and two other men—Arabs, Banks guessed—and, of course, Mirad himself, still ensconced in the chair, still talking.

"Ah, I want you to meet my leading men, infidels. The big one there is Yusuf, a man who learned to drive the internal combustion engine in Cairo. He dislikes the infidel—your presences excepted, of course—as much as

the average Arab ever did. The other is Ali; he handles men—my men. And I trust you slept well, Legionnaires?”

“Fine and dandy,” said Banks. He eyed the two Arabs, Yusuf and Ali. Yusuf was a big, rawboned Arab, bony-faced, and had a pair of ill-matched eyes. Ali was tubby, beefy. A couple of bandits, in this thing for what they could get out of it, reflected Banks. Mirad was certainly gathering a tough and ruthless bunch around him. These guys would make the marauding of Rommel’s Afrika Korps look like kids’ stuff.

“To-morrow, I want you to start in overhauling the tanks, Legionnaires,” said Mirad. “Incidentally, perhaps you should wear my uniform?”

Banks thought swiftly. “We prefer the Legion clothes, Mirad.”

Mirad considered a while and then said: “As you will. Clothes do not make soldiers. As you will, my sons. And now I must go to my couch.”

His wife, Sula, clapped her hands, and two great Arabs suddenly came into the room. Banks gasped at their size. They were as big as, if not bigger than, the giant Yank. They lifted the ancient chair and all, and carried him down the passage. For a moment the willowy Sula looked over the men in the living room and then she swayed off after her lord and master. Banks had the feeling that the air was charged with imminent lightning.

“Bodyguards,” muttered Buzz to Banks as they trooped out into the darkness. The two Arabs, Yusuf and Ali, motioned the two Legionnaires to go with them. Banks looked at Calito and the Italian nodded.

They walked down the quiet street of huts, entering one at the far end not far from the tank park. Here they found a motley collection of khaki-clad Arabs. The sour smell of cheap Arab wine was keen in the room.

They had wine shoved at them. Banks felt that at some time or other during his desert campaigns with the Legion he must have fired upon some of these men, and as probably they had fired upon him.

For courtesy's sake they took a sip of the wine. Buzz said in an undertone to Banks: "Me—I don't like the company."

"It's okay, Buzz, they don't care for us any either," said Banks. "We'll duck out as soon as good manners'll let us. This wine I wouldn't light a match near." They saw Calito go out of the hut presently, waving to them as he went. Yusuf and his pal, Ali, were swigging at the wine and had seemingly forgotten about the two Legionnaires. The talk was in some obscure dialect that neither Buzz nor Banks could understand.

Presently they rose and nodded a farewell to the company and ducked outdoors. The night was a fine one. A wind blew down off the hills and the starlight was strong enough for them to see the huddled shapes of the tarpaulined tanks. They walked along the lines of fighting vehicles and discovered a dozen armoured cars behind the tanks. Buzz was soon in among them sniffing like a knowing dog. After an inspection of one of the cars, he said: "This jalopy's serviceable all right. I bet they all are. That Yusuf feller's kept 'em in good fettle. They could take off right now."

Banks said: "Don't get any ideas, Buzz. And don't look now—we got company!" Banks kept his voice low. A shadow materialised out of the darkness. It was a sentry. He motioned for them to get the hell out of the tank park. They slowly withdrew and walked to the other end of the village—to come up against another sentry, on guard some hundreds of yards from the huts.

The man motioned that they were to go no farther. Banks and Buzz turned back, and as they drew near the old man's hut they were met by the Yusuf and Ali fellows. Both Arabs indicated that they should follow them. They went to the tank park, and this time the sentry there, seeing Yusuf, offered no obstacle. Yusuf went to the engine of the nearest armoured car and said in English: "No good. No go."

"Yeah, I know," said Buzz. "Rotor arm missin'." The Arab nodded, and they wore big grins. Banks looked at Buzz. Buzz wore a big grin, too. "Where you keep

rotor arms, huh?" He waved and shaped the rotors with his hands.

Yusuf shook his head. "Calito—ask him. He know. Him and Mirad."

They came away from the park and the two Legionnaires walked softly into the Mirad Abula house. There was a low light in the living room. Banks half expected the women to be sitting around in it. There was nobody. The place seemed to brood. They walked down the passage to their rooms, passing one of Mirad's bodyguards standing outside a door down the corridor. This was obviously Mirad's room, and the next two doors would also belong to his wives, Banks reflected, with connecting doors, of course.

Buzz entered Banks' room, and the latter said: "You said those cars were ready for moving, Buzz. Yet Yusuf tells us they got no rotor arm in."

Buzz said: "The one I looked at has, brother. Work that one out!"

"Not so loud. I think Calito's room is on the other side of mine," said Banks. "You think Calito knows about that arm being in the engine of the car?"

"It's anybody's guess, Bob. You heard what the Arab said. Calito's the boy with the rotor arms. Okay, so what's that one doing in the armoured car?"

"I got an idea," said Banks, "Calito's strictly for himself." Banks was eyeing the window. It was small. He wondered if it would open. He got up off the bed and examined the window. He saw the screws. The Arab carpenters had shoved two in to hold it secure. A jack-knife blade might loosen them. After all, a man had to have air on hot nights.

"Take it easy," said Buzz. "Don't forget Mirad's hatchet man's standin' four doors away. He's gonna hear things if we ain't careful."

"Start hummin' Yankee Doodle, Buzz. Go ahead! Start hummin'!" said Banks, as he opened his knife. "Havin' 'em loose'll make me breathe easier. Here goes with the first try!"

Buzz's big bass hum began to drone out and Banks attacked the first of the screws. His knife blade took a

big beating, but at last the screw reacted. The other came out comparatively easy. He plugged them back in with finger and thumb. They had a possible back door in case of trouble.

Suddenly a knock came on their door. Banks opened it. It was Calito.

"Somebody has the stomach trouble, eh?" said the Italian, his large eyes searching the room. "Or perhaps it was only somebody humming?"

"It's the wine we had," said Buzz. "It gets my throat wires crossed."

Banks noticed that Calito was still dressed. Banks' brain flashed on with an idea. He looked straight at Calito and said softly—softly so that his voice carried no farther than to where Calito was standing: "We just took a look at the cars, Calito. A neat idea, immobilising them. All but one, that is. It's a good idea. I guess Mirad's keeping that for emergencies, huh?"

For a moment, Calito stood stock-still, and then he came slowly into the room. He closed the door behind him. "Look, since I took you from the railroad I've had an idea that you two have other ideas about this camp."

Banks didn't answer the Italian. He kept his eyes full on the man's face. Then he said: "Okay, Calito, we're listening. Take it from there."

"You're Legionnaires still. For France. Oh, I know. Not the patriotic gibberish, but you don't like the idea of your battalion being massacred by these machines here. I guessed that when you tried to get me to take your pal you said you left behind. And other things, too, since then."

"Other things?" said Banks. "What other things?"

"The fact that you stick to your Legionnaire clothes. The fact that you probably hope to meet up with your Legion pals again, and that if you *weren't* wearing them you would—and could—be taken for deserters."

"What's all this gotta do with the rotor arm in that car?" said Buzz.

"Not so loud!" said Calito, his eyes wide now with fear. "I am an agent of the French. I contacted them

months ago. I went to Siddi to try to recruit technicians on Mirad's behalf. It was then I contacted the French. They jumped at the chance. When I got back the wily old devil had the camp moved. It took us a couple of months to move the stuff, working day and night. He's suspicion itself. I can't get away from the camp except with men who watch me as close as you are watched."

"The train business. You did a good job of that, didn't you? You were not on the Legion's side over that?" said Banks.

Calito said: "I could have dynamited the whole dam' train. Instead I had it uncoupled and piece-mealed. Nobody got hurt. The ambush? I could have used both sides of the gully and done a lot of damage."

Banks knew the man had a point there. He shot his last shot. "You wormed your way into the Mirad works. It wouldn't be because the Karta piece has anything to do with it, huh?"

Banks saw an expression flicker in Calito's face. He'd hit the target. "I am using her in the interests of France. It is necessary. She is very close to the old man."

"Not as close as she is to you," said Banks steadily. "And so the rotor is on one car, so that the car is ready for an emergency, huh?"

"Exactly. Mirad has the rotors hidden some place. He counted them all. Karta got me the one I have put back on the car. I inspect the cars periodically. The Yusuf Arab drives, but he has only a skimpy knowledge of engines. That's why Mirad wants technicians like yourself."

"What's the gimmick?" said Buzz. "When do things start to hum around this joint? By now, Mentier'll have dam' near contacted his supplies. He is gonna be nosin' around the desert shortly on the big search."

"I don't know," said Calito. "I am watched as much as you are. I can't move two steps without one of Mirad's bulldogs are right behind me."

Calito walked swiftly to the door and swung it open. There was nobody in the passage. He turned and

noded to them and disappeared. Both Legionnaires looked at each other.

"You pays your money and takes your choice," whispered Buzz. "That guy has either a very good line, or he's what he says. What we do know is that he knows what we're for, and if he knows that, what——" The big Yank let the other thought go with a wave of his thick arms.

"I know," said Banks quietly. "He's figurin' a way out for himself and Karta. That car's gonna have double company in it when Calito's good and ready. He almost sold me the agent idea, Buzz."

"Agent idea?" said Buzz. "You mean you ain't fallin' for it?"

"I mean," said Banks, "he's no more an agent than I am. But we're gonna act like we think he is—until it suits us to do otherwise. Calito's after a skin-free passage out of this dump for him and Karta. But the time is not yet, as far as I can see. The fact that he didn't dynamite the train is because he just didn't have any. You know the Eye-tie methods. They can't do even half a thing well. And Calito's mind isn't on his work. His mind is on Karta. Maybe she's the brains of their outfit."

Banks suddenly got to his feet. "Come on, we're gonna use that car. I just had a better idea! We've been taken for a ride on the switch-back." The Englishman had the feeling that he should have been wearing asses' ears. He'd just fallen for the corniest double-cross! But maybe it was not too late! He took a look out the door into the passage.

Then he took out the window screws and took down the window. He got through without much trouble, but Buzz experienced plenty. They got out onto the slope behind the huts. Then they headed silently for the tank park. Slowly they wormed in and out of the covered tanks. They began moving towards the armoured car that was all ready for the road—when a torch came full on them and Calito's voice said: "I hope I'm not disturbing you, gentlemen, but you'd look better with your hands in the air!"

7

Karta

“WELL—whadda ya know!” growled Buzz. “We fell for the big line, huh?”

Banks nearly jumped out of his skin when another voice chimed in. It was the Mirad treble. “This is unfortunate, gentlemen, very unfortunate.”

Banks said: “All right, Mirad, but you got a rotor arm missing from your collection. Probably you’ll find it among the works of this car.” Banks knew, even as he said it, that he’d been too late about that, too. Calito would have run out, removed the arm and maybe handed it back to the Karta woman.

“I have the correct number, my son,” said Mirad. His voice was gentle. Then he said: “Take them to my house. This has been an unpleasant night. I am an old man and the night air crumples my liver. Take them to the house. It is a very bad night indeed.”

He reminded Banks of a teacher catching his favourite pupils up his favourite apple tree. Banks saw the two big Arabs lift the chair and then he saw Yusuf and Ali range up alongside himself and Buzz and they were marched back to Mirad’s house.

The two Arab attendants set the old man down in his corner in the living room. They stood before him while Calito told the story. “I played along with them, Mirad, when they said they had found a rotor arm in one of the cars. I pretended I was an agent of the French——”

“Then you went right out after you left us, Calito, and removed that rotor arm and then came and told

Mirad here," said Banks. Calito smiled widely. Banks went on: "Naturally the Karta kid took it and shoved it back with the others. I guess she knows where they're kept, Mirad?"

The old man was grinning. "When a man drowns he clutches at straws."

"You hang onto your women, Mirad," said Buzz. "They ain't no straws."

The ancient cackled and flapped his scrawny hands delightedly. Then his laughter cut off abruptly. Gently he said: "Take these two out and I want to see their heads without their bodies five minutes from now!"

Banks hunched his shoulders. If they wanted his head they were going to have to cut it from his corpse. He was going to go down fighting, at least.

In the split second before the two Arabs, Yusuf and Ali, came for them, Buzz kicked out a long leg and the Mauser went flying from Calito's hand. The big Yank had timed his kick nicely. Banks took the nearest man—Yusuf. His big fist went wrist deep into the Arab's midriff, and as he came forward Banks crashed a haymaker to the ugly jaw. Then he went after Ali. Buzz and Calito were scrambling for the Mauser, and over all could be heard the high-pitched cackling of Mirad.

Even in the heat of the shemozzle Banks was amazed to hear that the cackling stemmed not from hysteria on the ancient's part, but that Mirad was actually laughing—having himself a jolly time in his ring-side seat. Banks guessed that was why Mirad hadn't sent his two big Arab bodyguards into the fray.

Ali was tougher than Yusuf. Banks couldn't stop the man from coming to close quarters, and those great arms of the man came around him and started in giving Banks the biggest squeeze of his life. Meanwhile, Buzz had picked up Calito and thrown him at the old man. One of the bodyguard fended off Calito's flying body, and then Mirad's squeaks pierced the row they were making.

Banks shoved the heel of his hand under Ali's nostrils and the Arab grunted with pain and let go of Banks. And then the roof seemed to fall on the Englishman. He

went to his knees. He shook the wooze from his head and looked up. The big guards of Mirad's had taken the fight up.

Dimly, through the haze around his brain, Banks saw Buzz staggering around, holding his head. Mirad was calling: "Do not kill them! Their heads must fall from live bodies. Do not kill them!"

Calito had gotten up like an old man and lurched to where the Mauser lay, and picked it up. Mirad was talking as Buzz and Banks were hauled to their feet by the guards. Calito levelled the Mauser at them and the two big Arabs returned to stand behind their master's chair.

"Ah, my sons, you are the magnificent fighters. It is a pity that you do not fight on the right side! It is a thousand pities." Banks saw him dry-washing his hands in fierce, jerky movements.

Calito said: "I'd better take them and let's get it over with, Mirad."

"Wait a moment," said Mirad. "Haste is the murderer of time, my son. I have not finished. I think we will make the lopping party a little larger, shall we not?"

Banks caught the gleam in the ancient's eyes. What was this old scallywag up to? Mirad went on: "I thought to play with the mouse a li tle longer. It does my old veins good to see the mouse steal the crumbs and think it is not observed. But it is always observed."

Banks suddenly began watching Calito, and he saw the Italian's face slowly go pale. Calito's big eyes began to grow wider, and Banks knew now who the mouse was. Mirad said: "Take the pistol off the man, Yusuf. Take it from him before he lets in fall from his withering fingers."

"Stand back, dog!" said Calito, backing towards the door that led to the passage. Yusuf hesitated. The Mauser was wavering in Calito's hand, but a twitch of the trigger and its heavy bullet would crash through him.

Mirad said: "I say take it from him, Yusuf. The mouse threatens with small teeth. His bite is a nibble. Take the pistol from him, Yusuf."

And then, like lightning, the old man drew a gun from out the folds of his robes and shot. Banks saw the pistol knocked out of Calito's hand.

"You were slow, Yusuf. Allah does not reward slow men—except with eternity. Now, Calito, listen to wise words. I have known about the Western contraption without which a car will not go—the rotor arm. I have known that you have had the car prepared for some time." The old man broke off and handed his Mauser to one of the guards. "Take this—it is too heavy for an old man's hand. I have known a long time that the mouse nibbles at the master's cheese. She is beautiful and I do not attract her now that my blood runs slow within me—so she turns to the young and the mouse-like Calito. He has not the stomach to jump in the car and take her out of Africa because he says the time is not ripe. The time is always ripe, my son. It is man who makes it ripe. You are not that kind of man. Bring Karta to me—no. I will clap my hands"—he clapped them—"and she will come. She answers half a man like myself quicker than she will answer a man who poses as a whole man!"

They heard her approach, and in those few seconds' waiting Banks saw an evil gleam in the old one's eye. Mirad was savouring this situation to the full. This moment was the high point—what he had been waiting for for months—ever since his old eyes had seen the union that had started and grown between Karta and this Italian.

Banks saw how the old fellow had let Calito think he was in solid with the old man by betraying Banks and Buzz, and then at the moment of Calito's triumph had rammed the spanner into the Italian's works. Sure, it was hindering Mirad's own preparations to take over a Hitler role in this desert struggle. But men could be got—men like Jardin. They could be procured. It also showed that Mirad wasn't considering the Mentier expedition to be much of a threat. He probably thought he had ample men and means to dispose of Mentier.

And then suddenly Karta appeared. She came in looking like a tigress; looking over the blue bore of a

Mauser. "Stand still, all of you!" she spat. The guard holding the pistol made a movement as though he was going to hand back the pistol he held to Mirad. Karta's Mauser spoke sharply. The guard slumped. He was dead before he hit the floor. "Don't move," she said. "You two——" she motioned with her head to Banks and Buzz. "Come over beside me and watch for if the sentries come to investigate the noise. Calito, get their guns—quickly!"

She had the situation right at her finger-tips. She must have heard the shemozzle, Banks figured, and then listened in and heard Mirad's showdown with Calito. Then she'd stepped in before she lost her mouse—Calito.

Banks collected a Mauser apiece off Yusuf and Ali, and they searched the old man's chair and him for arms, and found none. Then Karta said: "Calito, take one of these men with you and put the rotor back on the car."

