

J. D. NEWSOM

*gives us another of his famous yarns
of the French Foreign Legion*

STRICTLY PRIVATE



You Can't Bully Legionaires—Not Even if You're Commanding Officer of a Little Desert Outpost on the Edge of the Great Sahara

WHEN Legionaire Best elbowed his way into the canteen he found Le Blanc and Heinz, along with the rest of A Section, drinking up six weeks' back-pay.

A Section had just come in off patrol through the Djebel Hadoub foothills—a sun-blasted wilderness on the edge of the great Sahara which a camel itself, despite its alleged sobriety, would find rather arid.

The Legionaires were making up for lost time. They were pouring red canteen

wine down their throats as though they were trying to put out an inner fire.

Eight bottles stood in a row on the table in front of Le Blanc and Heinz. They had unbuttoned their tunics and loosened their belts. Their kepis were pushed onto the backs of their heads. Hot, sweating, glassy eyed, they were banging their empty mugs on the table as they brayed the chorus of a particularly objectionable marching song. It had to do with the diversified amours of a mythical lady called "Alphonsine," who had had the good fortune to take up her residence at Ain-Halwa, the oasis where

Detachment Number Eleven of the French Foreign Legion was stationed.

The detachment was very proud of that song, reserving it for special occasions such as the liquefaction of six weeks' back-pay.

Best, who had not left Ain-Halwa, and had no arrears of pay to collect, was cold sober—and like most young Americans, he didn't relish the condition.

"You lice," he said amiably, shoving Le Blanc and Heinz aside and squeezing in on the bench between them. "So this is how you treat me nowadays? The last time I had any money did you have to stay out in the cold while I guzzled all alone? Not so's you'd notice it. 'Comrades in arms,' I said in my foolish, open-hearted way, 'comrades, what is mine is yours. Come, let us drink.' And, by heck, we drank!" He grabbed Le Blanc's mug and drained it dry at one gulp.

Heinz, a short, bull-necked German with a solemn countenance, refilled the mug. "Ve couldn't wait," he apologized. "Fife hundred kilometers, we have got in our legs this time, and swallowing dust all the way. *Gott in Himmel*, it was hot."

"I hope you roast," retorted Best. He banged the tin *gamelle* on the table. "More! Fill her up. I've been in the cooler for the past five days and I'm full of news. Full of the worst kind of news!" Le Blanc, a lean red-bearded Frenchman who called Paris his home town, threw back his head and roared with laughter. "You have been in the guardroom for five days!" he cried. "What for, my old one? I cannot, I will not, believe it!"

"Who said 'guardroom'? I mean down in the cells. Solitary confinement, if that means anything to your atrophied brain. I've been delousing myself ever since I came out. That's why you couldn't find me—if you so much as looked. Believe me, I was crawling."

Le Blanc ran his fingers through his short red beard. His eyes were round with astonishment. "You make the joshing with me," he protested, laying a large freckled hand on Best's arm. "You—in solitary confinement. But it is an absurdity. I do not swallow that fish."

"Wait till I tell you—you'll throw a fit.

It seems I forgot to come to the salute six paces from this rat."

"He talks in riddles," snorted Le Blanc. "Pour him another drink, Heinz. It will perhaps sober him up."

"He is not drunk," declared Heinz, who was always literal minded, "and I can see he speaks der truth. Look: you can see the bite marks all red on the back of his neck and his wrists."

"And that's nothing," Best assured them. "Suffering cats! Wait till you see my chest! I was eaten alive. Even the old sergeant-major was frothing at the mouth. But he couldn't do a damn thing about it. Orders is orders. Down I went. Five days! I'd like to wring that little squirt's neck."

"It must be that we haf a new officer," concluded Heinz, taking off his kepi and scratching the top of his shaved head. "Is that what you mean, Best? A new officer——"

He was interrupted by a loud rapping on the door of the canteen. The shouting and the singing died away instantly. On the threshold stood the orderly sergeant, a hatchet-faced veteran with a waxed mustache sticking straight out across his cheeks.

"Well, you hyenas," he demanded, "having a nice time, are you? All right. Listen to me: the lieutenant wants that song to stop immediately. The lieutenant objects to that song, which he considers salacious and foul. If you haven't enough sense to shut your traps and to keep them shut, the lieutenant will have this canteen closed. And that's that."

An indignant clamor greeted this threat. The sergeant shrugged his shoulders. In his eyes there was a look of long suffering bewilderment.

"Easy, my infants," he said in a more confidential manner. "I didn't make the order. I'm simply telling you. I've sung that song myself many a time, but when an officer says no, it's *no*—and that's all there is to it. Try something else."

"What is this outfit supposed to be?" cried a flabbergasted trooper. "A children's nursery or a Sunday school class?"

Sergeant Tolbiac cupped his hands about his mouth. "Give 'Alphonsine' a rest," he urged in a hoarse whisper. "I don't want

to spoil your fun—you ought to know that, confound you—but what's the matter with 'The Lieutenant's Bride'? Try that!" Squaring his shoulders, he barked in his finest parade ground voice, "Detachment! Stand at ease! *Disposez!*" Then the sergeant turned on his heel and marched away, erect and as stiff as a ramrod, before any more embarrassing questions could be hurled at him.

FOR a moment a heavy silence weighed down upon the canteen, then, abruptly, someone began to chuckle. It spread, it grew into a mighty shout which made the walls rock.

A trooper jumped up onto a bench and waved his arms above his head, beating time as he chanted the opening verse of "The Lieutenant's Bride".

*"Ah, que la vie est belle,
Pour une jeune mariée!"*

The rest of that song is no better than it need be. Fifty leathery throats bellowed it with savage delight.

