



KISMET IN PICARDY

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THE FOREIGN LEGION IS THE FOREIGN LEGION—WHETHER ON THE BURNING AFRICAN SANDS OR IN THE MUD OF FLANDERS. A GLOWING AFRICAN SUN SAW THE FIRST CHAPTER OF THIS DRAMA—AND A COLLAPSED DUGOUT WALL HID THE LAST FROM CURIOUS AMERICAN EYES

BEN AMOUD swears that Nat'alla will never be allowed to enter the seventh heaven because she will make all the houris jealous; but it is not her beauty alone that causes a stir in the Algerian bazaar of Sidi-bel-Abbes when she sees fit to beat a certain tom tom. The circle of swarthy Arabians in white burnouses who squat on the ancient cobblestones beneath her windows know that the tom tom has a story. At thought of it their piercing black eyes gleam, and they peer at one another from under their hoods with their lips curled back from their white teeth in unholy mirth. Of all the grisly tales brought back from the western front by Spahis, Senegalese and legionnaires of *le premier regiment des etrangers*, none tickles their fancy more than the yarn of that tom tom's cover. It is a tightly stretched bit of exquisitely tanned leather, brought back from the plains of Picardy.

And how do I know the story? I was a private in the Foreign Legion, in the spring of '14—so that's how I came to meet up with Vance Rutledge. He had just come

down from Oran with a detachment of *les bleus*, which was our name for recruits who came from all over creation to do five years in the Legion, at five miserable centimes a day.

You've never seen the big barracks at Sidi-bel-Abbes, have you? You've missed a sight. You should see a batch of forlorn recruits fumbling with the buckles of their packs and staring at those grim, cheerless buildings for the first time! *Nom du bon dieu*, the sun beats down on the white stones of the barrack yard like an open furnace door, and the heat is held in by high, thick walls; but the prospect there for five years lays a chill on the heart like the hand of death. Ah, *oui*—like the hand of death.

Well, Vance was the only American in that batch; and when I saw him looking around I knew what he was thinking. There were men of all sorts came into the Legion at that time—despondent men, army deserters, men with blasted lives, adventurers, and hard-boiled Apache cutthroats, two jumps ahead of the gallows or the guillotine. That tall, blond kid stood out among those recruits—a boy with a queer mixture of

recklessness and aestheticism in his face, as different from many of those hard-biten legionnaires as a grayhound is different from a pack of wolves. So when I saw him fumbling there like a lost soul with his blue tunic and his kepi and the rest of his kit I offered a hand; and he was ready to hug me.

"I'm an awful duffer, I'm afraid," he said to me after I'd explained his kit twice hand-running.

He was fairly helpless, for an ex-football player; being a rich man's son, he'd never been thrown on his own in his life. But I got him straightened away after a bit, and, as he had some francs left, we were heading out of the gate soon afterward, leaving the outfit howling, "*Alles schieb los! A la soupe!*" at the mess hall. No *potage au gamelle* for us that night—not while he had that roll of francs.

NOW, everyone who came to the Legion in those days had a story—and he told me his while the shadows crept out across the sands from Mount Tessala, and the voice of the muezzin was ringing out in a nasal sing song over the flat roofs of the town, calling the faithful to acknowledge Mahomet. It wasn't much of a story—though he thought it was, poor devil! There was a girl—there usually is—and for some reason he'd torn up her picture. That was in Nice, France. Then he'd looked long on the wine when it is red, and had ended up broke in Monte Carlo. By way of retrieving himself he had signed a check, thinking that his dad, back in the States, would make it good—as he had before.

"This time, though," said Vance, tossing me a letter across a café table, "he gave me the gate. *Regardez!*"

The letter was short and sweet. It read: "*I've given you a most extraordinary amount of rope, young man, thinking that you'd eventually round to, go to work, and play ball. As a man you're a good lounge lizard. Work your way home on a cattle boat, and I'll give you a job. Not a cent, though, for gambling debts. Your dad.*"

"So," I said, looking him over, "you took your choice between *caput, finis!*—and the Legion."

"Well, between l'Isle Diable—over that

check, you know!—and the Legion. But it's the same thing, if you ask me." And the tears misted in the kid's eyes.

That was the way things were with him—at the time. He hadn't found himself as yet. He'd been floating along, so to speak, picking flowers along the high spots of life and blowing the petals any which way—*comme ça*. Proof! Now he was up against the real thing, with a double-barreled bang. By the silver statue of St. Michael, I was between two fires, looking at him; for while I knew that the jolt would be the making of him, if he pulled through, there was always the if to consider. The sands of the Sahara cover the bones of a host of forgotten men who were driven into *cafard* by the Legion.