"But these fellows——" Calito began. His fear of the old man seemed to have paralysed his mental processes. He shrugged as she waved her Mauser.

"Do as I say, or I'll point it your way, Calito," she said contemptuously. "Mirad is right. If you hadn't been so frightened of this legless fragment of a man we should have been out of this dump weeks—months—ago. Do as I say. We make bargains with the devil if it means we get out of this hole."

"Ma'am, I'll be right glad to take Percy here to that car. Shall I bring the car round, ma'am?" enquired Buzz politely. The giant Yank was enjoying himself now.

Banks said: "Do what the lady says. Put the rotor arm back and watch Calito. Leave the car where it is. We can walk to it. What you gonna do about these guys, Karta?"

"There is cord and rope in that locker over there, infidel," she said. "We should kill them, but shots would make noise and stabbing would make mess. Besides, I want Mirad to know and to go on remembering that I successfully trampled on his brains—and got away with it."

Banks watched Buzz and Calito go on their mission to the car, and then he began rooting in the locker, finding rope. Quickly he began the marathon task of trussing the Arabs. Yusuf and Ali he did first. Then the guard. For gags he used rag he also found in the lockers. He was just finishing with the guard when Calito and Buzz returned. Buzz stood up a big thumb in the okay sign.

Karta said: "Now hold this gun, infidel. I want the pleasure of dealing with Mirad." Without the slightest hesitation she handed the gun to Banks and swayed over and confronted her lord and master. The old man was smiling faintly, but his eyes held cruel, frightening things in them.

She faced him, her beautiful face set in a snarl that was half vindictiveness and half fright at what she was about to do. She spat in his face. The Mirad smile didn't waver. Then she slapped him across the face with all the strength she could muster. The old guy's head snapped back.

He said: "The chicken takes upon herself a cock's spurs. I hope I do not die before I cut off those spurs, sweet flower."

"All the time you scheme and everybody jumps for fear his head will roll off under your knife, Mirad. I'm getting out. The mouse hadn't the stomach, but his mate has. I will build stomach into him. He is mine, Mirad. Give me some rope, infidel." Banks handed her the rope, and savagely and expertly she tied those skinny hands and then gagged that toothless mouth.

She turned and looked at the others for a moment. "There is one other thing." The men watched her go through the door into the passage, and presently she returned, shoving the hand-bound and gagged Sula before her.

"Passion flower," she said to Sula, her lip curling. "Here's your chance. You can remain here and continue with the handmaiden stuff to this old skinny barrel of camel droppings, or you can come with us, Sula."

The latter's eyes rolled in terror. Banks had to marvel at the queer, strange mixture of ruthlessness and compassion in the Karta woman. Here she was offering

freedom—a dangerous freedom, maybe—to the other wife, whom she probably hated as much, if not more, than she hated Mirad—if that were possible, Banks added to himself.

Sula's eyes rolled in the aged Arab's direction and then she shook her head vigorously. "All right," said Karta. "Rot in this old goat's embrace if you want it that way. I'll take my chance on the desert."

Banks said: "We're wasting time, Karta. The sentries might be along any time now." Karta went over to the connecting door with the passage and locked it. Then she motioned the men out of the front door. They filed out into the darkness, and she locked that, too, tossing the key away.

They walked at some distance one behind the other, finally coming to the tank park. Buzz said: "Hold it a second." And before anybody could protest he had moved off in the darkness. They held stiffly for a few moments and then they heard a stifled grunt. Seconds later, Buzz came up. "I got too enthusiastic," he said. "I rabbit-punched his neck. You know what necks are if you get too enthusiastic. His wasn't any different—it snapped. I got his sten gun along with me."

They piled into the armoured car. Banks was amazed to grope into it and find Karta in the driving seat. Calito was in beside her. The guy seemed a nerveless hulk. Banks figured he'd snap out of it once they were out from under Mirad's influence. Calito was all mixed up inside probably.

Karta kicked the car engine alive. She switched on the lights and then the vehicle roared out of the park like a living, raging being. She turned right, and then the headlights picked out the sentry on guard at the end of the camp. He was standing with sten gun levelled. They could see him shouting something, his mouth wide and distorted, and the headlights picked out the inexplicable terror in his eyes.

Then they heard the ping of sten slugs on the steel skin of the car. The next moment the car roared on over him. There were a couple of ominous bumps and then they were zooming out on to the desert. Banks,

from the refraction of the headlights, was able to see that the car was stocked with provisions. This couple had certainly thought of everything.

Presently Karta cut off the lights. Calito guided her by the stars he could see through the gun slit. After five minutes of rough travel over the uneven ground, Banks tapped the girl on the shoulder. "Lady, slow down a little. We're gettin' off!" He had to shout the request in her ear.

She did. The car jerked to a stop. "This is as far as we go, Karta," said Banks. Calito had the torch working and Banks saw the girl regarding him in some surprise.

Karta said: "I thought you wanted to get back to your comrades? It is foolish. I intended taking you within walking distance of the Legion, and then dropping you. Calito and I are making for Siddi, and from there——"

"Okay, sister, okay. You do that. You and your mouse can go any place. But we got a job to do back at the camp, and this is a fine time to do it. Mirad won't expect our company. If we let these guys here start roamin' around in the desert with their stock of fightin' vehicles, Mentier's not gonna have a fightin' force for long."

The woman smiled, her white teeth flashing in the torch beams. "I should have told you, infidel, I have hidden the rotor arms where even Mirad won't find them. Nor anybody else."

Banks said: "Except us, Karta. We want to know. We want one of those hay carts. That Yusuf man's gonna start a search for you mighty soon."

She said: "What in? He has to find the rotor arms to do that. And I am not telling you, infidels. Please get down—or stay on—as you wish."

"That's tellin' you," said Buzz. Banks pondered a moment. He could get tough, but it wouldn't make her tell the location of those rotor arms.

This Eurasian woman wasn't a bad one when it came to working out a mite of psychology. She had sensed—known, in fact—that she could trust him and Buzz not

to horn in and try and take the car away from them; that they would observe the rules of the game—even unto their own undoing.

Banks said: "I don't believe that all of the rotor arms will be where you say. Mirad has a lot of aces up his sleeve, and maybe you shot the wrong guy back there, Karta. But Calito can tell us where the horses are kept. We haven't seen the place close in the daylight."

Karta gave Calito the stare and he said: "The horses are kept at the other end of the camp in an open-sided shed across from the tank park. A sentry covers that ground night and day."

"He did," said Buzz. "Only he ain't got a whole neck any more." The two men had got out and Karta, reaching in back, tossed some canned stuff out and also a skin of wine. Both Buzz and Banks had the Mausers, plus ammunition which they had taken from Yusuf and Ali, but Karta also handed out a Sten gun.

Banks said: "I wish you a lotta luck, lady, and look out that mouse you got with you doesn't double-cross you like he did us. Only we were the chumps—to fall for his line. He's a lucky guy to have a woman like you to wrestle with him—and for him," Banks added with a grin.

"I'll look after him," she smiled. And Banks knew she would. And then a sound smote their ears and he saw her smile fade swiftly. Pinpoints of light came into sight. *There was a car coming from the direction of the camp!*

8

the woman's mouse

BEFORE Banks could open his mouth Karta trod on the gas and the armoured vehicle leapt away into the darkness. Banks had been going to suggest that he and Buzz get back in the car and try to fight it out with the oncoming vehicle. After all, they would have had the element of surprise on their side. They could have ambushed the car from the Karta vehicle.

It charged down on them and Banks was certain that Yusuf would be in it with the Ali guy alongside him. Now the Arabs had flashed on their headlights and they probed the desert around them. Banks and Buzz dropped flat. The car jounced nearer, roaring down more or less on the same course taken by Karta. It was then that Banks realised that her car tyre marks must be the trail the Arabs were following.

Buzz had the Sten trained on the approaching car. They'd no chance to ambush it for their bullets would merely ping off its skin like peas off a drum. Both Legionnaires had dived to one side after Karta had jerked into motion. But the Yusuf guy was driving like a Hoboken drunk up Fifth Avenue. The tin box on wheels slewed all over the place, and Banks got a bitter taste in his mouth like when he thought his neck was only minutes away from a chopper back there in the Mirad house.

Then there was the flash of lights and a surging rush of air and the armoured vehicle had jetted past them. They rose, and Banks had legs made out of feathers. An extra bounce or slight swerve of the wheels and they would have been cats' meat.

Buzz said: "This night gits more excitin' as it goes on. Me—I think we oughter find a deep hole some place and crawl in and pull it after us. We just passed up a fine old hitch back to mamma, and here we are ready to put our heads back in that toothless gap Mirad calls mouth."

"Come on, let's not gab, Buzz. The dawn's on its way. I sure hope that gal makes it though. Come on, let's put our brains together and see what the whole hash of 'em'll make outa this mess."

They set off back to the camp. Banks didn't follow the route of the outward bound cars; he swung off to the north a little so that they would approach the camp from the ridge on its north side. It hadn't taken the Arabs long to wriggle out of the ropes. He hadn't expected them to remain tied for long, anyway, but he hadn't expected them to wriggle loose so soon, either. He took the thing calmly. Neither of them thought there was any big heroism in going back to Mirad's outfit.

It was just that they knew, as sure as they knew that the dawn wasn't more than half an hour or so away, that Colonel Mentier would doggedly regroup his men and begin the trek across the desert, and just as surely hit upon this camp—if the Mirad mob didn't ferret him out first. And both Legionnaires knew that, somehow, they had to forestall the Mirad men and enable Mentier to come and take the camp.

They presently gained the top of the ridge. The first streaks of dawn were veining the eastern sky, and they knew that a hole was necessary before daylight came. Down below they could hear movement in and around the camp. Yusuf and company must have got the camp on the *qui vive*.

Buzz grunted: "All same bunch of blasted hornets. We go down there, we are gonna get a lot of stings. Me—I am very tired. I bet that Sen feller is havin' himself the hell of a time."

"Mentier will have got them nearly up to the place where the locomotive left the train now. It's over thirty hours since. He'll probably rest 'em for one day and

then head north and east, looking for sign. Maybe he might hit our tracks. We were five miles away when we were taken by Calito, and if Mentier heads north he's bound to cross 'em."

"Yeah, that gives me gladness around the heart, except you wouldn't get your boy-scout badge. You forgot the big rain we came through the other night. You ever hear of rain-proof tracks, Bob?"

Banks tut-tutted. "I was forgettin' about that dam' rain. Sure, it will have washed 'em away. Although gravelly ground ain't like ordinary soil. It stands the pelt of rain better. Anyway, we got out worries without worryin' about Mentier. Come on, the closer we get to this camp the better. Hidin' out on this plain would be like takin' cover on a billiard table."

"Pool table, you mean," said Buzz. "You ain't civilised—billiards!"

"I said billiards. Come on." Banks slid down the hillside. The line of huts backed onto the hillside that Banks knew was covered by the thin skim of camel brush. He banked on the Mirad mob never dreaming that anybody would hide on their doorstep, and anyway they were supposed to be over the hills and far away with Karta and the mouse. Mouse? A hell of a good name for Calito.

At that moment Banks' heart leapt when big-footed Buzz slipped and went sliding down the hillside!

Banks held his breath as Buzz's huge frame crashed through the camel scrub. The noise in the valley drowned Buzz's, however, and for long minutes they lay still. Nobody had apparently heard them. Banks crept to a point where he judged they would be just above the tank park. Nothing would come into his mind that would set off an idea for spiking the Mirad project.

In whispers he and Buzz discussed the situation. "Mirad's stuck for drivers for those war wagons," said Buzz. "That we do know."

Banks shook his head. "He's got the drivers, but you got to have more than just drivers. You got to have mechanics that can keep 'em rolling. Calito told us that

Yusuf's about the best driver and he knows sweet nothin' about maintenance."

"Then what in hell are we worryin' about?" growled Buzz. "He's stuck."

"Yeah, on the face of it, Buzz. But Mirad's a guy who was born a lot of yesterdays ago. He's gonna be a tough nut. Even without the vehicles, he has enough men and Sten guns here to blast the innards out of Mentier's men. And Mentier's gonna stumble up against this part of the world sure as eggs have shells."

"Okay, Bob, you just said it. Shells. We gotta get at his ammunition. The dump must be somewhere around. If we set it poppin'—burn it——"

"In the last resort we can do that. How about lettin' our brains simmer a while and let's rest in this cover. We can come out when the darkness comes around again," said Banks. Buzz's idea was all right. But only if there was no other alternative. Once set a fire going and the whole dam' camp might go up in smoke, and the whole purpose of the French expedition would go up in that same smoke.

It was a brain twister any way you looked at it. Banks said: "I sure hope the Karta kid makes it, Buzz. I sure hope she does." Buzz humphed and a wry expression came onto his mug. And Banks knew the giant Yank did not hold out much hope for the mouse and his woman.

The daylight showed them the camp in detail. Banks saw that he had judged correctly. The tank park was below them, and at its far end was the open-sided stable Calito had spoken about.

Mid-morning found them roasting in a torrid sun that burned holes in their backs. And still Banks could not find an idea that would hold any hope of a solution. But somewhere in the recesses of his brain, the Legionnaire had a niggling thought. It kept harking back to the fact that they had been well fixed in the bosom of the Mirad mob by reason of their technical skill with guns and engines.

He began toying with the vague idea that grew and spread into his conscious mind. It was a long chance.

But if a guy like Mirad—and even the beautiful Karta—could play upon the susceptibilities of the human mind, why couldn't he? A guy like Mirad, without legs, without even physical strength even, could weld and hold together a bunch of murderers like they now watched moving around the camp.

He knew Buzz would object to the plan. And if it failed, assuming he could get Buzz to agree, that is, it would mean not only his own life coming to an abrupt end, but also Buzz's.

As the sun climbed the sky, and as they listened for the homing buzz of the Yusuf armoured car, coming to tell Mirad that they had not been able to catch up with Karta, Banks told Buzz his project.

"Are you gone plumb crazy, feller?" asked Buzz. It was exactly the kind of reaction Banks had known he'd provoke from Buzz. "You mean you want us to go back and shove our beans right into Mirad's lap?"

"Like I said," said Banks. "Mirad's gettin' desperate for mechanics. He knows Mentier'll smell him out sooner or later. Supposin' we stick up here and try to immobilise this outfit tonight, how far do you think we'd get with all the sentries there'll be on—because Mirad will have the place really lousy with extra guards."

"So we go down and say: 'Please, Mister Mirad, we're plumb sorry about what happened last night and will you give us another chance?'—supposin' we say that. Why, he'll have our heads off so fast we'll even see what our bodies look like without heads!"

"Look—Mirad'll take us back. He'll take us back because he knows that as soon as we've served his purpose he'll have our heads for his collection. But maybe we can have something of our own worked out by then. We shall be working on his vehicles. And only by workin' on them can we really get at 'em and make 'em unworkable. We gotta risk what he might do to hold us."

Buzz sighed. "I never won an argument with you yet—you shoulda been a politician—you could make a war sound like a declaration of peace. Okay, if you

want it that way. But I hope my body without a head haunts you, feller, so help me I do. You and your psychology!"

Banks looked at Buzz's face barely inches from his own where they lay under the thin covering of camel scrub. Buzz had a perfect right to dispute what was just about the riskiest decision of their lives. They had disputed before in their hectic careers in this motley company of the French Foreign Legion; Banks had invariably had his way. But this was different, reflected the Englishman.

He said: "Okay, Buzz. Let's forget it. We'll try the other way. We'll move in tonight. We get the sentry or sentries and set fire to the dump. The hell with Mentier's plans. If we immobilise this gang we'll be doing France the biggest service she ever had done. Especially them four hundred men Mentier's lea lin'."

Buzz didn't answer for a while. Then his big jaw thrust forward. "Say, you wouldn't be gettin' cold feet, would you?" he said, and Banks saw a slow grin begin to blossom around the Yank's mouth.

"Cold feet?" said Banks, puzzled. "Sure I got cold feet. I always have cold feet. I'll have frozen feet when we move in on that dump tonight."

"Okay, okay, you ain't the only one. I only wanted to know. But to hell with a guy who hasn't the courage of his convictions. I been talked into the deal," said Buzz. "Besides, this sun's toastin' my back black. Okay, feller, lead the way down. Mister Mirad, here we come!"

"Hold it, Buzz!" said Banks. He stopped the Yank from rising from out of their cover. "We'll squirm down to behind the Mirad hut. If we show ourselves now, feller, those chums down there are gonna start blastin'. We got'a do a big sneak in on Mirad and get the line over to him. He'll probably divine our dodge, but maybe we can work that out when the time comes."

Now the action had started on the big idea, Banks wasn't so sure about the Mirad reaction. But he had to go through with it—after all the boosting he had given it for Buzz's sake. They wriggled a tortuous way down the slope, edging in all the time towards Mirad's house.

Then Buzz remembered the loose window that backed onto the slope—the window of the room he had occupied for a bare twelve hours. They could get in that way possibly. At least it would minimise the risk of their being discovered by any of Mirad's cut-throats.

After a slow and painful crawl, they reached the lee of the big hut and came in under the window. Banks feared that its absence might have been discovered, for he had been unable to replace it the night before when he and Buzz had crawled through to end up by looking into Calito's Mauser by the armoured-car line.

They found the window still out—exactly as they had left it. Mirad must have had lots of other things on his mind. Heart in mouth, Banks went in through the window. He saw the cot still rumpled as he'd climbed out the evening before. Buzz came grunting in behind him, making, to Banks' over-sensitive ears, enough noise to waken the dead.