"There's your answer," grunted Best. "New officer. A dear little stranger." He spoke through clenched teeth. "Just the cutest thing you ever set eyes on. He breezed in about ten days after you pulled out, you lucky stiffs. He's too sweet for words! Scented handkerchiefs which he holds to his nose when he inspects our huts, silk shirts, a pomade. And mean! *Wow!* D'you know what he did right off the bat? Pitched into old Sergeant-Major Bourin. Called him a slack, inefficient buffoon—right on parade. He said that to Bourin, who's been running this outfit like clockwork for eighteen months! It's a crime!"

He was so mad that he sputtered incoherently. He grabbed up the nearest of the eight bottles and held it to his lips. To make matters worse the bottle was empty.

"Get me a drink, for the love of Pete!" the American shouted. "You guys get all the good breaks. You've been away for six weeks, gadding about in the open. We've been stewing in this damn dump, trying to keep this doggone loogie from starting a mutiny. Everybody's sick of him. He'll

bust things wide open if he ain't careful—and then, I'll bet, he'll turn around and put the blame on old man Bourin."



Heinz fought his way to the counter and came back with four more bottles tucked beneath his arms.

"What for should they send an officer to command the detachment?" he lamented. "Forty men—that isn't an officer's command. And he called Bourin inefficient! *Du Herr Ye!* What did the old man do? Exblode?"

"Aw, he's a gentleman, even if he is a sergeant-major. He took it standing up. Smart as a whip. Didn't bat an eyelash. In his boots I'd go crazy. According to this new squirt everything is wrong: discipline, cleanliness, equipment, stores. You can't name a single thing he hasn't picked to pieces. He's the one and only walking compendium of all military knowledge."

"And Bourin has been in the Legion twenty-two years!" laughed Le Blanc. "Still, it may be good for him. One is told on good authority that humility is a virtue."

"That's one thing this new coot hasn't got: humility. Cocksure! You might think he'd invented the Legion. And he wants to reform us. Get that? That's why he stopped us singing 'Alphonsine.' He's going to reform the degenerate Legionaires, the good-for-nothing scoundrels! He's been threatening to close the canteen for the last couple of weeks."

"That would be a sad blow," drawled Le Blanc, fishing a crumpled cigarette out of the lining of his kepi. "If he closes the canteen I shall feel compelled to rebuke this strange creature. What is it called, do you know?"

"Do I know!" yelled Best. "I'll never forget it. It's a mile long and it fits him down to the ground: Gontrand de Montsault de Baillage. That's him all over—Gontrand. The complete aristocrat. So damned haughty, don't you know. So very refined, haw, haw!" His eyes blazed as he

spoke. "Legionaires are the scum of the earth. If you didn't know it you'll soon find out. Leave it to Gontrand to tell you where you get off. Say," he broke off, staring hard at LeBlanc "what's the matter with you? Where's the ghost?"

LE BLANC had turned chalk-white. He sat bolt upright, gaping open-mouthed at Best, while the flaming match he was holding scorched his fingertips. He threw the charred stick away and passed his hand over his eyes. And his hand shook.

"My old one," he pleaded, "would you mind repeating that name again? There is the great noise in here, and I have had so much to drink that my brain she is not functioning properly."

"Maybe we ought to get him out in the fresh air," suggested Heinz. "To me he looks sick. When der freckles begin to show on a man's cheeks——"

"Heinz, *nom de Dieu*, shut up, will you!" rasped Le Blanc. "I want to find out who Best is talking about. What was that name?"

"Gontrand de Monsault de Baillage; Lieutenant of the French Foreign Legion, commanding, at the present moment, the Eleventh Detachment of the Third Battalion of the First Regiment. If you want any more details——"

Le Blanc's great fist crashed down on the table. His red beard bristled as he shouted: "I need no more details. I know all about that little cretin. Gontrand an aristocrat? Pah! An upstart. A tenth-rate—what do you call it in your jargon?—squire. A clodhopper. I did not think he had brains enough to pass the final examinations at the military college. But he did not get far. That is some consolation. An infantry officer! And he expected to become a gunner. Fool! I knew he could not get high marks *Ah, lala!* I shall pull his ears if he does not behave, the young Gontrand!"

"*Mein Gott!*" exclaimed Heinz, befuddled by this unexpected outburst. "You know of him then?"

Le Blanc helped himself to a mugful of wine and dashed the drops out of his mustache with a sweep of the back of his hand.

"Of course I know him!" he retorted.

"His people were the laughing stock of Paris. They would have given their shirts to get into society, whatever that may be. Funny? *Mon Dieu!* It was the funniest thing since the Panama Canal scandals. Gontrand's father used to give me tips on the stock market on the off chance I might invite him and his wife to my house . . . And this lad sent you to the cells for five days did he? Wait till I see him!"

"Say, who are you trying to kid?" jeered Best. "Be yourself, Le Blanc. You're a soldier of the second class."

"Yes, my friend, but there was a time when I was a member of the Jockey Club!" shouted Le Blanc, growing more and more excited. "I drove my own four-in-hand to the Drags, *sacré bleu!* I am disgracefully inebriated at the present moment or I should not open my mouth. *In vino veritas.* The great confession. The Princesse de Ligne used to call me Paul, and as for the Prince of Wales——"

"Don't," pleaded Best. "I can't stand it. And anyway, I don't give a curse who you are, Soldier Le Blanc. You can't impress me by shaking your family tree in my face. I'm a self-made man, I am."

Sticking out his chest, the American thrust one hand inside his tunic and placed his other hand behind his back. "As a graduate of the Harvard Law School," he announced in a deep, rumbling voice, "I acknowledge no superiors, sir. None, sir. No, sir! I fell; but angels may fall—and I have nothing but scorn for the tawdry and decadent society to which you refer with so much conceit."