They listened. The sounds of the camp came muffled to them. Then they tiptoed to the door. Banks silently opened it and looked into the passage and looked out. Nobody. He looked back at Buzz and the Yank motioned him forward. Banks hadn't looked to see solely if the Yank was ready for the plunge. He was wondering if it was worth what they were risking. There was still time to change their minds and go hide out in the scrub and figure out things a little more.

And then suddenly he saw the Sula woman come swaying down the passage. He dodged back—too late. He saw her big eyes widen and her mouth open to scream. His long arm reached around the lintel and his hand clamped over her mouth. He pulled her into the room. Buzz closed the door and stood with his back to it, Sten gun all ready for if anybody else got any ideas. Banks motioned to the woman that he didn't intend to hurt her.

"Your master?" whispered Banks. "He is in the room at the end of the passage? He has one bodyguard—two?" Banks held up one finger and she nodded and indicated her lord and master was in the living room. Banks said: "Nobody else in with him now, is there?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," said Banks. He brought his fist around in a tight half-circle and it snicked home with a delicate click to her shapely jaw and she collapsed as though she'd been struck by lightning. Banks caught her falling body almost in the same movement and lifted her and took her over to the bed. He added: "It was the only thing to do."

"That's one hell of a way to treat a lady," grinned Buzz. "But it is one way of keepin' 'em from naggin'. Let's go and invite Mirad to take a bite at us—okay, I'm still in this thing. I don't wanna do it any other way."

Banks swallowed his mouthful of words and moved out into the passage. It had to be done while Mirad had only the guard with him. For one wild moment Banks harboured the thought that they could capture Mirad and have him order the cut-throats to disarm, but it was a pipe-dream; a dream right out of the glossy pages of a kid's book.

They burst into the living room. For one long second they confronted the old man, and in that second the guard's hand twitched and came up with a Mauser. Buzz's Sten gun spoke once and the guard's gun hand crumpled under the smash of the heavy bullet, and then he was busy trying to hold onto a broken arm.

The old man had apparently been dozing. His head snapped up and the bleary eyes stared at Banks and Buzz, and then a slow smile broke over the toothless mouth. "My sons, they have brought you back, and you bring bullets with you?" Banks had to admire this ancient's composure. Here the old man was, looking straight down the cannon's mouth, and——

Banks said: "We had to restrain your bodyguard, old one. Yusuf and Ali didn't bring us back. They are chasing the mouse and the woman still. No, Mirad, we came back to strike a bargain." The front door burst open and a body of men came bursting into the room. The two Legionnaires backed to the wall, guns at the ready. Were these hatchet-men going to let go? The place would be a shambles inside a few seconds if they did. But the old man squeaked out an order that halted

them, and then he squeaked again, and, reluctantly, they backed out of the shack.

Banks said: "You trust us, old one. You trust us even though you look down the muzzles of our guns."

"Killing is for idiots and imbeciles, my son. You came seconds before my men came in. You could have honeycombed my poor body with bullets long before they came. You come with a proposition. It is possible for men to change their minds, even as you have done. I hope I am right."

Banks looked at Buzz and nodded. Buzz threw his Sten gun and Mauser down. Banks tossed his Mauser into the old man's lap. Mirad clapped his hands, but Banks had to tell him that Sula would have a headache for a little while and that she was probably lying down. Mirad grinned.

"Aha, so you caught her in the passage. Ah, my sons, men with brains. They are as plentiful as snow in the Sahara—unfortunately. But my erring wife, Karta? I see you did not continue your journey with the mouse and she."

Banks told him. "Theirs is a hopeless chase. They will not get far." Mirad shook his head in sorrowful acquiescence. Banks went on: "We left the car, Mirad, and reconsidered. We throw ourselves on your large understanding of men and things. To go back to the Legion would be bad for us. For we should be treated as deserters."

Mirad was toying with the gun that Banks had tossed in his lap. Mirad spat some dialect as the injured guard and the latter padded out of the room to get his wounded arm attended to. "And the proposition, my sons?"

"It is that we service your transport and armament for the same price that you offered us—five hundred thousand francs and a free passage to whatever country we desire to go when you are finished with our services. We will not take part in any fighting against our former comrades. Also we want assuring that you have the money to pay us immediately our period of service is up

—which will be the moment that you are established as over-lord of the desert.”

“Bargaining is the sweetness of living, my sons. The bold bargainer plucks all the finest flowers. I accept your proposition—except for one thing. The money. I have not got it yet. Don’t mistake me—I have it, but not here. You are trusting me with your lives; it is not so much that you trust me a little more and be assured that you will get the five hundred thousand francs each when I am over-lord of the desert. You see, I do not clap for my men to make you accept. Even as I trust you, you must trust me.”

And then Sula came staggering into the room. A slight lump on her jaw brought the old man cackling aloud with glee. “Aha, my beauty wears an infidel’s kiss on her jaw.” Banks saw the woman’s eyes flicker for an instant, and then her eyelids came down and shut off the queer gleam in them.

“Bring the gentlemen drinks, Sula. Scotch. We make the fresh start.” He clapped his hands and into the shack trooped three men. They had obviously been hanging around outside since he had first dismissed them.

“Meet Mahommed, Kas, and Ufu, gentlemen—they are to be your bodyguards while you remain with me. Ah, don’t mistake me—they are for your own good. Last night sentries were killed, and the men are not in a good mood this morning. These men will see to your well-being, gentlemen.”

Banks looked at the mob, all Sten-gun armed. He was beginning to dislike his great idea. It had worked well—up to a point. But Mirad had taken over, and now they were going to have to jump through his kind of hoop. It was not a pleasant prospect. Mirad waved dismissal at them, and the Legionnaires took it that they were to go out and get to work on the vehicles.

And then, Mirad suddenly said: “Hold, my sons. I think it better that we make sure the mouse and the woman do not get away. Banks, you will take a car out and Mahommed and Kas will go with you to help you.

The American will stay behind. He will stay behind. Ufu, put the big infidel in the pit until the Englishman returns. It is a safeguard, gentlemen, I assure you. An old one like me has to have security. The pit is twenty feet deep and has smooth walls. Ufu, make sure the American has a chair and food and water down with him. See that he is comfortable. On your head be his safety!" Banks refused his drink when it came.

9

Sen's escape

THE first intimation that Sen had that something was wrong was when the train began to slow down. In the rear compartment of the last coach was himself and Lejaune. The burly sergeant had been growling about the heat, the dust, and most of all about Sen. The little Chinese wished he had elected to help Banks up on the engine. Shovelling coal was a sinecure alongside of sitting cheek by jowl with Lejaune.

Especially when Lejaune had the surly idea that all three of them—Sen, Banks and Buzz—should have been serving their one-ninety-day sentences in the Siddi jail.

So when the train began to slow, Sen opened the door of the coach and nearly fell off the high step onto the ballast below in surprise. The front half of the train had gone. The coaches lurched to a grinding stop. Sen gasped out the news, and then dropped onto the ballast. Lejaune came out, bawling obscene oaths at Sen, blaming the Chinese for the disaster.

Out of the other three cars came the rest of the men. In the starlight there was no mistaking the fact that they had lost the front half of the train. An icy hand clutched at Sen's heart when he realised that Lejaune was the only senior rank in the whole bunch of a hundred and thirty men or so that now crowded the side of the track. Away off in the distance they could now hear the thunder and rattle of the train as it receded into the immensity of this upper plateau.

"Sabotage!" growled Lejaune. "It is your dirty comrades, louse," he told Sen. "It is that they have

the conspiracy to slough off the train. Next they will have the brilliant idea and cut off the locomotive and go racing into the blue. They do not want to serve their sentences."

"*Mon colonel* will be coming back for the supplies," said Sen quietly. "He must have the supplies. When daylight comes he will return. I saw that the couplings were all secure when we left Siddi, *mon sergent*. The saboteur must have ridden beneath the train and then cut it off when we reached the flats here when there was less strain upon the couplings, which would enable him to pull the coupling pin out."

"Every man keep his rifle handy!" bawled Lejaune. The sergeant was essentially a man of war. Whatever his shortcomings in the way of humanity he knew his campaigning onions, Sen reflected. The Chinese's cultured brain tried to line up the inexplicable mishap that had left a third of Mentier's force stranded on the desert. He reverted to his initial idea that one of the agents or one of the strikers had stowed away beneath the train and cut the coaches off as soon as darkness and circumstances would permit. He had succeeded admirably.

Then he suddenly found himself confronted by Lejaune. "You know what happens, pig-dog? Your friends have shot Saxe and taken the train on."

"Then why did they bother to cut only the last four coaches off?" said Sen. "They could have cut off the locomotive as soon as they reached the levelness of the plain."

"Don't ask me!" shouted the sergeant. "They have some plan afoot. But they will run away with the locomotive, never fear, *canaille!*" Sen knew it was useless to argue with the sergeant. Apart from the impossibility of either Buzz or Banks being able to inch along on the outside footboard of the coaches and cut off the last four without somebody seeing them, there was no reason at all why they should want only four coaches off when it would be absurdly easier to uncouple the locomotive and simply light out with the engine.

Lejaune had the men camp in the coaches, setting guards all around the train in case any of the camp cut-throats should be around, waiting to attack. "You, my beauty, will come in my compartment," he said to Sen. "I want you where I can put my hands on you. Perhaps *mon colonel* will discover we are not with him and come back for us. And perhaps not!"

He added the last three words in an ominous tone of voice. Sen affected not to notice. They bedded down on the hard wooden seats and Sen managed to grab some sleep. He awoke in the grey dawn and presently the sun was shining through the window. He and Lejaune broke out their rations and ate the dried mutton and dates and sipped at the tepid water in their water-bottles. Sen had all the feelings of a man under surveillance: that Lejaune intended making the most of his theory about Banks and Buzz conniving at trying to desert in order not to serve out their sentences once this expedition was over. If it ever came to a successful conclusion. Lejaune's hot air about Banks and Buzz having shot Saxe and uncoupled the engine was too barmy for words, Sen told himself. They wouldn't do a thing without letting him, Sen, know. After all, he was in the soup, too, as far as jail was concerned.

Lejaune held a council of war with two corporals and some of the Legionnaires right after breakfast. They had plenty of water and supplies. They decided that Mentier would certainly know by daylight that he'd lost a third of his force—perhaps even before daylight.

"He may bring the train backwards if he thinks the track will stand it," opined Sen. "On the other hand he'll have to conserve the water for the engine. Therefore, he may force-march the men to return for the supplies."

"Imbecile!" spat Lejaune. "How is he going to cram all these supplies and this group of us into the remaining coaches? He must bring the train back for us!"

"What does he do for water for the engine then?" asked Sen innocently. Lejaune spat again. It was something he couldn't get around. He was stuck. His men

couldn't pack all the supplies up for the main force, therefore there was nothing for it but to await the return of either the train or Colonel Mentier's force. The colonel would have the difficult decision to make on how he was going to re-unite the train, or how he was going to cram supplies and these men into six coaches.

The hot day wore on interminably slowly. The coaches took on the heat of furnaces and the men crouched underneath them on the line and sipped sparingly at their water-bottles, and then, towards dusk, one of the sentries came running. "*Mon sergent, mon sergent*, they come—all of them—down the line. *Mon colonel* brings them all!"

Sen scrambled out from beneath the last coach. Were Buzz and Banks among this lot? At any rate, the colonel was conserving the remaining water in the engine and was going to abandon this part of the train and cram supplies and men onto the six coaches he had farther up the line.

Lejaune had already had a fatigue party gathering the inevitable camel scrub and now the men lit camp fires along the length of the train to give light. It was dark when Colonel Mentier brought his whole force marching tiredly into the firelight. He had force-marched them nearly fifty miles since just past midnight of that day.

Sen wasn't altogether surprised when Lejaune came for him. "*Mon colonel* desires your sweet presence, pig-dog!" growled Lejaune. "So your pals do not try to desert, huh?" He prodded Sen ahead of him with his Lebel.

The Chinese found the colonel in the leading coach where the officer had set up a temporary headquarters. Sen's anxiety about his friends was not allayed when he saw Mentier's grim visage. Standing at attention at the other side of the colonel was Captain Jardin.

Mentier opened the ball. He said: "So, *mon brave*, your comrades try to steal the engine—do not interrupt, *cochon!* Let me finish. They took a leaf out of the saboteur's book. They learn of these coaches being uncoupled and they get the same idea and uncouple the

engine, but fortunately Captain Jardin here foiled them. He happened to go over the tender just at the precise moment that they were uncoupling the engine from the coaches. They overpowered him and the train drove some five miles or so ahead of the cars, but the old German corporal, wounded though he was, managed to stop the train and *mon capitaine* here knocked the gun from the Yank's hand, and then followed shooting. Saxe was killed by your comrades. And then they made off into the dark, after holing the engine boiler and rendering the machine useless for further travel."

Sen stood stiffly to attention, listening to the recital from the officer. Sen's gaze remained on Jardin. Mentier was simply reciting the captain's story. Sen was convinced that there was something else to this fantastic account, and he saw the unease in the gaze of the sullen Jardin. Either Jardin was lying or Banks and Buzz had gone completely crazy. In any case, Sen told himself, he was sure that neither Banks nor Buzz had killed the old German corporal. But what in the name of Confucius had happened?

Lejaune, standing ram-rod stiff in back of Sen, cleared his throat apologetically and said: "Your pardon, *mon colonel*, but it is my opinion that the men in question were intending to desert at the first opportunity. They did not know anything about driving railway engines, but volunteered, knowing that Corporal Saxe *did* know, and they intended killing him and making off with the engine once they were clear of the train itself."

Mentier said: "That seems to be the case. What have you to say to that, *mon enfant*?" The colonel eyed Sen bleakly. Mentier was too just a man to visit the sins of Banks and Buzz upon him, Sen knew. But the officer was trying to get a line upon the absent men by quizzing him, Sen guessed.

Sen said: "It is inexplicable, *mon colonel*, but it is perhaps that others were involved in their disappearance. Perhaps, had *mon colonel* had the time he could have examined the tracks——"

"Ach, *mon colonel*, this man is in with Banks and the American," grunted Jardin. "He tries to excuse

murder—the murder of Saxe. I saw the tracks, *cochon*, and they led into the desert. They would sooner face the desert than their deserts. They were determined they would not face their sentences. I demand, *mon colonel*, that this man be put under close arrest, otherwise he will be deserting at the first opportunity.”

“A moment, *mon capitaine*,” said Mentier. “This man has not tried to desert yet. The Legion does not convict nor condemn a man because he is the friend of other men—even if they are criminals. But I will have these men hunted down if it is the last thing I, Colonel Mentier, do. They have jeopardised the expedition.” The colonel’s thin hand slammed down hard upon the hard seat of the coach. Then he motioned Lejaune forward.

“We will march from here on, *mon sergent*; and, Captain Jardin, you will see that every man of the expedition draws and carries all the supplies he can carry—double the pack-load of every man. We march cross-country at dawn. Please give the N.C.O.s their orders right away.”

As Lejaune and Jardin climbed down out of the coach, Mentier signalled for Sen to stay behind. The fires outside the coach threw vagrant gleams of yellow light upon the colonel’s thin, hawk-like features.

He seemed to study Sen’s face for a long time. It suddenly occurred to the Chinese that Mentier had a fleeting idea that he might know where Buzz and Banks had headed. That Sen might have known about this. After all, it had been accepted that an outside saboteur had uncoupled this rear portion of the train, thus cutting Sen off from his pals. That had been beyond their control. But, had this not happened, it had been possible that the three men might have had some idea wherein they got together on the footplate and, after throwing the injured Saxe off the engine, uncouple it and take off into the blue until they got near enough to Kela to abandon it and walk into the town and lose themselves.

Mentier said: “You are sure you know not the whereabouts of these men? That you have no future rendezvous with them?”

Sen thought swiftly. He didn't know what had happened to Buzz and Banks, nor where they had got to. He thought that Mentier would not go chasing after a couple of deserters, supposed or otherwise. And maybe both Banks and Buzz were in need of help. Especially, Sen thought, if they were in the hands of any of the Arab renegades. And Jardin had something to do with this affair. Of that he was convinced.

Sen appeared to hesitate, and he saw a gleam come in Mentier's eye. He had the colonel nibbling. Could he swing it? Could he swing the idea?

Showing great reluctance, Sen said: "*Mon colonel*, I am all confused. But—but—well, we did speak of deserting up through Libya once we got near Kela—I think—I think they have gone across country, north-east. Their tracks—it would be possible——"

Sen's saying that they had headed north-east was not altogether wild guess work, since if they had been captured by renegades and still remained alive, he judged that that was the way they would be taken—in the direction of the lost camp. But his stomach iced over when he saw Mentier's face.

"So!" The word came like a hiss from the colonel. "My theory was correct. I just wanted to know. They are so anxious to desert—and you, too—that they head through renegade country. They will be killed by the renegades, assuredly. But I hope not. I hope they fall into my hands!"

Sen knew now that his gamble had failed. Mentier had wormed what he thought to be the truth out of him. Sen stood stiffly to attention as the colonel said: "You will be put under arrest. You will march and carry double-pack like the rest of the men. At the first attempt to escape you will be shot down like a dog!"

At that moment Jardin returned from giving orders for the march at dawn. Sen saw the rain on the man's shoulders. The rain made him remember what it did to tracks. What it would do to Buzz's and Banks' tracks around the abandoned engine.

Mentier issued instruction to Lejaune, who had come in behind Jardin regarding Sen's arrest. Colonel

Mentier, tired as he was, watched the little Chinese be herded out of the carriage by Lejaune. The Chinese had said north-east, the colonel mused. North-east, eh? He brought out the map that showed the line from Siddi to Kela. This railway had been thrown roughly and crudely across the desert to ship in lease-lend stuff for the brave troops under the famous General Leclerc.

The line curved like a rainbow from Siddi to Kela to miss the worst terrain. Idly Mentier drew a straight pencil line across the line's arc. Then he measured the distance and found that his straight pencilled line cut off almost forty miles. But for the niggardly War Department the location of the camp would have been pin-pointed from the air by plane and all this guess-work would have been eliminated.

"Jardin," said Mentier to his aide, "see, I have drawn this line. We will take this route with the men. You note that it runs through renegade country. We will clean up these brigands as we go. Perhaps the train mishap might prove a—how would you say, *mon capitaine?*—a blessing in disguise. It is also possible that, if they are in any number, they have moved the camp from its original place, is it not?"

"But, *mon colonel!*" expostulated Jardin. "The route is not known—we do not know about the wells—if there are any. Four hundred men—they will need an incredible amount of water. It could be suicide!"

"Nevertheless, *mon capitaine*, we go tomorrow at dawn. It is, too, that we may catch up with those deserters, *sacré*, and what an example I shall make of them, *mon ami!*" Mentier's thin, bony hand curled round into a tight ball, and it struck the hard seat with surprising force. Jardin's mouth-line tightened as he watched his chief.

Meanwhile, Sen had been shoved into an empty compartment with two Legionnaires to guard him. Lejaune had picked his own kind of men for the duty, and they watched Sen like hawks. And the rest of the train was occupied by the tired Legionnaires who had walked the fifty miles from the front part of the train. Not all could get dry berths in the four coaches, and some had

to sleep under them. The force slept soundly despite the pelting rain.

Lejaune had ordered sheets to be spread, funnel-wise, so that they could fill every water-bottle and water-skin. Water would be more important than food. Already the word was spreading on the desert telegraph that they were going to march across country.

Sen huddled in a corner of the compartment and listened to the drumming of the rain on the roof. Dinning into his conscious mind was the picture of Captain Jardin's face during his interrogation at the hands of Colonel Mentier. Just what had prompted the captain to go out over the engine tender? An ordinary routine inspection? Mentier had *not* said that he'd ordered Jardin to go and see how the engine crew were doing. So that meant the captain had gone on his own.

And ordinarily, Jardin was a lazy officer. He could have deputed any one of the N.C.O.s to do that chore. Why had Jardin gone over that tender? He felt that the answer to Buzz's and Banks' disappearance lay with Jardin—to a large extent, anyway. Sen closed his eyes and awoke to the bugles sounding reveille. Dawn was no more than half an hour away. Sen was hustled out and into line with the rest of the men. He sensed the hostility of the rest of the Legionnaires. Word had got around that he and Buzz and Banks were responsible for all this shanks'-pony stuff that they were going to have to do.

As the dawn started to come in the blanket of low clouds, Mentier gave the order to march.

Sen found himself in the centre of a four-man escort at the tail of the column. Lejaune kept saying in a loud voice: "Oh my beauty, I just wish you would try to escape. I just wish you would try—just once."

Corporal Evich, a Central European and a side-kick of Lejaune's, chuckled and said: "Go ahead, Sen, run for it. It is dark still—and you stand a fifty-fifty chance. Go ahead because it is going to be a long hard march, and maybe some of us will go *cafard*. And if we do

go *cafar*—who knows? We may get to shooting each other.”

Sen suddenly noticed that Lejaune and his escort of four had dropped some way behind the tail end of the column. The Chinese knew that something not very pleasant was going to happen. Lejaune had never liked him, mainly because Lejaune carried an out-size inferiority complex, and he knew that Sen had more brains to the square inch of head than he would ever have.

Sen's mind began weighing up the possibilities. Corporal Evich and another marched in front, and two other privates first-class marched behind. Lejaune brought up the rear. Their labels were—as yet—slung on their shoulders. Lejaune had a Mauser pistol in a holster at his belt. The dawn was heavy and cloud-ridden. There was maybe a half-hour of murk left wherein to do anything he might contemplate—if he could evade the slugs that would assuredly come his way.

Each step the column up ahead took, took it farther away from them. In a moment or two Evich was going to prod him out in front and tell him to run for it. Sen acted swiftly. He stumbled into the man on his left rear, whirled with the swiftness of a striking cobra, and hit the rear man on his right. It was a judo punch and the man collapsed. And then, as Lejaune began tugging at the flap that buttoned down his Mauser, Sen butted him in the stomach. Even Sen's swiftness of attack wouldn't have availed him but for the blundering man he had hit on his right. This fellow, convulsed with pain, staggered in a tight circle and got in the way of the two members in the front rank.

Sen made a despairing grab for Lejaune's Mauser—and missed—and then he was gone—running into the half-light like a hunted rabbit. He was tempted to shed the great pack on his back, but he stubbornly stuck to it.

Behind him yells came and then shots. A great thump in his back told him he had been hit. The impact sent him to his knees, and then he realised that the cumbersome pack had saved him. He scrambled up and plunged on. He ran a twisting course, sure that

the next fusillade would slam him down for good. It came—this time wild and making holes only in the air around him. Was he going to succeed?

He turned and saw vague figures some three hundred yards off coming running in a wide arc. He had gained this distance through the escort stopping to fire at him. Another burst of fire came and he heard the slugs thwack into his pack, but their impact did not knock him off his feet this time. The very thing that was hampering his getaway was also saving his life—the pack.

10

“not so fast!”

HE ran on with sobbing breath, his small body straining to send his legs faster over the ground. And then he suddenly fell over the lip of a small water-course. It was nothing more than an oversized rain gully, but it served to enable him to get out of the direct line of fire, and it ran in a general north-easterly direction.

He jog-trotted along this, with the cries and distant shouts still in his ears. He had a fighting chance now—and then he suddenly kicked against a boulder and went down heavily, his temple smacking hard against a rock. He had a brief impression of lights in his brain and then he went unconscious.

He came to with a boot prodding his ribs. “Up, *cochon!* Up!” Sen opened his eyes. Daylight had come fully. Everything was quiet except for the order that Evich was issuing. Sen sat up. “Lejaune’s going to enjoy this, *cochon!*” Evich wore a sneer on his broad, peasant face. Sen’s wits came together and he felt the trickle of blood where his temple had collided with the boulder. But for that, he would have been well clear.

He came slowly to his feet under the muzzle of Evich’s Lebel. “It’s kind of lucky I have the stamina,” Evich was gloating. “You got quite a bit yourself, feller. Come on, we’ll get back to the others. They’ll be delighted, I’m sure.”

Evich’s words put Sen back on the alert. The man must have out-stripped the others. Sen tottered again, his hand clamped to his abraded temple. Evich took a

step forward and then started a kick coming at Sen. As Evich's boot came up, Sen's hand darted out, catching the man's ankle. Sen's arm swung upwards and then he jerked and Evich up-ended and flopped over on his back.

Sen took one step forward and his right hand came down edgewise and hit Evich at the base of the neck. Sen knew he wouldn't get up again for an hour or two. He unslung Evich's water-bottle. Already he heard a distant shout of one of the searchers. Apparently Evich must have stuck doggedly to his tracks and come upon him a few moments after Sen had fallen and hit his skull upon the boulder. Sen knew he hadn't been out many minutes.

He started off up the shallow water-course. At any moment it might peter out and leave him in full sight of the search party. Maybe Mentier might have the whole of his corps on the search now. Well—so be it. Sen ran for half an hour, until he could not hear any more sounds of the chase. The water-course still bored a shallow groove across the plain.

Finally he had to stop for breath and rest. He threw himself down. He had Evich's Lebel now and he felt in better case to deal with any further trouble. He crawled up to the ragged lip of the course and looked over. All he could see was the swell of the plain some half a mile ahead. The column would be over that some place. He decided to stick to the water-course as yet, no matter where it led. He couldn't afford to go shunting over the plain. Lejaune wouldn't give up the search so easily.

He resorted to the Legion method of marching. He rested ten minutes of every hour and steadily the plain drew him into its immensity. By sunset he was still plodding along the water-course and deadly tired. He made camp on the sloping bank, arranging boulders so that he wouldn't be apparent to anybody coming either up or down the water-course.

He lay, his limbs soaking in the much-needed rest, and looked at the stars. He figured that Mentier would head more north than east, so that if he himself kept a more or less north-easterly direction, he might possibly

come across some sign of Buzz and Banks. Or even some sign of the camp!

He found it increasingly hard to think—to apply his ordinarily keen mind to the thought he was trying to pursue. It was some time before he realised that he must have suffered some slight concussion from the smack on the temple. The grind of carrying an extra heavy pack, plus the long tramp, had also taken their toll of his reserves of strength.

He finally fell asleep, to start up at frequent intervals, convinced that Evich was once more standing over him with poised Lebel. He finally shook himself out of a miasma of dreams to find that it was no more than two or two-thirty in the morning. His head ached and he found his conscious mind switching on and off with startling suddenness.

“It’s concussion all right,” he told himself aloud. And then his stomach took up the revolt. He began retching. He felt his own pulse and found it racing. He lay back and looked at the cosmic carpet of the night sky above him. “Holy smoke, I’m running a temperature,” he heard his voice say. “This is a fine time to go sick, so help me.”

He went unconscious and woke with the thought that somebody was trying to poke a hot poker into his eyes. He managed to get his eyes open by a sheer effort of will. He found the hot stabs at his eyelids was nothing more than the strong morning sun—but he could hear a humming in his ears.

He poked them, digging irritably into each orifice, but still the humming would not leave his head. In fact, it had got louder. And then his hazy brain suddenly registered the fact that it wasn’t his ears.

He scrambled up the bank and peered over. At first his blurred vision saw nothing and then, perhaps a mile or more away, he saw a bouncing, careering car—an armoured car—loom over a fold in the ground and then go jouncing and bouncing like an over-excited bug down the slope and disappear into a hollow, to reappear a moment later, heading directly for the hidden water-

course. He told himself that the car was going to crash into the gully, sure enough.

And then his eyes almost bugged out of his head as he saw a second one practically leap over the far fold in the ground. What was this?

His bemused brain tried to bring this new development into line, and then a spear of lightning thought hit his brain. The dump, the camp! Of course. These cars were from that camp. Maybe come to spy out the whereabouts of the Mentier column! The renegades would know about the train-business by this time. Especially if they had captured Banks and Buzz.

But—the hind armoured vehicle appeared to be chasing the other one. As he battled with this thought the foremost car suddenly leapt over a rise not two hundred yards away and sped over level ground, straight for the unseen gully. Before Sen could move, the car rampaged over the last few yards, appeared to remain poised on the lip and then tumbled sidewise into the gulch, going over on its side and sliding in screeching protest as the stones scratched the metal. Its motor raced like crazy.

Sen downed an impulse to go over and see what the damage was to its occupants, for, at that moment, the pursuing car came over the distant rise. But he saw this one slow and come around in a tight half-circle to jam to a dead stop by the lip of the gully. Then he saw two khaki-clad figures clamber out and go running down the bank. He saw the stubby weapons in their hands.

“Stens, by God!” gasped Sen. “Sten guns! These guys are from that camp all right.” He picked up his Lebel. The drama was happening some hundred and fifty yards away, and he knew he was not visible because of the minute breastwork of stones he had built around himself.

The two figures stood regarding the overturned car with its still racing engine, and then Sen saw movement—a small figure came crawling out of the wreck. Sen gasped again as he saw the wealth of dark, loose hair that framed the face. It was a woman. One of the watching figures motioned her to one side with his gun.

So it *had* been a chase, and it had ended badly for the woman. Maybe there was somebody else in the armoured car?

He saw one of the watching men crawl into the wreck and come backing out dragging another form with him. Sen saw that this figure was a man—unconscious, by the looks of it.

Then his gaze strayed up to the waiting armoured vehicle on the lip of the gully. His eyes measured the distance. He judged it was maybe a few yards nearer to him than it was to the others. Had he the strength to run those few score yards and reach that car before the others could get at him? The sight of those stubby stutterers called Stens gave him pause.

His gaze switched to the drama being enacted almost under his nose. One of the khaki-clad figures was buffetting the unconscious man about the head.

The woman had apparently gotten over her dazedness and Sen saw her fly at the man who was methodically beating the flat of his hand across the injured man's face. The second figure grabbed the woman and held her, and he seemed to be having himself a jolly time trying to hold her. Sen rose slowly, his Lebel at the ready. As he came upright, the sky, the earth, the whole world started to revolve.

Blast this concussion business! He realised that he would have no chance to make the dash to the car. There was only one other thing he could do. He'd take his chance with the woman. He gritted his teeth, trying to keep his senses clear. He surged forward in an erratic run. None of the actors in the drama ahead of him heard him until he was only a dozen yards away.

Sen rapped out in perfect Arabic: "Drop your guns! Drop them, I say!"

Both men whirled. Sen saw that they were Arabs in Western soldiers' garb. For one brief moment they stared at him, and then the one holding the woman tried to bring up his Sten. Sen's Lebel spoke, and the man dropped like a log, a neat round, red-blue hole showing between his eyes.

The other Arab dropped both the unconscious man and his gun. Sen was conscious that the woman's big brown eyes were watching him. He saw speculation large in her gaze. She was wondering whether she'd just exchanged frying pan for fire. Sen said without looking at her: "You speak English?" When she nodded, the Chinese said tersely: "Don't just stand there, madam. Get some cord or tear up your shirt and tie that Arab up."

Sen noticed that the man on the ground—the injured one—was not an Arab. "Italian," he told himself. He kept his teeth tight set, for the swimming in his head seemed to be increasing. He found himself swaying. He hoped he could stay upright until the woman had tied the other fellow up. She had gone to the wrecked car and was fumbling inside it.

She came away with cord and she began tying the Arab up. Sen tried to keep his eyes focused, for the picture of her tying the man up came and receded like an erratic film. And then suddenly he was looking at the ground and it was coming towards him. He remembered it hitting him, and then there was a confused impression of shouts and screams, and the whole picture was blotted out by a big, falling blackness.

He came to again with the impression that somebody was pouring water on his face. They were. It was the Arab standing over him. The one the woman had been trying to truss up. Sen sat up spluttering. He saw that the woman—a Eurasian, by the looks of her, he guessed—was bound hand and foot. A little way away lay the Italian, groaning now. He appeared to be injured internally, for blood was running from his ears.

"Infidel," said the Arab. "You come from the force of the Legion?" The man spoke in a Ber-Ber dialect, which, Sen remembered, was common in this part of the country. Sen said he did.

The Arab was clearly in two minds whether to put a slug into Sen or not.

Sen said: "Yes, I am a deserter. I have information for the chief of the renegades." He hoped his words might stave off what looked to be coming his way. His

head felt somewhat better. But he realised now that he must have collapsed and thus allowed the Arab to seize the woman before she could complete her tying-up routine.

"You shot Yusuf, my brother, infidel. Is there any reason why I should not kill you like a dog?" growled the Arab. Murder was bright and fierce in his eyes. Sen looked calmly at him. Any signs of fright would have this man pouring slugs into his carcase.

Sen said: "There is plenty of reason. Your chief wants the information I have. And he will always welcome an addition to his new army." This last essay of Sen's was a pure stab in the dark. Also it seemed that this man had to take back the woman in one piece at any rate, and she might—she would—tell the chief of the Arab's murdering him. He thought he had a pretty fair chance of surviving—if he didn't show fright!

The Arab tied Sen's hands, and then he shoved the injured man in the car at the top of the bank, and then he came back and hated Sen and the sulky-eyed woman into the vehicle. The woman eyed Sen malevolently. It seemed as though she blamed Sen for collapsing at the psychological moment.

The Arab turned away from the armoured car and looked down the bank to where his dead comrade lay. He seemed to consider for a few moments, and then he ran down the bank.

Sen couldn't see him, but he heard him rolling stones and concluded the Arab was going to build a rough cairn of boulders around his companion to keep off stray jackals. The woman nudged Sen with her boot. "Quick! Rub your ropes on the sharp edge of the ammunition box there! Quickly, infidel! The dog will return shortly. You have a few seconds only!"

Sen began rubbing the thin but tough cord and lacerating his wrists on the rough edge of the steel lid. He said: "But he has all the guns, madam; it is hopeless. It is better that we go to the chief——"

"Not me, infidel. I am making progress with my ropes. Ali is careless. He did not tie them tightly on me. Quick! It is our only chance!"

Sen felt the cord suddenly come free, and he flapped his numbed hands, the better to get the circulation going. The woman whispered: "Untie me—we can drive the car away and leave him. Quick!"

This was a heck of a thing. True, he didn't want this Ali's company, but the woman wanted to drive any place but where he, Sen, wanted to go. But they had to get the car and themselves out of reach of this Arab. Sen wanted that much. He and the woman could argue about the choice of route afterwards, and he hoped he would have a gun in his hand when he was arguing with her. You can't trust tigresses, he figured.

And then, as he crawled over the injured man to get in the driver's seat, the long, lean muzzle of a Lebel rifle came through the slit in front of the driver's seat, almost poking Sen's eye out. At the same moment they heard the Arab shout, and then in the next second a shot blew a hole in the desert silence. And to Sen's amazed gaze he saw the leering countenance of Lejaune through the slit, behind the levelled Lebel.