"Pah!" cried Le Blanc. "A lawyer! I thought as much. But we were talking about Gontrand——"

"A lie, sir!" The American interrupted the other Legionaire. "A downright distortion of the—hic!—the truth! We were discussing your coaching days and the Prince of Wales. Legionaire Le Blanc and the Prince of Wales! Fairy stories for the feeble-minded. . . ."

The heat, the noise and the wine had set the brains of the two Legionaires on fire. They were having a grand time. If Heinz had not been on hand to separate them Best and Le Blanc would have fought it out there and then for the fun

of the thing. Heinz, fortunately, was a steadying influence. He could drink more than any other man in the detachment without ever losing his matter-of-fact outlook on life.

"Harvard and the Prince of Vales," he told them, "dot's nothing. I was a sailor before I choined the Legion, *und* dot's something to be proud of. Let's have one more bottle. I still got a few sous left."

Before the bull-necked German could squirm his way off the bench, a commotion occurred in the doorway. Somebody blew a shrill blast on a whistle. Somebody else thundered "Silence! Officer's inspection! Detachment—'tention!"

And there was silence.

ON THE threshold stood Lieutenant de Baillage: a tall, slender young man, slightly caved in at the waist, slightly round shouldered; a very bored, very superior young man, who gazed with evident disgust at the roomful of ungirt, perspiring Legionaires.

Behind him, like a red harvest moon, loomed the anxious, glistening countenance of Sergeant-Major Bourin, whose lips seemed to be moving in silent prayer.

"*Sacré bleu!*" breathed Le Blanc, clutching Best's arm. "It is Gontrand!"

Best trod heavily on his foot.

A full minute dragged by. Without haste De Baillage tucked his silver-mounted riding crop beneath his armpit and folded his gloved hands behind his back. The sound of the flies buzzing about close to the ceiling became painfully audible. The Legionaires, with the sergeant-major's baleful eyes upon them, stood like rock.

The lieutenant drew a handkerchief from his cuff and wiped his lips.

"Fop!" whispered Le Blanc, his red beard sticking straight out. "Monkey!"

Again Best's iron-shod heel mashed his toes.

The lieutenant cleared his throat.

"*Ainsi!*" he drawled with elaborate sarcasm. "So I have come in person to instil a little decency into your putrescent souls! Well, here I am at last—ready to deal with you. It's high time you realized that there is someone in authority over you who will

not tolerate any more of your antics. We'll have discipline," he added, his voice rising sharply — "we'll have discipline if I have to send every one of you to the rock pile! Are you trying to defy me, you filthy pigs?"



Not a man stirred, but from somewhere at the back of the room, clear and unmistakable, came a gurgling long drawn grunt. It told the new lieutenant, more explicitly than words could have done, what the stony-faced Legionaires thought of him and his handkerchiefs and his superior manner.

De Baillage's lips set in a thin, bloodless line, and two bright-red spots appeared on his cheekbones. The blank faces of the troopers confronted him like a stone wall. He realized, as he had realized many times since he had reached the Ain-Halwa blockhouse, that he could make no impression whatsoever upon these hard-bitten, sullen men. He couldn't get at them; couldn't impress them with a sense of his own importance. They were very different from the young conscripts he had dealt with in France before his transfer to the Legion. These men, though they went through all the outward motions of obedience, despised him. In this presence he felt ill at ease, and unpleasantly aware of the fact that, in case of trouble, he stood alone. Headquarters was two hundred kilometers away, across a dusty plain, over a range of blue hills. . . .

The lieutenant knew that he was cut off from the outside world, shut in upon himself, at the mercy of the most crapulous gang of cutthroats he had ever set eyes upon. Because they did not cringe in his presence, because he was belittled by their indifference, he hated them with a malignant fury which was not very far removed from fear.

Abruptly he wheeled upon the sergeant-major. "These are what you are pleased to call well trained men, are they?" he exclaimed. "You old fool! You stupid, wheezing fool, can't you see there's not a

shred of discipline left? You ought to have been kicked out of the Army long ago. You're senile!"

Old Bourin's jaw set tight. He was too good a soldier to argue with an officer, even though the latter chose to violate every rule of military etiquette. No officer worthy of his salt would have spoken to a sergeant-major in that insulting fashion. But this cad seemed to think he could ride roughshod over everybody and everything. For six weeks he had been playing havoc with the detachment. It couldn't last.

"*Mon Lieutenant,*" the sergeant-major pointed out, "I don't yet see what you are complaining about. Most of these men have been out on patrol for weeks. Surely, they're entitled to a little relaxation——"

"If you call their debauched, animal-like conduct 'relaxation' you're as bad, if not worse than they are," rasped the incensed De Baillage. "I'll drill some self-respect into them and into you, too, *par Dieu*, if it's the last thing I do on earth! This canteen is closed until further orders. Every man present will be confined to barracks for a week. Sergeant-Major make a note of their names as they file out!"

"Very good, *mon Lieutenant,*" sighed Bourin. "Just as you say." He moistened the point of a pencil on his tongue, and held it poised over his notebook. "Come on," he grumbled. "File out. The canteen's closed."

FOR a fraction of a second no one moved, and a startled look crept into the lieutenant's eyes. He stepped back a pace, putting Bourin's broad shoulder between him and the Legionaires.

The ice was suddenly broken by Le Blanc who was too hot-headed and irrational, and far too full of red wine to bother about consequences. Ever since De Baillage had set foot in the room, Le Blanc had been growing more and more restive, despite Best's efforts to keep him in check. The injustice of the sentence made the red-bearded Frenchman's temper boil over. There was nothing half-hearted about his reaction. He tore himself away from Best and Heinz, vaulted clear across the table and barged down the aisle, sweep-

ing the Legionaires out of his path as he called out, "One moment, Sergeant-Major! I've got a few words to say to this officer of ours."