"Not so fast, *mon enfant!*" said the sergeant gently. "Not so fast!"

11

desert clash

BANKS had the feeling of a man who has just won a handful of money and then found it all counterfeit stuff. Buzz going down a pit twenty feet deep as an insurance against his own return. He said to Mirad: "But what if I do not return, Mirad? It is possible that I might get killed. We might even tangle with the Legion itself. Who knows?"

Mirad grinned. "You will have a steel skin round you, my son. It is impossible that you do not come back. In any case, my son, it is—er—as your country says, all in the game, is it not?"

Banks watched them lead Buzz away to the pit. To Banks, it was nothing less than fantastic. Like something out of the thousand-and-one nights in Arabia. Then he found the one called Kas tugging at his arm, and he went over to the door. Both Arabs, Mohammed and Kas, carried Mausers and Stens. Banks was unarmed.

Mirad's squeak came to them as they went through the door. "Remember, my sons, I want them alive. Yusuf and Ali are a little impetuous. I wish that you had been able to go in the first place, infidel—Yusuf and Ali are so fond of the sound of Sten guns. May Allah guide you!"

Kas replaced the rotor arm in the motor and they soon were bouncing out onto the desert. They made Banks drive. They could keep a better eye on him that way. He figured that Carta and Calito had something like seven or more hours' start. Yusuf and Ali, of

course, were practically on Karta's heels, and he felt it was with Yusuf and Ali that the issue might rest.

It wasn't a case of who had the faster car, for they were all alike, both in speed and manoeuvrability. It would rather rest with the humans—which had the most stamina and ability to drive. He didn't think Karta would come out at all bad beside either Yusuf or Ali. But you never knew.

He watched the trail of the two armoured cars winding over the stony desert. Now, in the noon heat, he could see the tracks for a long way ahead, and he was thus able to cut across the arcs and save valuable time. It was curious. As he drove into the south and west, he began to feel an urgency come over him. He felt as though he were running head on into a hornets' nest. He wanted to get in and get out—quickly!

By the meandering tracks of the other vehicles he saw that they made ground rather than distance, and he began to feel hopeful that they might possibly catch Karta's and the Arabs' cars up before darkness overtook them. There was no stopping. Hour after blistering hour he drove the car, and the steel sides took on the roasting qualities of a baker's oven.

The terrain took on a more gravelly nature and the plain rose and fell in swells like some petrified ocean. The tracks became harder to follow. But the keen-eyed Arabs managed to keep them in sight and direct Banks from the observation step. Meanwhile, Mohammed had been preparing the machine-gun and seeing that the belts of ammunition were all to hand.

Suddenly Kas shouted and Banks brought the car to a stop. Kas said: "Listen!" They remained poised, ears cocked for some minutes. Mohammed grinned. He had a kind of cock-eyed face, as though some big fist had knocked it askew at some time or other. Mohammed was about the most Westernised of this crude mob, Banks had figured. With the exception of the redoubtable and rhetorical ancient—Mirad himself, of course.

Mohammed said: "Our brother has noises in his ears. Over the noise of this infidel contraption he hears men miles away. Or perhaps he hears war sounds. It

is a sign that he grows old—or is it his brain that grows soft upon him? It is a bad sign for our brother!”

Kas grunted. “I heard far-away shots. I am certain, brother. It is not that my head grows soft either, crooked face. I am twice the man that you are, Mohammed. One day we will prove it. I make it that the shots came from due south of here. Perhaps Yusuf and Ali have caught up with the woman and her mouse. Hand me the wine skin, Mohammed. All speed, infidel, into the south. If I remember, there is a long gully that runs hard by the railway line and travels due north-east.”

Banks trod on the gas and soon had the car jouncing in the direction of Mohammed’s pointing finger. The slow-motion badinage that had begun passing between Mohammed and Kas could have been perhaps something for Banks to work upon in normal circumstances, but not now. Whatever he did wouldn’t alter the fact that Buzz was sitting at the bottom of a hole—waiting. It would do the big guy good—the waiting. Just the same, he would have only the same chance as a snowball in hell if Mirad decided to have the hole filled in. And he would if a man named Banks didn’t return from this mission. In half an hour’s time they hit the gully. Kas ordered Banks to drive in a south-westerly direction along its edge. Banks had the feeling that Kas’s hearing had not deceived him. These Arabs had ears like the animals, and this facility was backed by a sixth sense. They could smell trouble far enough.

The sun was westering as Banks heard Kas shout. Shading his eyes while he hung onto the twisting wheel with one hand, Banks saw the heap that was the wrecked armoured car in the bottom of the ditch. He also saw some sort of cairn and beyond that a little way—a body. He pulled up on the lip of the gully and they clambered out and ran down the bank.

Banks saw that it was the body of the Arab called Ali, sprawled loosely in that careless attitude corpses have. Kas dug down into the cairn and found the other Arab, Yusuf. Then all three began examining the

tracks. Banks saw something familiar about the marks the killers had made.

Kas beat him to it. "These are Legionnaires, infidel. It is a patrol. See they stole up upon the car that stood on the lip of the ditch here."

Banks had seen the track that led some hundred or so yards away to a low breastwork. Here a lone Legionnaire had lain for some time. It was not a big cairn, nor a long one. Built to fit a small man. Sen? Ach, wishful thinking. There were small men galore in the force under Colonel Mentier. But the thought persisted. Had Sen started out looking for them as soon as he learned they were not with the Legion force any more?

Kas said: "Perhaps the patrol stumbled upon the armoured car. The man who laid here came ahead of the others. A scout perhaps. Or a deserter!"

"Deserter!" repeated Banks. He'd never thought of that. It rang a sour note in his mind. All Jardin had to do after they had been taken by Calito was to go back to the colonel and tell him that Banks and Buzz had deserted. Saxe was dead and couldn't support them. It would be Jardin's word against theirs. And—this must be Sen! He'd come to tell them not to go back to the Legion! If he could find them! The astute Chinese must have deduced that they had been captured after putting two and Jardin's false evidence together. Sure, that was it! Sen was with that armoured car that was now on its way back to Mentier!

It might be mostly a pipe-dream. There were scores of short men in the Mentier force, and any of them would be glad to desert if he thought he could survive in the desert on his own—or even join up with the renegade band. Banks hated this kind of perplexity, but he knew that he had to make up his mind for if they should catch up with this car. He didn't know what would happen if they ran into the troops under Mentier. With one captured armoured car, the French colonel wouldn't be any better off.

Especially when Mirad's men brought mortars or twenty-five-pounder guns to bear on it and the force

itself. Banks drove the car along at a cracking pace, and the two Arabs clung on for dear life. The sun dropped into the western horizon and still there was no sign of the other car.

As the darkness dropped upon them, Kas ordered that no lights be shown. The tracks of the captured vehicle trended along the edge of the gully. Banks kept driving, and every now and again Kas got out and examined the ground to make sure they were on the trail.

It was about a couple of hours after darkness had fallen that Kas, for the dozenth time, told Banks to stop and the Arab got out and knelt down some distance in front of the vehicle. He was just rising when Banks saw a spurt of flame, and a second afterwards heard the slap of a shot. He saw the dark form of Kas slump over and lay for a moment, and then begin crawling towards the car.

They'd caught up with the Legion patrol and the captured armoured car. And Banks knew the sound of a Lebel when it was fired. Mohammed grabbed the machine-gun he had been tending all during the trip, and triggered off a burst. He slewed it back and forth. Banks rose from the seat and shoved Mohammed from the breech of the machine-gun. The Englishman acted purely on impulse. Out there in the dark Sen was probably lying. Why didn't the other car reply with its machine-gun? Kas shouted for help.

Lebel bullets pinged off the sides of the car. Mohammed swore a great Arab oath and began tugging at his Mauser. Banks hit him. The blow would have half-killed an ordinary man. Mohammed merely shook his head and whipped out the Mauser. "Get back in the seat, infidel, or I blow off your head!"

Banks crouched in the restricted confines of the car, and then slowly did as Mohammed bid. "Now switch on your headlights so that I can see these dogs who fire upon us! Go on, infidel, or by the beard of Allah, I will blow your brains all over this steel camel!"

Banks switched on the lights, and then he saw the armoured car they had been chasing. It lay in the gully—exactly as the one that Karta had crashed miles back.

It was over on its side. How had this happened? Firing from behind its cover was the Legion patrol.

Banks realised that all Mohammed had to do was to patrol this car up and down the top of the gully and spray slugs around that car. He would drill whoever was hiding down there like rats in a barrel. Sen was down there all right. Banks could feel it in his bones.

Mohammed ordered him to move up to where Kas was half sitting, half reclining on the ground. It was Mohammed's intention to pick Kas up. Banks wondered if this might be his chance. This was a hell of a predicament. He could help slaughter his comrades down there in the ditch—and Sen, of course, or he could try his hand at downing Kas and Mohammed with the certainty that if he did so, Mirad might very well take Buzz's life in payment for these two Arabs' lives.

Kas finally clambered painfully up on to the car, with Mohammed keeping his Mauser full on Banks. Kas, therefore, had to make it on his own. Once he was inside, Mohammed said: "Now drive up and down slowly so that I can bring the machine-gun to bear. Hold this pistol upon the infidel, Kas. He has the worms in the stomach, Kas, over us shooting down this heap of infidel dung out here. Mirad will not be pleased. Hold the gun, Kas. You are not dead yet! Ach! The sounds a little lead in the leg makes."

Banks did as requested and Mohammed began his deadly spraying of the overturned car. As he got some yards beyond the car, Kas dug the Mauser in his ear and indicated that he turn the car again. Mohammed shouted for him to drive nearer to the verge of the ditch so that he could shoot up the Legionnaires. Banks manœuvred the car expertly along the lip of the ditch. The big vehicle lurched uncertainly as one side leaned to the trend of the bank. The lights had swung away from the captured car, but there was enough refraction from their whiteness for Mohammed to see to throw his lead around. Then Banks saw the dip in the top of the bank and instinctively began to twist the steering wheel to miss it.

A sudden idea came to him. He accelerated and hit the dip. His front wheels fell away and then rose sharply up out of the dip as his back wheels began to descend into it. It had a whip-like effect. Kas fell pell-mell atop Banks, and he heard a deep curse from Mahommed as he was jerked away from the machine-gun's breech.

Banks stalled the car and whipped round, hitting out as he did so at the wounded Kas. He heard Kas's Mauser go clattering to the steel floor of the car. A gun belched almost in his ear, and he knew Mohammed had let go at him with his Mauser.

Bending down for Kas's Mauser had saved his life. His groping fingers suddenly encountered the gun and he came upward and fired over Kas's squirming body. He heard a grunt and then a falling body as Mohammed came off the firing seat. Banks scrambled over Kas. Mahommed was dead when he got to him. Banks turned to Kas. The man had hit his head hard on the back of Banks' seat as he had whipped forward, thrown hard there by the whippet movement of the car. He was out cold.

Banks shoved his head out the top and shouted: "Legionnaires! Legionnaires! It's okay. Come on out. The war's over!" He looked down into the ditch, warily keeping his head just at eye-level with the top of the car. He didn't want his head blowing off from some idiot's rifle. Then he heard an answering shout. There was only one shout in the world like that. It was that runt of a Chinese—Sen.

"Bob! Bob! This is Sen! Are you all right, feller?" came the call.

Banks leapt out of the armoured car and saw four vague figures coming towards him. The foremost of which was Sen. Banks' big hand rubbed over Sen's *kepi* and into his hair. The *kepi* fell off. Banks' elation at meeting the diminutive Chinese suddenly took a dive as he heard the old familiar bawl. He couldn't even get out an answer to Sen's query as to where Buzz was.

"Cripes! Lejaune!" said Banks, involuntarily. "Sergeant Lejaune!"

"Oho, my cock!" bawled Lejaune, coming up. "You are the sight for little pigs' eyes! And we thought the Arabs had us pinned with slugs to the ground. And a capture, too. An armoured vehicle that goes!"

Then Lejaune's levity suddenly fell away, and he bawled: "All right, Banks, this is the end of the picnic. I am taking you in as a deserter along with the Chinese pygmy here!"

Banks saw the rest of the patrol close in around him. He saw Evich's peasant face. "But—*mon sergent*—we—I have to go back. Legionnaire Buzz Wein's life depends upon my going back—back to the camp of renegades!"

"Oho, so you reached the camp after all! Your information is going to be valuable to *mon colonel*! It is going to be so valuable. This is interesting. Evich, go and look into the armoured car and clear out those Arabs in there. You have Arabs with you? It is not you that fired upon your comrades, Banks?"

"There is one corpse in there and an Arab that's unconscious," said Banks.

"Bring him, Evich, let us look at this renegade. Bring him out. Come, Banks, I will show you the rest of our birds. Your little comrade was in the most excellent company when we caught him. He did not expect that Sergeant Lejaune would keep on his trail. *Sacré*, who Sergeant Lejaune goes after, he goes after, hein?"

He shoved Banks and Sen down into the ditch. Banks saw Karta lying bound and gagged and, beside her, Calito. Calito looked badly wounded; he was unconscious. Banks turned to Lejaune. "*Mon sergent*, I request a word with you—alone."

For a moment he thought the sergeant was going to hit him in the teeth. Lejaune said: "Of course, *mon ami*, let us talk, let us talk!"

Banks knew he had one last chance to smooth things out; to get Lejaune to agree to a plan for the—he hoped—eventual reduction of Mirad's men and the camp. The Mauser he'd taken from the injured Kas he had thrust in his pocket. In the excitement the Legion patrol had neglected to search him. The mere fact that Lejaune

had put him under arrest, and Banks' quiet submission, had aided the oversight. Banks knew he would have to use the weapon in the last resort. Lejaune wasn't going to make Mirad fill in that hole on Buzz!

Lejaune accompanied Banks some distance from the jubilant Legionnaires. Banks could hear them dragging Kas out of the armoured car. Lejaune said: "Quickly, *mon ami*, the column is moving up towards the north-north-east. The camp—it is shifted, hein? The renegades have moved it?"

Banks said: "Yes. But it is not that, Lejaune. I have a plan——"

"Lejaune? It is *mon sergent, cochon!*"

"*Mon sergent*, then! Buzz Wein and I are accepted by the renegade leader Mirad, but the renegade leader insists on Buzz being a hostage until I return from this mission. I have to return *mon sergent*. You must realise that although Mirad has not the drivers for his armoured vehicles, he has much armament—the English twenty-five-pounder guns and mortars. These his men can handle—in a fashion. But they will handle them well enough to blow Mentier's men into kingdom come. You must understand this!"

Lejaune belched and seemed to consider for a moment. "Ach! You would take on to yourself the role of strategist—Private First Class Banks. Know you that already the woman we have captured ran us into this ditch? She was driving because none of us could drive, and I do not trust the Chinese. And besides the Chinese has the concussion. He is not right in the head, understand? And now you ask me to let you go back to the renegades, *mon ami!*"

Banks used all the persuasion he knew—except his Mauser persuasion. "I tell you, *mon sergent*, it is imperative that you let me go back. Let me go with the Chinese. Or hold him as hostage. He is our comrade—Buzz's and mine. You could make a camp here and act as liaison between us and the colonel himself. It is the only way, *mon sergent!* Let me take that armoured car and the woman back to Mirad." Even as the words came out the thought hit Banks with a terrific mental

backhander. The woman! He had to take her back into the clutches of Mirad, and heaven knew what the old moloch would do with her.

If he didn't, Buzz wasn't going to live under several tons of earth in that hole! Was ever a guy tormented and drawn in opposite directions! Maybe he could get around that. But first he had to persuade this thick-headed sergeant to let him go on with his plan.

His ire began to mount; his hand itched to thrust the Mauser between Lejaune's teeth and force him to accede to his plea! He tried once more. "*Mon sergent*—remember—the kudos—the colonel's gratitude will be yours if the camp is reduced without the colonel losing his men. My pals and I want none of it. I want simply the American in one whole piece."

This was Banks' last but one ace. There was always the Mauser. It was the riskier method of the lot. Then suddenly Lejaune shook his head. "*Non, mon ami*, it cannot be done. You will accompany me back to *mon colonel*. He must decide. You are deserters and you have to face the colonel."

Banks whipped out his Mauser. "This will decide, Lejaune! Come on, we'll go back and you're gonna order your hounds to release Sen. I'm takin' him back with me—and the woman and her man. Get goin'. Put a hand or foot out of line, Lejaune, and I'll blow air-holes through that sponge you call a brain!"

The words hissed from Banks. It took him all his time to keep his hands off this gross fathead. Lejaune moved by numbers always. But when it came to using initiative, then Lejaune was way off on a back seat. Banks shoved him towards the others, grouped now in the headlights from the armoured car. Banks halted Lejaune a few yards from the party. He saw that Kas was standing on one leg, holding his injured one off the ground.

"Go ahead, Lejaune, start dishing out the orders!" Banks gritted.

"Ho, Legionnaires, this man is about to shoot me! Grab the Chinese, and the moment I fall, shoot the Chinese, understand!"