Le Blanc spoke in a crisp, business-like voice which completely took the wind out of Bourin's sails. Inarticulate sounds came from the sergeant-major's throat, but he was too overwhelmed by the enormity of Le Blanc's crime to be of any assistance to his commanding officer.

In three strides Le Blanc reached the lieutenant. Spraddle-legged, arms akimbo, his red beard jutting truculently forward, he snapped, "Look here, Gontrand, this has gone far enough. You're making an ass of yourself, my good fellow."

De Baillage quivered with rage. He was so mad that he forgot his latent fear of the Legionaires. Never before had a damned private dared to call him an ass. It was unheard of! Monstrous! Another proof of Sergeant-Major Bourin's inefficiency.

"How dare you call me an ass!" the enraged lieutenant spluttered. "You must be out of your mind. I'll have you arrested, you insolent rascal. You'll finish your days with the penal battalion for this."

"Don't be so petulant," retorted Le Blanc. "You're an officer now, my lad, and you must try to act like one. You shouldn't meddle with the orderly sergeant's job; your place isn't in the canteen. If you come in here hunting for trouble you're sure to find plenty. You can't bully Legionaires, Gontrand; and you can't frighten them into respecting you. If you have any common sense you——"

All at once De Baillage, whose eyes had been growing rounder and rounder, let out a yelp, "*Mon Dieu!* Paul!"

"Of course it's Paul, you cretin," snorted Le Blanc. "It's taken you all this time to recognize a man who used to give you pocket money! What's the matter with you, my poor fellow? Go on; run along now; you've been making yourself ridiculous."

De Baillage glared helplessly at his tormentor. Behind the lean, sun-blackened Legionaire of the second class, who called himself "Le Blanc," he saw the hazy outline of the man who had once been the

most brilliant, most erratic leader of Parisian society: Paul de Pernardin; the man who, for no reason, out of sheer boredom, had deeded his property to his head gardener and had vanished into thin air, leaving behind an explosive "last will and testament," flaying the hypocrisy, the sham and the glittering dreariness of so-called "high society" of France. And this man today was a sweating, stinking soldier of the second class of the Foreign Legion—answering to the common name of "Le Blanc."

A WAVE of disgust swept over De Baillage as he recalled how he had fawned upon and flattered this beast. Now, however, the tables were turned. Paul de Pernardin was dead; and the man who now called himself "Le Blanc" was only a common soldier. In the Legion there were only officers and men—and the men were in duty bound to obey their officers.

"You'll remember who you're speaking to!" barked the lieutenant. "When your advice is needed you'll probably be granted a commission. Meanwhile, you'll stand at attention in the presence of your commanding officer, do you hear?"

Grinning from ear to ear, Le Blanc came up to the *garde à vous*. "There you are!" he chuckled. "How does that suit you? Discipline has been maintained; that's the big issue, isn't it? Now listen to me, Gontrand: you're acting like a child suffering from a bad attack of colic. It runs in your family, I admit, but that's no reason——"

De Baillage, driven frantic by the sound of that taunting voice, suddenly reached the end of his endurance. His hand closed on the riding crop tucked beneath his arm. He struck before he himself knew what he was doing.

The lash whistled through the air. It caught Le Blanc full in the face, ripping the flesh of his cheeks. Dazed by the blow, he rocked back on his heels, and as he swayed unsteadily, De Baillage slashed him again and again, cutting him to ribbons.

Blood poured down into Le Blanc's eyes. He could not see to defend himself. He tripped and fell to his knees. As he did so,

De Baillage reversed the riding crop and brought the loaded knob crashing down onto his skull. Le Blanc rolled over, senseless, at the



lieutenant's feet.

The whole thing had not lasted fifteen seconds.

De Baillage's heart was beating like a triphammer against his ribs. He was filled with a giant's strength. Single-handed, he felt, he could have subdued the entire detachment.

"Now then!" he cried. "We'll have no mutiny tonight! Fall in the first four men. Pick up that *salopard* and carry him over to the guardhouse."

A growl answered him. The atmosphere in that smoke-filled room was charged with dynamite. One spark would have sent De Baillage hurtling into oblivion, torn to pieces by an angry, snarling pack. But Sergeant-Major Bourin was too old a hand at the game to be caught napping by his own men.

He stepped forward, interposing himself between the troopers and the lieutenant.

"Steady!" he commanded without raising his voice. "Steady the Eleventh." The Legionnaires saw his right eyelid flutter as he spoke. "You're going to do as you're told. You're going to file out quietly, and——" his eyelid fluttered again—"you'll kindly remember that there is still such a thing as military law which we are, *all of us*, supposed to obey. Even though one man has broken the law, that is no reason why *you* should disgrace yourselves."

The Legionnaires understood. The growling subsided. Four troopers took hold of Le Blanc and carted him away. The others filed out of the canteen one by one. They did not go cheerfully, but they went, nevertheless, and the sergeant-major checked them off as they marched past him.

"Twenty-eight men," he announced

briskly, closing his notebook. "All confined to barracks for a period of one week. Is that right *mon Lieutenant?*"

"Quite right," snapped De Baillage. "Except in the case of that one man—whatever his name is."

"Number Eight-One-Five-Four-Four Soldier Le Blanc, *mon Lieutenant.*"

"Le Blanc? Is that his name? I see." De Baillage drew a deep breath. "Confound him!" he exclaimed, "I can't help it—it's his own fault. You'll hold him in the cells for court martial."

"Quite so," agreed the sergeant-major. "Just as you say, *mon Lieutenant.* Anything else, *mon Lieutenant?*"

"Why," thought De Baillage, staring hard at Bourin's impassive countenance, "why, the swine is laughing at me!" And all at once he felt weak and alone and apprehensive. The fury with which he had attacked Le Blanc filled him with shame. But it was too late to turn back.