12

the pit

THERE was a heavy silence after Lejaune's words. Banks was in a quandary. The burly sergeant was no coward, and Banks knew he meant what he said. Then Evich, as the next in seniority to the sergeant, stammered: "But—but—*mon sergent*—it is imbecile. How can we sign your death——"

"It is you who are the imbecile, *cochon!*" bawled Lejaune. "Cannot you see that a Mauser nuzzles my kidneys? This man is trying to force me into letting him and the Chinese escape. But he is not going to get away with this. He intends to kill me if I do not order you to let them go. Now do you understand, Evich?"

"But—*mon sergent*, killing the Chinese will not bring you back. I——"

Lejaune began bawling at his frightened subordinate. "Do as I say!"

"*Oui, mon sergent, oui!*" said Evich. His broad peasant face had the look of the man who sees the hangman's noose dangling before his eyes. This dull-witted product of the central plains of Europe would normally walk through fire and water at a superior's command, but a situation of this kind had him gasping mentally and physically. His poor brain was weighing up its consequences. If he carried out Lejaune's bidding, what was *mon colonel* going to say? Who would believe such a fantastic story—that Lejaune had ordered his own execution! It was *impossible!*

Sen said slowly: "It is not Lejaune who suffers, Evich. Lejaune will be dead and out of it. It is you

who will suffer. *Mon colonel* will believe that you have killed Lejaune for your own ends. *Mon colonel* knows how much Lejaune is *loved*, even by people he calls friends, like you, Evich." Sen's voice reasoned it out for the corporal's muddled brain.

Lejaune began bawling: "Do not listen to the *canaille*, Evich! They are trying to confuse you. Do not listen! If this man does not take the revolver out of my back in three seconds from the time I stop speaking, let the Chinese have it. Understand, Evich?"

Banks took two long strides and waggled the Mauser "A moment, *mon sergent*, a moment!" screamed Evich. "What shall we do with the Arab here, the one who has the wound in the leg?"

Lejaune said: "Kill him now. The three seconds interval starts the moment he falls dead!"

Banks knew the moment had come. He struck hard with the heavy Mauser barrel behind Lejaune's ear. This was going to complicate matters no end if ever he should live through this to face Colonel Mentier—striking a superior officer. You got burnt over a slow fire—or something. The thin thought ran through his mind as he saw Lejaune fall on his face.

in Evich's face. The corporal stood stupidly with his Lebel trained upon Sen. "Drop that rifle, Evich!" barked Banks. And the Englishman was certain he saw relief written large upon Evich's features.

"That goes for all of you!" Banks ordered the patrol. Their Lebel's clattered to the ground, including the other Mauser and the two sten guns they had lifted out of Banks' armoured car. Sen seized the guns and held them on the patrol. "Take 'em for a walk, Sen, across the desert and then send 'em on their way back to Mentier. We got lots to do. And you, fellers, tell Mentier that the camp lies more east than north of here—that the renegade Arabs shifted it. Tell him to arrive in its vicinity forty-eight hours from now. Now pick up your sergeant and take him along, too. Remember what I said—the camp's location is east by north from this spot, among hills!"

Banks had another problem looming now. The air was full of problems. His head ached and he felt like a man who has run in an over-long marathon with the devil at his heels. Kas, the Arab, stood regarding him. This was one problem. Kas was in pain, but he was very much aware that he had just missed a bullet in his brain. Kas said: "Infidel, if you worry about my tongue when we get back to the camp, you have my permission to cut it out if I tell Mirad that his camp and dreams are doomed."

Banks said slowly: "It was I, Kas, who killed your friend, Mohammed."

Kas shrugged. He looked like some grotesque heron, standing there on one leg. "It is the fortunes of war, infidel. Mohammed to-day, you, me, these others tomorrow. It would have been me to-night but for your quickness. If I do not take you back, Mirad will kill me. If I try to stop you from letting the woman go with her mouse, you will also kill me."

Banks wondered. The Arab mind was unfathomable. Would this fellow go back on his promise not to talk to Mirad about his plan? The plan he had had to tell the patrol about? Then there was the woman, Karta. What about her? Banks watched Kas lie down and begin some sort of rough first-aid on the big flesh wound in his thigh.

He was still pondering the seemingly insoluble problem when Sen came back from herding the patrol on its way back to Mentier and his men. The Englishman had been down into the ditch and saw that Karta was still bound hand and foot and gagged. Her eyes flashed as he looked at her. Calito looked to be a back number. He lay in a coma.

Banks took Sen back up the slope and out of Kas's hearing. He put the problem to the Chinese. Sen said: "You talked about a plan all right. What plan? All you said was that you were going to sand up the Mirad works. That's all Kas and the woman heard."

"But don't you realise I've got to take that woman back to Mirad. To go back and tell him that she was killed—he won't believe it. He's as cunning as a hungry

cobra, Sen. He'll tip that hole in on Buzz as sure as the Lord made little apples!"

Then Sen said: "Look—leave 'em here with me—at this spot. Kas and the other wounded man, and take in the woman. The one you call Calito's so near to being dead that he'll not interest this Mirad man. Say, the old Mirad man must be quite a character by the sound of him."

"You should meet him on the wrong end of a pistol, feller," said Banks feelingly. "But the woman—you think she'll go back—and keep her mouth shut? She's heard Lejaune bawling and letting all the cats out of the bag. Besides she won't leave her mouse—Calito."

"Why not ask her?" said Sen. "See if she'll come to some arrangement? Tell her you'll see Mirad doesn't harm her. Let's talk to her."

Banks shook his head. It was crazy. You worked out one problem and then you had another one get up and stare you in the face. This one made the last one look like cream and molasses. If he could summon the courage to kill Karta and Calito then Mirad was going to kill Buzz and maybe a guy called Banks, too. If he took her in she would blab the whole dam' story, and he'd end up in the hole with Buzz!

There was only one way. He said to Sen: "Come on and watch your Uncle Shylock work this one. Me—I am going to put on the act of my life."

"I see what you mean. I have been trying to show you that angle without actually mouthing the words. You should have the Chinese way of looking at life. You Occidentals are too sentimental."

"Hush yo' mouth, brother. You got English blood from an English mother who wished she'd never had you. Let's go talk to Karta—I would as soon talk to a bereft tigress. But she's comin' back to that camp if I have to drag her by her beautiful hair, so help me, she is!"

They walked back to the wreck. Kas was sitting on the bank, nursing his injured thigh and twisting on a home-made tourniquet. Banks figured that an Arab could take off his own head and still have enough

vitality left to apply a strangling tourniquet to his neck to stop the bleeding.

He stopped and took off Karta's gag, and the first thing she did was to spit at him. He then untied her hands and feet. She got up, chafing her wrists and stood at bay. "I heard what you said to those Legionnaires, infidel. I am not going back! Force me and I'll spill the whole story to Mirad. I want that car to take myself and Calito out of here. You can work it out for yourselves—but I want that car!"

Banks looked at Calito. If the guy lived it would be a miracle. But alive Calito was the most important thing in the world right now to Banks. Calito had to live—or the new idea would fall on its face! Banks turned back to Karta, conscious that Sen was standing just off-stage, watching and wearing the old familiar grin on his yellow mug.

"Not so fast on the wants, lady. I wanna tell you what *you* got to do. You're comin' back with me. Mirad's holdin' my pal down a hole so deep he can shake hands with Sen's pals in China. Buzz's comin' outa that hole, lady, and the only way I can get him out without scramblin' over the bodies of two hundred renegades is by takin' you back. No—hold it, sister——"

She spat again. Banks wiped his face. She stood beside Calito, teeth bared, and Banks was reminded of a bob-cat defending its young. "I—am—not—going—back!" The words hissed at him.

Banks clenched his teeth tightly. He reached for her, caught her by the wrist and yanked her to him. Her hair burst in a cloud round her face.

"You're coming back, beautiful, and you're gonna like it. I don't guarantee I can do the lady-in-distress routine—in other words, I don't know if we'll both come through on this thing. But I'm gonna put it to you straight."

"Cut the roundabouts, Bob," said Sen. "Tell the lady in words of one syllable. Tell her and get going. The night is not young any more."

"Who's doin' the talkin'?" Banks snarled. He felt himself getting red-necked about the whole thing. He

didn't want to get mad. "Sen's holdin' the mouse here—Calito. If I don't show up in a reasonable time, or if he sees Arabs come runnin' out of an armoured car, he shoots Calito before he starts in shooting Arabs. Understand?"

Karta's spitting and snarling stopped suddenly. Her eyes widened and her body began to crumble and her legs went jellified. Banks knew the way it would be. He went on ruthlessly: "You're gonna tell Mirad everybody's dead except you and me—Kas, Mohammed, Calito—everybody—except me and you. Not one word about the patrol or about what we intend doing to his camp and his renegades. See?"

She looked fearfully up at Banks and he had to make a special effort to keep his ruthless mask where she could see it. "What—what—you know Mirad will tear out my tongue, infidel? You—you can't throw me back to that jackal, infidel. You can't."

"I don't intend to. I'll shake him by saying I've seen Legion signs around the desert. It'll keep him busy organising his glorious war he wants to wage on the French. He may put you in cold storage for a while until he can get the time to deal with you. That's gonna give me the time and room to try to get you out of it—you and my pal, the big American. I ain't promisin' anythin'—but if it's humanly possible to get you out of this mess, you can bet I'll do it. But you gotta choose—if anythin' happens to me whether through your mouth or through anythin' else, my Chinese pal here gives Calito the kiss of death! It's up to you, Karta!"

She shook her head. "No! I'm not going back—do you hear?" Banks swung her round by the wrist and lifted her and took her up the bank. He almost threw her into the car. Now she was sobbing in part fury, part grief. "He'll tear out my tongue, I tell you! Let me go!"

Banks shouted to Sen: "Bring the cord. I'll have to tie her up. It's no use. This is the kind of thing Mirad inspires in everybody he has dealings with. Gimme that cord, Sen. You're comin' along, Karta!"

She suddenly stopped crying and struggling. Banks held the cord poised. She said: "All right, infidel. You win. I hope your soul rots in hell, but you win. I will keep my mouth shut—until Mirad rips out my tongue."

"Okay, Karta. He won't rip out your tongue—I'll promise you that. He will meet with a Mauser bullet first," said Banks between his teeth.

He examined the petrol gauge. He made a rough estimate of the distance and petrol reserves and figured he had enough to put him within walking distance of the camp—until he looked at the overturned car. He got in his own vehicle and turned it so the headlights shone full upon the other car. He got out again and went over to the car. Sen was trying to make the delirious Calito comfortable.

"I wonder if I can get some petrol out of this car to boost up my tank a little, Sen," said Banks. He didn't feel so good after the emotional squeeze with Karta. They couldn't get at the tank with the car in its present condition. Banks growled: "Oh, the hell with it. We'll just have to take a chance." He saw Sen staring at the overturned car.

"Look," said Sen. "You see how this vehicle ran a little up this side of the gully before it overturned? The angle it is lying at isn't much more than a forty-five degree one. And it'll have a towing cable if I know armoured car equipment at all, Bob."

"What you gettin' at? Say, I left that dame in the car—I wonder if she——" Banks didn't finish; he ran back—to find Karta sitting staring into space. The emotional splurge had left her with the loose emptiness of a discarded paper bag. Another time, Banks figured, and she would have jetted away with the car, or maybe tried her hand with its machine-gun.

Sen came behind him carrying the towing cable with its two strong steel hooks at each end. "Come on, Bob," he said. "I have an idea——"

Banks gazed sourly at the towing cable. "If you got ideas about me pulling that car onto its wheels, forget 'em. The towin' cable ain't long enough for one thing,

and for another, the car's a write-off, anyway. It won't go—it's U.S., finished!"

"Karta wants her man in one piece, doesn't she?" insisted Sen. The wily Chinese said it so the woman could hear. Banks saw her head go up. "And you've got a towing cable there. Joined together they'll reach across the water-course to the other car. If we can get it upright, I'll have a kind of fort to work from. Just in case any Tuaregs or Lejaune's men come back on the scene. I'll stand them off a lot better in a steel skin."

"That's an idea," said Banks. It would be better than leaving Sen with only Sten guns, plus a few rounds of ammunition, especially if the spill hadn't upset the machine-gun in the car itself.

Banks and Sen joined the cables—to find that when one end was hitched to Banks' car, the other end was still some six feet from the overturned one. Banks swore and then excused himself to Karta—who said a bigger and nastier word. This gal knew them all, concluded Banks.

Banks trod on the gears, his mouth working. He shoved the rear end of the car down the bank, dangerously so, so that it was in imminent danger of somersaulting down to join the other one. A yell from Sen told Banks that the Chinese had made contact with his end of the towing cable. Then Sen came running up the shallow slope.

"Okay, Bob, give her the works—and may the blessing of Confucius be upon your endeavours. I will sprag your back wheels every time you win an inch. Only thing is we have to keep our fingers crossed. If she does come over, she may totter over onto her other side. Okay, she's all yours."

Banks trod on the gas and took the strain on the cable. He was surprised when he heard a high-pitched yell come from Sen. "She's over, Bob! She's over, pal!" He heard Sen unhook the cable. Sen came up to Banks. "Now you can try for that petrol, Bob. It'll not take long."

"The hell with the petrol," snapped Banks. "Get inside that steel trunk and stay put. You got water and

provisions. 'I'll be back in forty-eight hours. Gimme twelve hours more than that and then shut off Calito's breath. You hear, Karta? We're playin' for more than cardboard chips!"

The Eurasian didn't answer. Banks let in the clutch and the vehicle leapt into a gallop. Banks put the blinkers on the lights, shutting off all except a dip-light on his side of the vehicle, and he hit the high spots for home and beauty.

What he and this woman were running into no one knew. They would soon find out. He figured it would be some time after dawn when he hit the vicinity of the camp. Already he was rueing his impetuosity in not waiting to tank up with petrol, but it couldn't be helped. Maybe Sen would have the tougher job, for Lejaune might choose to come back when he came round, or Sen might wind up with Mentier's men on his neck.

Hour after hour he drove that armoured car with Karta hanging on, but still getting thrown around like an apple in a rolling barrel. He guessed she had lost count of the bruises. He wracked his brains for some solution for her problem, but it depended upon the old man of the hills—Mirad. He could picture the toothless gap of a mouth making the best of an evil smile when the old eyes clapped on Karta.

Dawn came in a timid way, peeping greyly through a lot of clouds. The terrain was becoming more rolling, sure sign they were approaching the rough, scrub hills that guarded the approaches to the camp itself. His eyes were now as much for the petrol gauge as for the track. He stopped as the sun came redly up out of the east. It was a stormy sky all right.

He said to her: "You're sure you know your piece, Karta?" he said. "You saw Calito, Kas and Mohammed killed. There's only us two. Remember?" She nodded dumbly. Then he added a little more gently: "I sure hate myself for takin' you back into his claws. But I had to, Karta, I had to."

"I understand," she said. "Your pal is in the pit. I understand, infidel." Her big eyes looked at him, and

then she reached forward and pulled his face over to hers and planted a warm, lingering kiss on his lips.

For a moment, the desert, Mirad—everything—was blotted out by her warmth and nearness. Banks looked at her. "You shouldn'ta done that," he said. "It's been a long time since a woman did that."

"It is a weapon that woman uses to advantage sometimes, infidel. Perhaps I should have used it back where the Chinese man waits for us," she said.

"It mighta worked at that, Karta. You got any more shots like that in your locker, shoot 'em now, and after, start crossin' your fingers." She deliberately reached for him and repeated the mixture as before. Banks said: "Mirad's gonna have to tear out my tongue, too, if he wants to stop me from gettin' you back to your mouse, sister. And I mean it!"

"Perhaps I wish I had met you before I met my Calito," she said wistfully.

"Let's go, sister. Hold your hat. Mirad, here we come!" Banks stepped on the starter. It whined and ground the motor into motion. They travelled exactly twenty yards and then the motor coughed and gave it up.

"Ridin' in on the white charger's out, Karta," grinned Banks. "I got the idea we were gonna do just that. Me—any time I try for the big impression, the handle falls off." They piled out of the car. He judged they couldn't be so far. For the first time since he'd seen Buzz taken away to the pit, he felt happier. He felt much happier now that Karta had started in putting her shoulder to the wheel. It took much sand to do what she was doing. To walk into the Mirad web. They had to win through in this thing they were in together.

They trudged on in the tracks made by the outward-bound cars, and the sun threw a high yellow light around them, and Banks was sweating profusely. In one hot half-hour they had gained the hill which overlooked the camp. They stood for a moment catching their breath. Banks let go with a big gasp. In a line, facing the south and west in a wide arc, were a line of twenty-five-pounders—those stubby saviours of the famous Eighth

Army of Alamein fame. They crowned the top of the hill, and Banks counted some fifteen. Ahead and behind a thrown-up breastwork were the mortars.

Mirad's boys had been ultra busy while he had been away, Banks figured. And Mirad also must have smelled the advance of Colonel Mentier . . .

Banks looked at Karta, tightened his lips and then, shoving her ahead of him, they plunged down the hill. This was going to be the big time—the facing of Mirad. Every word to this old Solomon would have to be gilt-edged and lined with sincere lies—or else.

One of the khaki-clad Arabs met them at the hut and shoved them inside. Mirad was curled up in the corner, looking exactly as he had looked when Banks had set out twenty hours ago—looking like an ancient vulture sitting upon a stinking carcass.

“Ah, infidel, so you bring her—the beautiful witch that spits,” he croaked. “It does my old eyes good. You come alone? You had the good fight? Ali? Mohammed? Kas? Where are they all?”

Banks recited his piece. He did it in a sulky way, as though he were partly glad, partly not caring. “They're all dead. Calito. He died in the crash. She killed her little mouse herself, Mirad.”