"No, there's nothing else!" he snapped. "But if you are not very careful, sergeant-major, if I find you siding with the men instead of helping me drill some discipline into their thick heads, I'll have those stripes off your arm in a month. There's no shortage of good sergeant-majors at the depot."

IT WAS close on one o'clock when Lieutenant de Baillage finished the draft of his confidential report to headquarters.

Yawning, he sat back in his chair and skimmed rapidly through the closely written pages. Several times he nodded his head, smiling at his own handiwork. It was a good report, terse, lucid and optimistic.

Ten days had gone by since he had closed the canteen and sent the man called "Le Blanc" to the cells. Since then he had had no trouble with the Legionnaires. They were ready to eat out of his hand. When he gave an order, they almost fell over themselves in their eagerness to get things done. In another month, as soon as the depot sent him a new sergeant-major to take Bourin's place, the detachment would be really efficient. His other bugbear, Le Blanc, whose presence in the cells made

him feel vaguely uncomfortable, was going back to the base in a day or so with the supply convoy.

De Baillage clipped the pages of the report together and slipped it into an envelope, ready to be handed over to the convoy officer when the latter arrived. He blew out the kerosene lamp, took off his dressing gown and groped his way across the room to his camp bed.

The night was very quiet. He heard the slow, measured tread of the sentry posted outside his hut: ten paces up—halt—right about—ten paces back. From the stables across the yard came the rattle of an iron chain.

Through the front window, looking across the parade ground, he caught a glimpse of the outer wall of the block-house, white and shimmering in the moonlight, its embrasures standing out sharply against the starry sky. Through the window on the other side of the room a shaft of moonlight, slanting over a jet-black roof, poured into the room.

De Baillage turned his back to the light, curled himself up into a tight ball and dozed off. Then a board creaked, and the drowsiness which had been creeping over the lieutenant's brain was dispelled in an instant. At first, thinking it was nothing more than the crackling of the heat-dried furniture, he refused to open his eyes. But his straining ears caught another sound—a faint, scratching noise, as of cloth being dragged over a rough surface.

His eyes flew open. He sat bolt upright in bed. Someone was standing over him. Another man, black against the moonlight, was crawling over the sill of the back window.

De Baillage opened his mouth to call out for the sentry, but before he could make a sound the cold, round muzzle of his own revolver was thrust between his teeth. The foresight of the gun gashed his upper lip.

"Shut up, you louse!" ordered a voice. "If you let out one squeal I'll put a bullet into your nut. Quiet. Got any matches, Heinz? Light that damn lamp. You don't have to be all night about it either."

De Baillage said nothing, for the gun muzzle was pressing down heavily on his

tongue. A match flared. Legionaire Heinz, the bull-necked German, fumbled with the lamp chimney. A moment later a flood of mellow light filled the room. Behind the gun, tight jawed and grim, stood Legionaire Best, the American.

"You rat!" he went on, addressing the lieutenant. "You're going to get up and come with us. You've got an urgent engagement behind the stables."

Outside the hut the sentry tramped his beat at the same unhurried pace, and the sand cried out beneath his hobnailed boots.

"I wouldn't if I were you," cautioned Best, reading the lieutenant's thoughts. "So far as you're concerned that sentry might as well be a million miles away. This is strictly private—between you and the Legionaires of the Eleventh Detachment. . . . Got that gag handy, Heinz? Bring it over."

Heinz drew a wad of dirty rags from his pocket and gave it to the American.

"It isn't as white as one of your handkerchiefs, *mon Lieutenant*," Best chuckled, "but maybe you like the smell of shoe polish. I clean my boots with this rag."

"This is an infamous outrage!" gurgled De Baillage, as soon as Best took the revolver from between his teeth. "I refuse to allow—"

"You're refusing nothing," retorted Best, jamming the gun muzzle against the frightened lieutenant's ear. "You're going to do as you're told, or, by gosh, I'll let daylight into you."

"But you can't do this!" stammered De Baillage, hoping against hope that the sentry would hear him. "You can't, I tell you! Murdering your own officer! If it's a joke—"

"Aw, was it a joke when you horse-whipped Le Blanc?" jeered Best. "Well, this is the same kind of a joke."

De Baillage tried to gain a little more time. "Please!" he begged, wringing his hands. "Please! I don't know what you're talking about. What are you going to do to me?"

Heinz, who had edged in behind the lieutenant suddenly caught him by the hair, jerked back his head, and stuffed the dirty rag into his mouth. A muffled yelp welled

up in De Baillage's throat, but nothing louder than a moan passed his lips.

"Save your breath," urged Heinz. "You'll need it." He tied the rag in a tight knot behind De Baillage's head. "Now let's have your hands. Behind your back. We'll have you all trussed up like a spring chicken before we're through." He dug the lieutenant in the spine. "Come on, *grande vache*, don't keep me waiting."

AS SOON as De Baillage's hands were securely tied, Best tossed the revolver onto the bed. He rummaged about the room until he found the lieutenant's riding crop.

"Handy little weapon, ain't it?" the American said to Heinz. "Flexible, strong, well balanced. What more could a guy ask for?"



"*Und* look at the silver on the handle!" grunted Heinz. "It must be worth a lot of money."

Seeing the two Legionaires with their heads close together as they examined the riding crop, De Baillage decided that the time had come for him to make a desperate break for life and liberty. He struggled to his feet and tottered toward the window.

The lieutenant didn't get far. A resounding smack over the ear sent him sprawling on the cot. He made as much noise as possible, but the sentry refused to hear the commotion; he had come to a halt outside the hut, and was softly humming a barrack room ditty—off key. The top of his kepi showed above the windowsill, nevertheless, he heard nothing.

De Baillage gave up the ghost. This was the end. He was quite sure he was going to die. Very well then, he would show these swine how a gentleman of France went to meet his fate. He squared his shoulders and raised his chin. Unfortunately his captors failed to note the change in his bearing.