The old man began the dry-washing of the hands again. The dry palms gave out with a soft hissing as they scrubbed each other—a soft, snake-like hissing. It began to wear on Banks' taut nerves.

He went on: “There are signs of Legion patrols about, Mirad. I saw tracks. It means that Mentier is on the march. I see you think so, too.”

“It is a precaution, my son. I have had the men set defences. Mentier will find our teeth have thunder and lightning in their bite, my son.” He clapped his hands. Two khaki-clad men came in carrying Sten guns. “Take this female to the fourth door down the passage—your old room, Banks. Take her there and hold her until I have the time to deal with her. On your heads be it. If she escapes I will have you sat upon sharpened stakes!”

The old eyes came round and looked full upon Banks' set face. "You look tired out, my son. You must rest before the fun starts with the Legion."

"I have to go back and bring in the car, Mirad. It needs petrol taking out to it. I'll bring her in and service her before I rest up, Mirad."

"Ah, my son, think nothing of it. It is not only the tiredness, but you worry about your American friend. He is quite well, I assure you. I will have the American go out and bring in the car. You will take his place in the pit!"

13

father of all foxes

“IN the pit?” said Banks. He couldn’t believe his ears. “In the pit?”

“Of course, my son. One infidel on the loose at one time is sufficient for an old man like me. It is necessary. It is the big American’s turn, surely? The pit is comfortable, but a little monotonous for active men to stomach.”

Banks’ mind raced. He could whip out the Mauser and drill this old buzzard, and take his chance of getting through to the guarded pit. But where in hell was it? He didn’t even know its location. He let his body go slack. “Okay, Mirad, where’s the pit? Let’s go.”

“You are a very wise one, infidel,” chuckled Mirad. “You were going to use the Mauser you have concealed on you. You thought: Shall I kill this old camel now and try to rescue my friend from the pit?”

Banks said: “You’re one hell of a good thought-reader, Mirad.”

“You are exceedingly sagacious, infidel. Look behind you!” said Mirad.

Banks turned, and saw there an Arab with Sten gun trained on him. The guy must have been there all the time, just behind the door. Mirad was having no more mishaps. It was uncanny—this ancient’s knowledge of men and their thoughts. Banks’ mind boggled at the thought of what would happen to the desert and the desert forts should this man let loose his men and equipment.

"You may keep your Mauser, infidel. I trust you." Mirad signed to the Arab, and the latter stepped forward and motioned to Banks. The Englishman went out of the hut. How was his promise to Karta going to work out? It was now as binding to him as had been his mission to return on Buzz's account. The Arab led him through the main street of the camp, past the tank park, and so to the huge ammunition dump. A fine place for a hole, Banks figured. And so it was, smack in the middle of the neat squares of stacked shells and ammunition boxes full of rifle rounds and mortar shells. A tarpaulin was strung between two such dumps and under it was the hole. It was a deep one, all right.

At first in the semi-gloom under the tarpaulin, Banks couldn't make out the bottom of the hole. Then he said: "Buzz—my friend—he isn't down there?" The hole was about four feet square and slipped sheer down into the rough earth. But there was no Buzz.

The Arab said: "The American—he is not down there. He is working on the defences on the hill."

"You mean he's been up there all the time?" said Banks.

"He is well watched, infidel," said the Arab non-committally. "You will please get down on this rope ladder, and then I will remove it when you are down."

Banks had his hand on the Mauser. The man was lowering the ladder, his Sten slung over the right shoulder. This was the time. He wasn't going down that hole. There was only this man here. They had passed a group of sweating men at the next dump but one, unearthing mortar shells, preparatory to carrying them up the slope and on to the next hill position.

Banks guessed that the old man had sold him a big dummy. He must have had Buzz working on the defences all the time. The old fox!

Banks moved towards the rope ladder. He had taken his right hand off the Mauser. He had a better way. He took one swift step and his big fist snicked home on the Arab's jaw. He brought a swishing left round that whistled on to the same spot on the man's jawbone.

The Arab rolled his eyes once and then fell like a tree falls.

Banks swiftly undid the man's belt and tied his hands together with it. Then he tore a strip off the khaki shirt and stuffed it in his mouth. A string yanked from the eyehole in the tarpaulin served to lash the gag in place. Then, using the ladder, he lowered the man into the hole. He dropped ladder and all into the depths.

He picked up the Sten from where it had fallen from the man's shoulder. Banks crawled around the dump, took a look at the men working twenty yards or so away, and then he looked swiftly round him, his mind working fast.

The dangling strings from the eyeholes in the tarpaulin caught his eye. They were tufted and fuzzy. Near the ground where the wind and water from past desert rains had eroded the badly stacked shells; that, or the weather had rotted the wood upon which they'd been stacked.

Banks quickly scraped together a heap of powder until he had a sizable pile of it. It was damp. Among this he sifted fuzzy strands of tarpaulin strings. Then he began knotting more strings together. The longest he could make them was about twelve feet. He had to have more if the idea was going to succeed. Succeed? He wasn't sure whether he wanted it to succeed. But it was a last resort he hoped he wouldn't have to take if Mentier was going to have this dump untouched.

He crawled around the back, working away from where the men were working, cutting the tie-strings off other tarpaulins over other dumps. Presently he had a handful. He hadn't much time, for Mirad might send an Arab at any moment to make sure he was well salted away down the hole, and possibly to look for the guy that had taken his place.

He crawled back and knotted these strings together and laid the rough line in the heart of the heaped powder, making sure the powder on top of the pile was quite dry. He was sweating fiercely, and his stomach was tight. Around his head seemed to be a contracting

steel band that became tighter every second. He was terribly tired.

He took the rough line of knotted tarpaulin string and crawled up the slope. It reached almost halfway up, maybe twenty-five yards or so. The camel scrub on the hill kept him concealed from the working party down below.

He had taken care to conceal the line, running it along the edge of the shell stack and on out into the camel scrub. It wasn't that it might be spotted, but anybody catching his toe in it, could easily drag the inner end from out of the powder.

"Now I gotta find Buzz, before Mirad finds I'm not in the hole. Otherwise, he's gonna give it to Buzz," he said to himself. "And Karta, too. I got a date with her——" He looked up from the camel scrub where he lay. The figure of a sentry stood atop of the hill, peering down at the dump from which Banks had just emerged. Banks was suddenly aware of what it was that was attracting the sentry's attention. Queer noises were issuing from the hole. He divined it was the guy he'd smacked trying to squawk over the gag in his mouth. Banks reached for his Mauser, as he saw the sentry start down the hill. He could buy a little time if he could intercept the sentry. Then the squawk got louder—and he heard the working party start to talk loudly among themselves.

"That does it," he said inside himself. Peering from under the cover he could see the sentry's legs swishing down through the scrub. The man passed not six yards from where he lay. Now the working party were moving in on the hole between the dumps.

He began crawling as fast as he could without making too much noise. He could hear the Arabs jabbering at each other, probably telling each other to go fetch a rope or a ladder. He had to get off this slope and across the camp's one street; he wanted to fetch up behind Mirad's shack. They would haul Buzz there, sure, for the Mirad judgment. Maybe he should have let the Arab shove him down the hole. Mirad would

have had him hauled out as soon as Mentier and his men were sighted.

Banks ran along the bank as soon as he was out of sight of the dump. Down in the camp's one street he could see Arabs running in response to the fine old noise the working party were giving off.

He came to a kind of bunkhouse or barracks used by Mirad's men. He made a crouching run to avoid showing at the windows, and emerged into an alley between two bunkhouses. He took a careful peek around. Across on the opposite slope he could see more men coming down off the hill beyond which Buzz had laid the screen of guns and mortars. Pretty soon he'd see the escorted Buzz come that way. *He had to get across the street.*

The noonday sun shone down with a blinding yellow stare. He judged it to be about fifty or sixty yards between him and Mirad's shack. A whole bunch of Arabs were now over at the hole salvaging the guy he'd put down.

He took a big breath. He hadn't time to skirt the camp and come right around, via the hills, to get to Mirad's place. He expelled the breath slowly and casually walked from the alley right across the street. An Arab came out of a hut opposite, looked at him and then started walking towards the ammunition dump. Banks made the passage between Mirad's shack and another bunkhouse. He flicked the sweat from his head. He halted just around the corner. He heard a footstep. The Arab who had come out of the shack and begun walking towards the dump shoved his head around the corner. Banks hit him, caught him one-handed, and dragged him up the alley, all the time smacking the man's jaw.

Banks dragged him down the alley and up the slope and left him in the scrub. It was idiotic, he knew; he should have creased the guy's skull with his Mauser barrel and made sure of the guy's silence, but that was a thing for story-books and tales by the fire. Sen could do it; and sometimes Buzz would, when he was good and mad. But not the man who was called Banks.

He gained the spot where he and Buzz had hidden the day before, and lay down. Then he heard men coming down the hill. He looked up and saw the big Yank in the middle of an escort. Mirad was going to hang Buzz on the hook—for him!

He saw Buzz go into Mirad's headquarters, accompanied by two men with Stens at the ready. He got up and worked along the back side of Mirad's hut until he came to the window of the room he had occupied a hell of a long time ago. This was no time for plans. Buzz might be taking a slug from Mirad at any moment.

He looked in the window, inching his head just over the sill. He saw Karta lying on the bed. There was no one else in the room. He tapped on it and she came alert, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. Holy smoke, the woman had been asleep. Then he remembered she was a Eurasian and had in her as much fatalism as any Arab. What is to be, will be, was the way they took everything.

They'd screwed the window back in. He motioned for her to put a blanket up to one of the panes of the window, and when she did so, he hit it with his elbow and the glass collapsed without a sound. He handed her his jack-knife. "Here, unscrew those two screws in each side of the window. Quick, if we're gonna get out of here!"

She worked clumsily in a ham-fisted, female way, and Banks chewed his nether lip in impatience. He could have kicked the thing in, but that would have had her guards outside the door coming in with guns talking.

It took her nearly five minutes to get the screws out. Banks lifted the window out gently and crawled through. She had her finger to her lips.

"Okay, Karta, call those guards in. I'm behind the door. Get both of them in—understand?" She nodded eagerly. Banks took up his post behind the door, and gave her the high sign. Karta was a heck of a good actress. She let go with a small scream and jumped on the bed, giving an imitation of a woman who has just been frightened by a snake, or maybe something worse—a mouse!

The door slammed open and both guards came trooping in. Banks had downed one with his Mauser barrel before the other even turned. It was as this one turned that Banks smacked him on the temple. "Never mind the trimmings, Karta, let's get into that living room. We gotta——"

At that moment the woman Sula came gliding into the room. "Holy smoke, woman," said Banks bitterly, "why couldn't you keep your head under the clothes some place while we did what we have to do?"

Karta shot some terse dialect at the woman. Sula's big eyes rolled, and she faded out of the room, going back down the passage to her room.

"She won't give the alarm, huh?" said Banks to Karta.

"She will not. She hates Mirad, anyway. She won't help us, but she won't help Mirad either," said Karta.

"I hope she don't hold against me that clip on the jaw I handed her," said Banks.

"She'd probably love you for it," said Karta, a faint smile coming over her face. She was responding to his rescue act like a flower opens to the sun. Banks motioned her to follow him and crept up the passage.

He eased the door open and peered into the room. He saw the backs of Buzz's escort as they stood facing Mirad over in the far corner. As far as Banks could see there was nobody else in the room. He stepped through and said: "Okay everybody, up with the hands!"

Only Buzz whirled, and there was a grin on his big mug.

"What kept you, feller?" he said. "Meet Mister Mirad, Bob. He's layin' the law down about sump'n you done to one or more of his troops. And is he mad!"

"Don't talkie-talk, Buzz; grab the escort's guns, and then root in Mirad's lap—maybe he's got a Mauser or field piece in the bundle of burnouses he wears."

Buzz busied himself collecting armament. He found no gun in Mirad's lap. All the time the old man talked gently. "You shouldn't have done this, Banks. You

could have protested about going down the hole. I would have reconsidered the position."

Karta spat: "Kill him, Banks, kill the toad. He is stalling for time!"

"Not just yet, Karta. He is more valuable alive. We have to get out of here," said Banks. "We'll take him out with us. Buzz, you can carry the chair—no, make these two Arabs carry the chair, and Karta can go with 'em. We'll get him into the armoured car I brought in."

"It's back in the tank park," said Buzz. "They had me bring it in. How we gonna get past the Arabs out there? You gonna hold a gun on him and shoot if they come for us?"

"I am. Karta, Mirad's gonna be *your* passport to home and beauty. You take that car and beat it back to where we left Sen in the desert. Mirad is going with you, tied up of course. Tied nice and tightly, too!"

Then the group stiffened as the front door shot open and a bunch of men came stamping into the room. Banks let go with an almighty gasp. In the grasp of the khaki-clad Arabs were Sen and the wounded Kas. Banks' group faced this fresh bunch for a moment, and Banks knew that one shot from his Mauser and the six Arabs with Sen in their midst would blast them out of existence. Mirad's senile cackle broke through the heavy silence.

"Come in, brothers, and join our happy party. Banks, I would put down the Mauser and the Sten—somebody will be getting killed, will they not?" said Mirad.

Karta glared at Banks. "I told you to kill him while you had the chance, infidel! You are crazy! It is too late now. Nobody can outfox the father of all the foxes!"

14

jail again

“SO! Kas is dead. Calito is dead—everybody is dead, eh, Banks?” Mirad went on. “But they are so dead they come to life. Forward, Ahmed, and report where your troop caught these fine fish!”

One of the newcomers relieved Banks of his guns, and then took the guns from Buzz, the ones he had taken off his own escort. The room was now crowded. Over a dozen people in the place, Banks noted dazedly. Events were moving too rapidly for his tired brain. Maybe he should have started blasting. Maybe he *would* have started blasting if there hadn't been this damn camp to immobilise. He could have shot the old buzzard first.

But it would still have left the Arabs to fire those mortars so strategically arranged by Buzz.

The Ahmed Arab came forward smartly. “We rode our horses a long way into the night. We saw the first armoured car pass us, Mirad, and then presently we saw another one coming slowly. It looked to be in trouble. We sneaked up on it and found Kas and this infidel in it with another who was nearly dead——”

“Calito!” breathed Karta. “You found Calito—my Calito!”

Banks put his hand on the woman's arm to steady her. He was sure she was about to hurl herself upon Mirad. The Ahmed Arab looked at her for a moment and then resumed in a matter-of-fact voice. “This Calito, Mirad, was sick about the head and dying. It wasn't a second to tap him with the butt of the Sten gun. He wouldn't have lived the journey out.”

Mirad's grin thinned a little. "So you tapped his head a little, eh?" He seemed to consider for a moment. "You decide who shall die, eh? And not me. I do not have a say in it. Take this man away. Let only his head see the sun set!"

One of the guards seized Ahmed and led him outside. Banks saw that their exit had left a little more room in the place. Karta had her eyes tight shut. She had nursed Calito across the barren miles of desert only for an Arab to decide her mouse couldn't survive the ride back to the camp and calmly knock out what little life he had left in him!

Banks knew now that Sen must have got the armoured car going. But why had he started towards the camp? Why not anywhere else? Sen was talking now. "They picked us up, Bob. Lejaune came back, and I thought we would travel out of his reach. I didn't want to start blasting the patrol anyhow. Then these Arabs picked us up——"

Banks said to Mirad: "Your number's up, Mirad. The Legion are onto you. You might get by for a time with your mortars and field pieces, but they'll send more men now they know where the camp is."

"Perhaps you are right, infidel," said Mirad. "But you—you will not live to see that. You two and I could have made this desert resound with our deeds—but, no, you would not have it that way. So! The American has fixed up our guns. We will blow this Legion force out of the desert, and then move our camp where they will not find it until I am ready to take my army south."

Mirad clapped his hands. Sula appeared. "Drinks, desert flower, for these gentlemen. Some Scotch to send you on your way. Quickly, my priceless one, bring the drinks!"

Banks could feel Karta's body slowly relax and begin shivering. Calito's death had hit her hard. You couldn't tell with damned females, he mused, for Calito was about as much use to humanity as a two-headed viper, and yet this delectable and fiery female had put her all on the guy.

Sula came creeping into the room, her big eyes large and frightened. She had glasses on a big, ornamented tray. All except one of the glasses were of the same size. The biggest she had brought for Mirad. Apparently he used only the one glass. Banks took his drink. Buzz took his and Sen took one, too. Only the Europeans had the drinks. There was not one for Karta. Banks took his hand off her arm.

He downed his drink in a second and in that second Karta launched her slender body at Mirad. Her claws raked his face and she made animal sounds. The guard's eyes swivelled to the shemozzle. Then Buzz's giant form seemed to shake itself and a couple of guards went flat, leaving the Yank with a couple of Mausers in his hand.

They thundered and the room filled with acrid smoke and when it slowly drifted up on the thick air, two guards were down and the other four were standing, hands high. "Okay, Sen, grab their Stens and guard the door."

Meanwhile Banks had watched the struggle between Karta and the legless ancient. He knew he should have intervened, but he also knew that Mirad had it coming to him.

Suddenly Karta staggered away from the old guy, hand over her stomach. Banks saw the blood pulsing over and between her fingers. He saw the haft of the big knife that Mirad had stabbed her with. Banks caught her and lowered her down to the floor.

Buzz said: "Bob, whadda we do now we got this lot bottled and ready for servin'? We gotta make it snappy. The rest of the army'll be comin' to take us apart—say, look at Mirad!"

Banks whirled away from the dying Karta to gaze at Mirad. The ancient's eyes were closed and he was swaying in the chair like a palm in a wind. His loose mouth was working as though he were trying to talk—to tell them something.

Buzz gasped: "She got him then. She made it a fair swap, by God!"

Banks went over to the old one. Had Karta managed to stab him before he had gotten her? But Banks couldn't find any blood. Then he caught a queer smell. He sniffed closer to the old man's mouth.

"Poison, by heck!" he yelled. "Mirad's been poisoned!" Banks looked at the others. Then he knew, suddenly and awfully. "The mousey one—Sula! She did it. She poisoned that whisky!" Banks began to laugh. He couldn't stop himself, and then he shut it off abruptly as Karta called to him.

"Banks!" Her voice wasn't loud, but low and coming from a long way down inside her. He bent over her. He saw she hadn't much left. She gasped: "Mirad—I—heard you say—say—he was—was dead! Lift me up—careful, Banks. Lift me—I want—to—to see him—dead!"

The Englishman raised her and she looked upon the small slumped figure of the would-be overlord of the desert. Sen said: "They're coming, Bob, to see what the shooting has been about. What do we do?"

"The hell with 'em," said Banks slowly. "I want this gal to die happy. She just didn't quite make it. Buzz, go find Sula. She'll want protection. She needs it. Gee whizz, I never thought she hated him that much. She sure made a good job of it."

Sen took over guard of the Arabs in the hut, and Buzz went off down the passage. Karta was trying to smile at the sight. Then she looked up at Banks. "Banks, promise me you will bury—bury Calito. He is—is—only a mouse. The jackals will get him. He will be afraid—afraid!"

She died as the last word came from her lips. Banks laid her down and composed her hands on her chest. Apart from the big ugly stain on her abdomen she looked asleep only. Buzz came back. "You don't have to worry about Sula any more. She took the same kind of drink she handed to her dear husband. She's very dead."

Banks stood up as the door dithered under the thunderous knocking of gun butts. Sen said: "Let's take these guards as fronts—hostages—and get away that

way. We can get to that armoured car they made me drive in after they picked us up——”

Banks shook his head. “No more hostage stuff for us, brother. We blast our way outa this. Buzz, drop these guys in the good old-fashioned way, and then we will take the usual way out we took before.”

Buzz hit each of the four under the ear and they fell like toy soldiers fall. “We shoulda drilled ‘em, Bob,” said Buzz. “But I guess we are the——”

“So we are. Shove the table against the door. If it hasn’t occurred to these babies there is a back, as well as front, we should be able to get outa here,” said Banks. He fired his Mauser, and the bullet went through the door. He heard a yelp of anguish, and then the three of them—and Kas, the Arab—were running down the passage. They heard a Sten stutter leaden death through the door. The door itself, plus table, would hold them a matter of seconds.

As they got to the room wherein Karta had been incarcerated, Banks said: “Hold it, we may have company to contend with!”

Buzz whirled, and let go at a couple of Arabs that came into the other end of the passage. They dodged back. “Make it quick, feller, we got company all the way round us, Bob,” said the Yank.

Banks kicked in the door. He rushed through, Mauser pointing. They hadn’t got to the window yet, he saw. Buzz said: “Go on, git through, while I hold ‘em off! Go on, now.”

Sen said: “You’re bigger. It’ll take a couple of wild horses to drag you through. *I’ll* hold them off.”

Buzz took Sen’s advice. Banks got through and then Kas. The Arab was in pain and his thigh bulged his khaki shorts. Banks caught the faint gangrenous smell it was giving off as Kas climbed after him. Last came Sen. They ran up the hillside and the minute they emerged into view of the crowd of Arabs in the street a hail of Sten gun fire came at them.

They kept running a zig-zag course. And then a line of figures showed on the rim of the ridge up ahead of them. “Oh—oh,” said Buzz. “This is the big round-

up. We got 'em in front, we got 'em behind. Okay, let's take the side until they start fillin' that up—and after that we'll have to start fightin'."

Banks said: "You talk too much, feller. If it hadn't've been for you, feller, I'd have been coasting over the hills and far away with Karta and her mouse—Calito. No, I hadda come back and see what the inside of the lion's mouth looked like. That's me—the desert Sir Gallyhad."

"Galahad," said Sen, "is the name . . . The slugs seem to go where we go."

Now the men on the top of the slope were popping at them. Banks led the way along the slope towards where the tank park lay in the valley. He could have taken the other direction—*out* of the valley, but there was still this camp to see to. Could they hold this gang off until dark?

It was late afternoon now; there must be another two hours of light yet, and they had the whole damn Mirad force after them. "Make for the tank park, you guys," he said. "We can play hide and seek among them for a while—until somebody runs outa either breath or ammunition."

"It's us that's gonna run outa breath, feller," said Buzz. "Don't look now, but I think somebody just beat us to the tank park, too."

Banks cursed. Buzz was right. Another group of about forty or so Arabs had gone to guard the tanks and armoured cars. On the other side and farther along were the ammunition dumps. Over there was his last-resort rendezvous. And the Arabs were alert now and peppering them with lead galore.

"Okay, dive into this camel scrub. We'll have to play hunt-the-rabbit over the hill-side," Banks ordered.

"It's gonna be the toughest game I ever played," said Buzz. They flopped down and began crawling with the slugs of the Stens whining and searching for them among the coarse undergrowth. Buzz and Sen crawled up alongside Banks. The shooting had lulled down a little.

Buzz grunted: "Ain't no use botherin' about this camp, Bob. We're gonna by lucky if we git outa here with all our hides."

"Colonel Mentier should be nearing the place, surely," said Sen. His yellow face was caked with dust and the sweat made runnels in it.

"There he goes again," growled Buzz. "He always has the story-book slant on these affairs. Every time a tight corner stares us in the face he has to start mouthin' about the nick-of-time stuff. Feller, Mentier ain't found the joint yet——"

"Okay, Buzz, okay," said Banks. He told them what he'd done with the powder under the dump and the tarpaulin strings. "It was a last-resort gimmick—for if we couldn't take and hold this fort until Mentier came. It's a pipe-dream I been nursin' all the time. I get these damn silly dreams. I shoul'da known that three-four of us couldn't hope to hold this camp against these renegade fellers."

"So what?" said Buzz. "If you gotta blow the dump, blow it. The hell with the Legion wantin' it intact. If you don't blow it, then——" He broke off, a grin spreading across his big face.

"Then—what?" said Banks. "Quit the grinnin' stuff, Buzz. This is a gamble we're losin' fast."

"I just remembered. Every one of them guns I had the boys set up on the hill yonder ain't workable. I just bruised them breeches. They won't shut. I did it because I thought we'd never get around to turning 'em on the renegades anyway. I gave the Arabs a line about 'em bein' outa line—the guns—and just damaged them breeches up somethin' scandalous!"

"Good man," said Banks. He felt Kas crawl up alongside them. The Sten barrage began again. More and more were coming into the fray, and somebody was making the Arabs direct their fire at one picce of ground at a time.

The group began crawling ahead of the death drive begun by the Sten guns.

As they crawled like clumsy snakes, Kas, his brown face now grey with the pain of his leg, said: "This dump

where the powder is. You have the tarpaulin rope for a fuse? Show it to me. I will go and touch it off."

"The hell you will," said Banks. "The guy that touches that off will have to have all the legs he can muster to get away before she starts to go up. Those shells 'll fly all over the place. You wouldn't get ten yards with a bum leg like that."

"You ain't goin' no place without me, feller," said Buzz, his big jaw thrust forward belligerently. "One goes, we all go. We been taggin' around one after the other too much this trip. It gives me corns in the stomach."

Sen said: "Maybe there's some other way, Bob. Maybe we don't have to blow this thing. If we could make a rush for the armoured car, we could run her out into the clear."

"Hear the guy," said Buzz. "Hear him! Know what? I been around this dump while you guys been runnin' in circles on the desert. Practically all the tank motors want takin' out and throwin' away. The weather's got at 'em. The armoured cars are all right. Let Mirad's guys have the rotor arms. They ain't no good anyhow. And the ammo. It's duff stuff, I tell ya. Mentier'll condemn it soon's he sees it."

"The other stores are all right though—look out!" Banks went scrambling forward. The Arabs were on the slope behind them now—and in front.

Banks rose now, his gun stuttering an answer to the oncoming Arabs.

"Come on, you fellers, across the valley in line abreast!" he bellowed. The ragged little band, four-man strong, started down the slope, their guns spewing out slugs. The Arabs at the foot of the slope began to retreat. The very audacity of the attack had them gasping.

As they reached the bottom of the slope, Banks bawled again. They broke into a run, Kas keeping up with them magnificently, despite his bum leg. They ran across the street and then along the foot of the other slope and behind the huts which afforded them plenty of protection.

Then Banks began his search for the rope twine and finally found it. He put a match to the fuzzy twine and the flame curled and went out. He struck another match and held it to the rope. It flared again.

Then it began to run on its twenty-five yard trail to the powder heap.

Buzz snorted gently. "I bet the powder's too dud to go up. I bet you anythin'!"

Sen said: "There goes Mister Optimism again. Come on, Bob, this is no place to be." They ran up the slope, and now the Arabs could see them again and the Sten slugs came humming around their ears.

Banks threw himself down into the camel scrub near the top of the opposite slope. He had no eyes for the cautiously-advancing line of Arabs coming up the hill. "Why doesn't the dam' thing go off?" he kept saying.

"Give it a chance," said Buzz. "And keep them guys from spotting it. I can see the smoke of it from here!"

They kept a well-directed fire going to keep the Arabs occupied. "It's gone out!" cursed Banks. "It's gone out, I tell ya . . . I'm goin' down there right now——"

Buzz said: "You ain't goin' no place, brother——"

"Look!" said Sen. "Look, Bob, it's got there!"

Banks looked and saw a column of smoke shoot up. The flame must have got to the powder. Then a big sheet of flame went up. They rose and began running up the hill. The flame flared, and more flame shot up and ran along the lines of the dump with atomic intensity and suddenness.

Then explosion after explosion began to blow over the camp. The air thumped at them and knocked them to their knees. They began crawling out of it. As they got to the top of the hill, Buzz looked over to the south and said: "Don't look now, but I reckon Sen's story-book stuff is comin' true, fellers. Here come Mentier's lot!"

They looked and saw, and marvelled at the colonel's tenacity and doggedness. Banks wasn't elated. None of them were. Buzz said: "Here comes one hundred and ninety days' detention."

Banks said: "That is only a flea bite alongside of what's comin. Remember? We're posted as deserters by Captain Jardin!"

"What are we going to do?" asked Sen. Banks looked at Kas. Kas would be all right. He'd helped in this thing. Mentier would let him go.

Buzz said: "Come on, the camp's afire now. There ain't no more renegades—for the time bein', anyhow!" Banks saw Buzz was right. Streams of Arabs were running out of the camp to the north as Mentier's men came ever closer to the smoke pall from the south. Buzz said: "Let's go follow the renegades. If we're deserters in Mentier's eyes—why, let's desert."

"Hold it!" said Banks. He had been looking at Kas. The idea wasn't a good one, but it might work—through Kas. He talked in short, quick sentences to the Arab. The latter nodded. Sen and Buzz shook their heads.

"You're crazy, Bob, it won't work. Kas'll run his head into a Lebel slug," said Buzz.

Kas said: "I could have run my head into a Mauser slug from this man you call Banks. This is something I can do for him."

"Come on, Kas," said Banks. He whipped off his belt and tied the Arab's hands behind his back. Banks then shoved Kas ahead of him. They all headed down the ridge for where Mentier had halted his force at the edge of the camp. The first man they saw was a grinning Lejaune. The sergeant's leer held all kinds of evil promise for them.

"Ach! The Devil's Own!" said Lejaune. "Come, *mes enfants*, the colonel wishes to see you more than he does the renegades. You save the camp, hein? For the Legion! And it goes up in smoke!"

Chuckling, he led them to the colonel.

Then as they lined up before the cold-eyed Mentier, Kas suddenly threw himself at Captain Jardin's feet. The captain drew back, his eyes bulging. Kas mouthed: "Ah, captain, you said you would help me if I helped you!"

Jardin drew away. "Take the man away, *mon sergent*, he is crazy!"

Lejaune made a movement towards Kas. Mentier put his hand up. "Hold it. Let the man have his say!"

Kas looked around bewildered, his mouth working. "But—you said, captain, that you'd look after me if——"

"This is a conspiracy on the part of these deserters, *mon colonel!*" yelled Jardin. "They are trying to implicate me!"

Kas suddenly began cursing Jardin. The captain tried to ignore him, and then suddenly Jardin's nerve went. The long march, the knowledge that he had shot Saxe, the fear that the keen-eyed Mentier would find out about his defection—all went to his head in one surging, red cloud.

He whipped out his revolver and pointed it at Kas. Banks' Mauser spoke. His bullet took Jardin in the arm. Again the captain tried to aim at Kas.

"*Mon capitaine!*" barked Mentier. "Steady. You are going *cafard*, man!"

Jardin's wild gaze came away from Kas. Then he changed hands with the Mauser and aimed it at Banks. A shot sounded and Jardin dropped. It was the colonel's gun that had spoken! Jardin died as he hit the ground.

Mentier said: "I thought it was *cafard*. I will hear *your* story of the abandoning of the locomotive, Banks!"

Banks told him, and then told him of the act Kas had put on for Jardin's benefit. "It was our only chance to clear ourselves, *mon colonel.*"

Mentier eyed them with the intensity of a hawk about to pounce. Banks told him about the uselessness of the dump. Of having to divert the Arabs from their purpose of massacring Mentier's men. Of the dud guns and tanks.

"Ah, *mon enfant*, we have too many strategists here. But perhaps the Legion's Lebel's would have been poor weapons against the automatic weapons of the renegades." He looked at Kas and then at the dead Jardin.

"Jardin had murder in his eyes. He has had it in them since the train incident. I need no proof to realise that he had defection on his conscience. You are

exonerated, *mes enfants*, from desertion. Had you wished to desert, you could have joined up with the renegades. Lejaune, you are a fool and a dupe. Release this Arab!"

Lejaune, his dark face showing chagrin, unleashed Kas's hands.

Mentier said: "Let the medical orderly look at the man's wounded limb. Legionnaires," he said to Banks and Buzz and Sen. "This does not absolve you from your ninety-day sentences——"

"Ninety days, *mon colonel!*" gasped Banks. "I thought it was a hundred and——"

He got a big kick on the foot from Buzz.

Mentier shouted: "Silence, dog! You dare to tell me what you thought!"

Banks cleared his throat. "*Non, mon colonel,*" he said. Then he said: "Your pardon, *mon colonel*——"

"What is it?"

"We have a task to perform in the desert—to bury a man called Calito, who was a friend of a friend of ours. We gave our promise to bury him."

Buzz said: "There is an armoured car, *mon colonel*, out there on the desert. I could fix it and take Banks out there to do the job."

"You a mechanic, *hein?*" said Mentier. Buzz nodded eagerly. "Go out there. I have set some nincompoops on trying to mend it. You will go out there and help them fix it. I will give you twelve hours only!"

Banks looked uncertainly at Mentier. "Your pardon, *mon colonel*, I would like to——"

"You are assistant mechanic to the American. Take the Chinese with you—go, at once!"

Mentier turned away and began issuing orders to the men to take over the smouldering camp. Only faint explosions were coming now from the ammunition dump at the other side of the camp.

The three pals saluted and turned away.

They were well out on the desert when Banks said: "I thought it wasn't going to work—the Jardin act, I mean."

The Englishman felt weak about the legs. He had been on the go for nearly forty hours.

"How far to the armoured car, Sen?" he asked.

"Oh, about two hours' walk maybe—no, it isn't. It's two minutes. Look!" He pointed to where a small cloud of dust came mushrooming out of the red eye of the setting sun.

"Holy smoke," said Buzz. "They fixed it. They're bringin' it in."

The car jounced up and they stopped it, their Mausers out. Two wide-eyed Legionnaires got out. Buzz said: "We're takin' this bus, fellers."

"This is mutiny!" said the fat Czech sergeant.

"Okay, go tell Mentier that. Tell him we deserted, too, will ya," growled Banks. They got in and turned the car around and went bouncing out to bury Calito in response to a brave gal's dying wish.

As the Yank held the car at full gallop, Banks said: "Ninety days, huh? I couldn't believe it."

"Yeah, you were gonna suggest one hundred and ninety days until I hoofed ya, you stoopid! The colonel can lose count, can't he?"

"According to the Czech sergeant we're mutineers now," said Sen. "The colonel will start using his counting right and give us the extra hundred when he hears the Czech's story."

Banks didn't answer. When the other two looked at him, he was snoring his head off and jouncing around like a drum in a pea, or vice versa, or something . . .

THE END

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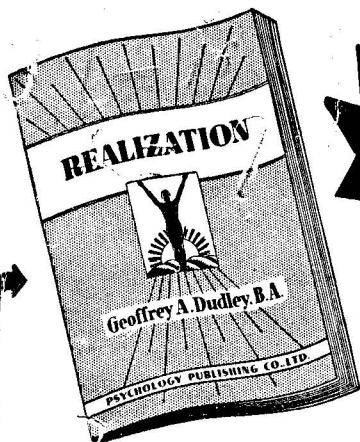
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