Best had gone over to the writing desk

and was pulling the confidential report out of its envelope. "Here we are, Heinz," he exclaimed. "Here's the dope. It's just what this poor coot would write! Bourin is a moral coward—can you tie that? Yep, it's here in black and white. His timidity in dealing with the troublemakers almost destroyed the morale of the Ain-Halwa garrison."

Heinz shrugged his shoulders. "*Dum-kopf!*" he snorted. "Old Bourin is worth ten of him."

"But you'll be pleased to hear," Best went on, "that our bold looie—damn his black soul!—has the situation well in hand. The ringleader is in solitary confinement awaiting court martial, charged with 'insubordinate conduct' which would have engendered a mutinous outbreak if this little squirt of an officer hadn't been so brave and so fine."

Then the American expressed his opinion of the report in one short, blunt word, stuffed the document into his pocket, and blew out the light.

"Let's go, kid," he added. "Gang's waiting."

De Baillage tried to hold back, but they handled him roughly, dragging him out through the back window as though he were a bag of meal. Once they reached the ground, they grabbed him by the elbows and rushed him along at a swift pace.

Two minutes later they reached a narrow courtyard behind the stables. At one end stood the horse trough, at the other the washbench where the troopers laundered their clothes. Midway down the alley, Best and Heinz stopped and shoved their captive up against the wall with the moonlight shining full in his eyes.

It seemed to him that several men were crouching in the strip of blue shadow by the stables, but the only sound he heard was the roaring of the blood in his ears.

"Le Blanc!" Best called out. "Come on over. Friend of yours wants to see you."

De Baillage's heart missed a beat. Beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead and streamed down his cheeks. If Le Blanc had been let out of his cell it could mean but one thing: the whole garrison was leagued against him. Fear clutched at his throat with icy fingers, and his legs

threatened to give way. He tried to spit out the rag wedged between his teeth, but only succeeded in half strangling himself. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he choked.

"Don't cry," urged Heinz. "You ain't worth it."

LE BLANC had stepped out of the shadows and was striding across the alley. In the moonlight the crisscrossed scars on his face stood out in livid welts. A pair of filthy canvas trousers were tied about his waist with a piece of string. He wore no other clothes. He was so emaciated that his ribs looked as though they were about to burst through his tightly drawn skin.

The three troopers shook hands.

"Here's your man," said Best, "and here's your riding crop. Go to it; beat him up, croak him—just suit yourself. The sky's the limit."

Le Blanc made the switch whistle through the air and brought it down with a smack—against his own leg. "That feels familiar," the red-bearded Frenchman confessed. "I might have known you two imbeciles would devise some such scheme. You're crazy—and so am I. *Mon Dieu!* It is good to be out of that cell. It was as steamy as a Turkish bath down there."

Five minutes earlier two of the guards had unlocked the door to his cell, and had whispered to him to come out. Being a wise man he had asked no questions.

"Sure we're grazy," agreed Heinz. "But the convoy comes in tomorrow, and you would haf been sent down to the base for trial. Nobody wants that to happen. The detachment is sick to its stomach of this lieutenant. He makes monkeys of us. He hit you—dot's forbidden. Now you hit him—dot evens the score—"

"Before you start anything," broke in Best, drawing the crumpled sheets of the report from his pocket, "I want you to listen to a few well chosen words culled at random from the writings of our great commander. You can judge for yourself what he thinks of you and of us and of old Bourin. That's why we had to hang around so long: we couldn't jump him until he stopped writing and crawled into bed."

Holding the document close to his eyes,

the American read out the passage bearing upon the Legionnaires and their conduct. From the shadows came a long drawn hiss.

"Silence!" cautioned Heinz. "This is a private affair. Us three and him. Nobody else is present." A piglike grunt came out of nowhere, but the German Legionnaire refused to notice it. He turned to De Baillage and dug him in the ribs, chuckling, "Yust you and us. The detachment it is in bed and asleep, *mon Lieutenant*. Later on, maybe, you can make a report about us: Heinz, Le Blanc and Best. But I don't think you will make out any more reports."

Le Blanc took a step in De Baillage's direction. Abruptly, he stopped and flung the riding crop to the ground.

"I can't hit that worm," he confessed, "not while he's tide up. Let him go."

"He'll squawk," cautioned Best.

"No, he will not!" snorted Le Blanc. "If he does I'll strangle him." He strode up to the lieutenant and tapped him on the chest. "A word in your ear, Gontrand—a question. Are you listening to me or are you too filthily scared to hear anything I'm saying? Take that gag out of his mouth, Best, will you? I want an answer to my question."

"I could kill you," the red-bearded Frenchman went on, to the Lieutenant. "A few days ago I should have done so—but you're not worth the bother. I'm going to give you the thrashing of your life, and afterward do you know what you are going to do? You're going to resign your commission. You're not fit to command Legionnaires, Gontrand. Your place is at home—in France—among the ladies. The Eleventh is too much for you. You could send me to prison, and Best, and Heinz—but you can't put the whole outfit behind the bars, and some bright morning, sooner or later, if you don't clear out, you'll wake up with a bayonet in your neck."

De Baillage winced. He knew quite well that he would be disgraced if the detachment mutinied. The Powers that Be had no sympathy for officers who allowed their men to kick over the traces. The Eleventh had a good record. The battalion commander had assured him that it was one of the

best outfits in the district. If an outbreak occurred while he was on the spot, the troopers, undoubtedly, would suffer, but he would suffer far more, unless he could prove that the trouble was the work of a few ringleaders and not a spontaneous uprising of the entire detachment.

"Does Sergeant-Major Bourin know about this?"

the lieutenant demanded. "Is he a party to this disgraceful behavior?"

"Of course not," retorted Best. "This is, as you might say, strictly



private and confidential—like that report of yours. Forget Bourin! He'd be the first man to rush to your help if he knew you were out here."

De Baillage saw a glimmer of hope shining in the darkness. "You'll be shot, every one of you!" he sputtered. "This is mutiny!"

"Don't you believe it!" the American retorted. "It's what they call 'spring cleaning' where I come from. We're getting rid of a nuisance. When Le Blanc is through dusting you off—you're all through. Get out of here. We don't want you. And don't talk too much when you reach headquarters. It'll look bad if you force the whole gang to testify against you."

"The testimony of mutineers," sneered De Baillage.

"That's where you're wrong. The sentries are all on duty, the orderly sergeant is going his rounds; everything is running smoothly. You couldn't make a mutiny out of this if you tried. This is a good outfit, lieutenant; we're damn proud of it—but you can't whip it into obeying you."

DE BAILLAGE'S self-confidence was slowly returning. These men were unarmed. By their own admission only a few men were involved in this plot. If he could reach the main parade ground and attract the attention of the picket on guard duty, there was still a chance that he could

have these scoundrels safely under lock and key before morning.

Best and Heinz were standing a little to one side, on his left. Le Blanc stood directly in front of him. To his right, the way lay open toward the washbench. Past the bench there was a short passageway leading out onto the parade ground—fifty yards to go!

Gathering himself together, De Baillage struck out wildly at Le Blanc, and leaped sideways, yelling at the top of his lungs, "*Au secours! Help!*" But the lieutenant had tackled too many things at one time, and his coordination was poor. His fist merely grazed Le Blanc's red chin whiskers, and his leap was too short to give him a good start. Something very hard collided against his ear. He tripped over his own feet and went down heels over head, like a shot rabbit.

De Baillage wasn't hurt, however, and he bounced up again just in time to run into a wicked jab which squashed his nose out flat on his cheeks. And that blow did hurt. He did no more shouting that night, for he needed every ounce of his energy to ward off Le Blanc's savage attack.

Blows hailed down upon the lieutenant. He didn't know the first thing about the noble art of self-defense; nor did Le Blanc. Heads down, arms flaying the air, they waded into each other with great fury but little skill. De Baillage used his nails as well as his fists, and one of his blind sweeps ripped the scabs off the scars on Le Blanc's face, covering him with a wet, glistening mask of blood. This gory sight gave the lieutenant fresh courage. He smacked his antagonist across the mouth and followed this up by digging him in the groin.

The pain made Le Blanc grunt. It slowed him down long enough to enable him to see what he was aiming at, and as De Baillage rushed in, Le Blanc clouted him once more on the nose and closed the lieutenant's right eye.

Locked together, chest to chest, they fell to the ground, rolling over and over until they struck the base of the wall. De Baillage came up on top. Kneeling on Le Blanc's chest, holding the red-bearded Legionaire down with one paw, the lieu-

tenant raised his other arm to administer the *coup de grace*. But it never fell. Le Blanc's knees came up and caught De Baillage in the small of the back. He was flung forward over Le Blanc's head. They scrambled to their feet, swaying drunkenly as they closed in. Le Blanc landed one more blow on the lieutenant's nose, then they fell into each other's arms again and went down, scraping their bare shoulders against the stone wall.

Clawing, gouging, biting, kicking, officer and second class Legionaire squirmed and heaved in the dust, which billowed up about them in a luminous cloud. When the commotion subsided Le Blanc was uppermost. He didn't attempt to protect his face, which was being mashed to a red pulp by De Baillage's fists. He caught his opponent by the ears and slammed his head down on the ground.

At the third slam De Baillage, who had been going strong, began to show signs of wear and tear. A moaning cry burst from his bleeding lips. "No! No! Oh, my head!"

"Positively—your head!" muttered Le Blanc.

And *bang!* went the back of De Baillage's skull against the sunbaked earth. He made one last feeble attempt to free himself, pushing against Le Blanc's chest with the flat of his hands, but the effort was unsuccessful. A blinding flash leaped up before the lieutenant's eyes as his head crashed down once more, and all at once he felt himself slipping down faster and faster into a black and aching void.

IT WAS broad daylight when Lieutenant De Baillage recovered consciousness. He was lying in his own bed, in his own room. Versier, his servant, was bending over him applying wet compresses to his throbbing head. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move, he ached all over. He couldn't see out of his right eye which was puffed up like an overripe tomato. He groaned dismally.

Versier, the perfect servant, smiled consolingly. "Monsieur, the Lieutenant, is doing nicely," he soothed. "Monsieur will feel better in a little while. Monsieur has had a very rough night, it would appear."

"I'm so sick!" moaned De Baillage. "So dreadfully sick!"

"It is nothing," Versier assured him. "Monsieur the Lieutenant must have fallen rather heavily, but he will get over it without a doubt."

"I fell?" muttered De Baillage, whose memory was still foggy, "What do you mean—I fell?"

As the lieutenant spoke, startling incidents came pouring back into his mind: the moonlit alleyway; Le Blanc's hairy face black with blood; Best's voice drawling, "Get out of here. We don't want you."

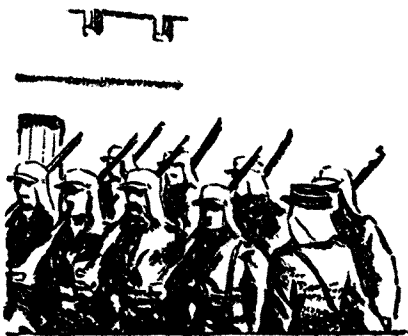
"*Mon Dieu!*" De Baillage exclaimed hoarsely. "How did I get back in here? What happened?"

He listened intently to the sounds drifting in through the open window. He could hear Sergeant-Major Bourin's raucous voice bellowing orders.

"I found Monsieur, the Lieutenant, lying—er—half in and half out of bed," explained Versier, who seemed to be amused at something or other. "Monsieur must have tripped up and struck the edge of the chair. It is covered with the blood——"

"Damn it!" cried De Baillage, catching the servant by the wrist and pointing toward the window. "I want to know what's happening out there!"

Dutifully, Versier looked out onto the parade ground. "The sergeant-major is giving the squads their orders for the morning," he explained. "Number One, A Section, is going off to the rifle butts;



Number Two is to scrub out the stables. Number One, B Section is——"

"But—but—but," floundered De Baillage, who had been expecting a bloody riot. "But I don't understand."

Versier's long, butlerish face expressed

faint but unmistakable disbelief.

"Monsieur, the Lieutenant, fell rather heavily," he pointed out. "Monsieur will feel much better in a little while. The scalp will need a few stitches, I believe; but that need not worry Monsieur, the Lieutenant—the convoy can take him back to hospital without discomfort."

A strange odor had assailed De Baillage's nostrils. He sniffed and sniffed again. The room stank of cognac. The smell was almost overpowering. He struggled up into a sitting position and looked about. On the writing desk he was horrified to see three empty brandy bottles and a glass. The fragments of another bottle lay on the carpet. In among the bits of glass lay his riding crop, broken in two.

"What's all that?" De Baillage gasped, his eyes opening as round and wide as saucers. "Where did those bottles come from?"

Versier shrugged his shoulders. "Monsieur, the Lieutenant, knows best. I have not had time to do anything except care for Monsieur since I came into the room half an hour ago. Monsieur gave me a nasty turn, I confess. I shall be glad when his wounds have been dressed by a doctor."

De Baillage fell back on his pillows. "Fetch the sergeant-major," he ordered. "I want to see him at once!"

A MINUTE later Bourin came into the room. Out of the tail end of his eye he saw the bottles and the glass and the debris on the carpet. He looked accusingly at the lieutenant as he said, "I am very sorry to hear you met with an accident, *mon Lieutenant*. I'm glad it's no worse."

"I—I didn't meet with that kind of an accident," panted De Baillage. "I was kidnaped—nearly beaten to death."

"Really? Kidnaped!" exclaimed the sergeant-major who didn't believe a word his officer was saying. "And who was responsible for this outrage?"

"Le Blanc. That's the man. Le Blanc! He tried to murder me."

Bourin's face relaxed. He stared at the bottles and slowly shook his head. "I think you ought to reconsider that statement, *mon lieutenant*. Le Blanc is in the cells—in

solitary confinement. And *I* have the keys to the cell block."

"They were taken from you——" De Baillage began.

"That's out of the question," the sergeant-major denied quickly. "I sleep with 'em beneath my pillow."

"But he was out, I tell you!" the lieutenant exploded. "He was!"

"Huh! Well, he's right in there now. I saw him myself when I went my rounds this morning."

"He was out last night," insisted De Baillage. "I was kidnaped by Best and Heinz——"

"That's impossible, too," asserted Bourin. "They were on guard duty at the well in the oasis. Sergeant Tolbiac didn't report any absentees. I'm afraid you're wrong, *mon Lieutenant*. What you need is a good sleep, and afterward. . . ."

It was only too clear that he thought De Baillage had gone crazy. The lieutenant squirmed miserably. "Call Sergeant Tolbiac," he cried. "I'm not dreaming. I was kidnaped and then beaten. Those bottles——"

"Less said about them the better," observed Bourin, who knew damn well De Baillage had spent the night drinking like a fish.

Sergeant Tolbiac came in, looking very stiff and stern. He too saw the bottles and the debris and the empty glass.

"Best and Heinz?" he repeated, staring straight into the lieutenant's one sound eye. "Why, they didn't once leave the post! I'd like to see a man of mine leave his post while on guard duty! And what's more I can call ten witnesses to prove it."

"You're sure of it?" demanded Bourin. "You're positive?"

"As sure as I'm standing on my own two feet," lied Tolbiac. "Do you think I'm

in the habit of letting my men wander away like sheep when I'm in charge of a picket, Sergeant-Major?"

Bourin glanced meaningfully at the bottles on the writing desk. "That's all right, Sergeant. I merely wanted to make sure. That'll do, thank you."

He turned toward the lieutenant. "You see," he pointed out, "it's all a bad dream, I'm afraid, *mon Lieutenant*. Wine won't harm you but brandy is bad stuff in this climate. Bad!"

"I haven't touched a drop," protested De Baillage. "I'm as sober as you are!"

Bourin looked sceptical. "Leave it to me," he urged. "We'll hush it up. Tolbiac won't talk, I'll see to that. I don't want my men to know anything about this."

"You old fool! I tell you——"

"Now, now! No hysterics, please. Be calm, *mon Lieutenant*. If I were you I'd get some sleep. You're not well. Your *head* isn't well, if I may say so. If you'll take my advice you'll let me send you down to the base hospital with the convoy. It ought to be here in a few hours. We could—er—say you fell off your horse. . . ."

A sense of utter weariness crept into De Baillage's heart. He loathed Ain-Halwa and everything connected with it. Instinctively, he knew that his case would be laughed out of court if he ever made a complaint. They had him at their mercy, these crapulous Legionnaires and this gruff-spoken sergeant-major who treated his men so harshly. Yet those men seemed ready to go through hell-fire for him. . . . They were incomprehensible people. He was very tired of them all.

"Yes," he sighed, "we could say I fell off my horse. That's it—I did fall off my horse. I'll go back with the convoy. Send in Versier to pack my things. I don't think I'll be coming back this way."

"Valhalla"

a gangster railroad
story

by **T. T. FLYNN**

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