WELL, I didn't stress that that night—and Vance kept on throwing *vin blanc* and *cognac* into his system. At first he was away down in the dumps, and full of choky sobs; then a reaction set in and he was ready to defy the world; and pretty soon, when the cognac had all his incandescent lamps going full blast, he craved action. Any sort of action, from jumping on a table in the *estaminet*, so they could hear him singing the better, to reciting "Jim Bludsoe" from the neck of a camel. He had a way with him, that kid; he could make even the Arabs laugh, and I couldn't reason with him. Off limits or not, he would explore those winding dark alleys as he pleased. So that's how we ended up under Nat'alla's windows, defending ourselves with loose cobblestones, our backs against the wall.

What started it I don't know, except that it was something he did. Anyway, there were a heap of Arabs there, about to make a rush with their knives, and Vance about to heave another stone, when a voice from the window behind us checked the Bedouins dead.

"Aha!" said Vance, looking up. In the half light Nat'alla was a vision. She had most eloquent eyes, had Nat'alla, and a creamy skin of gold and ivory. She wore long yellow trouserlettes of soft silk in lieu of skirts, and a sarong was draped around one shoulder; but the other was bare, and the high Spanish comb in her jet black hair

glinted with jewels. 'Twas no wonder Vance stared.

It was only a second, though. Off came his kepi, and he bowed low. "Cleopatra herself?" he exclaimed. Then he grinned in the way he had, and reached up his hand to her. "I'm sorry I was late," he said in French. "Will you forgive and forget?"



I started to grab him then. He didn't know who he was talking to. Nat'alla was a power in the province. There was a deal of mystery about her; from whence she came no one seemed to know; but she had both Tourareg and Spanish blood, and was ace high with the natives. They treated her as a sort of semi-saint, attributing certain supernatural powers to the girl. It was said of her that she appeared once out of a dust cloud in the desert, when the camels in a caravan had gone seven days without water, and were refusing to rise; and where the me'allim—men of water wisdom—had said there was no water, there she made water appear. Don't ask me how such legends start among those people; they do. Anyway, the French Government catered to her, having an eye to trade, and the colonel and his staff were occasionally her guest at téffin. With enlisted legionnaires she had never been seen.

"Come away from here while she's in good humor," I warned him in English. "You're crowding your luck."

BUT Nat'alla understood English, it appeared. There was something about that boy's infectious grin that had taken her fancy for the moment, too. Down she reached, siezed his hand—and in two shakes we were through the window.

Why did she do it? Not because she fell in love with him, at any rate. A whim, I suppose. It was the damned audacity of that kid that tickled her sense of humor, too, I suppose. Then, she'd been educated on the continent, and the blue tunic of the Legion couldn't hide the earmarks of his

sort from her. Anyway, she clapped her hands, and Arab servants glided into the salon—and then Vance spotted the phonograph. In less than two shakes he had asked her to dance, and they put on a record.

That's the way we were when Von Bissemer came in. I was sitting back on a divan with a long, cool drink in my hand, and Vance was teaching Nat'alla a new tango step when suddenly Von Bissemer stood in the archway.

I can see that fellow yet! A tall, trim officer he was, with cold gray eyes, and a small blond mustache. Neatly waxed it was, too. He had the air about him of a man who had been born with a monocle in his eye—and he wore one that night.

In less than the bat of an eye I was on my feet, standing stiffly at attention. I knew Von Bissemer well. That is, I knew him as the stiffest disciplinarian in the Legion. A cold-blooded aristocrat from some old German family who looked on all enlisted men as dogs and swine. He had come to the Legion as a private, running from some sort of trouble in the German army—and then Nat'alla had fallen for him. Yes, Nat'alla. She loved him, and it was through her influence at headquarters that he received his commission as a lieutenant.

"Here," I thought, "is where we catch it!"

Said Von Bissemer, tapping his leg with a rosewood swagger stick, and smiling without separating his white teeth, "I knew my fiancé was fond of dogs, but I didn't know you fancied this particular breed, Nat'alla."

THE cognac, of course, had something to do with what followed. Vance stopped dancing and looked at Van Bissemer. By the nose of the holy camel, there was hate at first sight, if ever I saw it! Quick as a flash Vance shoved a hand in his pocket, withdrew a silver franc louis, shoved it in his eye, and stared at Von Bissemer.

"Do you know," he said in his best Harvard drawl, "that I really think you'd like my old friend Devonshire? He's quite a rotter, and a bit of an ass, and most awfully stupid—but *you'd* like him!"

I nearly fell through my shoes. Von Bissemer could speak several languages—and

I thought for a moment that the blood would burst through the skin of his face. His smile froze there. Then he stepped to the window and blew a whistle for the military police.

"Before I get through with you," Von Bissemmer gritted, "you'll wish that you'd blown your brains out in Marseilles!"

Nat'alla tried to soften things a bit, saying that Vance could not have grasped the full significance of disrespect to an officer in the Legion; but she might as well have addressed a stone wall. In a minute or two a detail came running, and we were off for cells.

You've read of "black holes" in civilian prisons. We spent that night with thirty others, packed into a cell about twelve feet square. No bunks, no blankets, no air vent save for a small one above the door. One fellow went crazy that night and tried to bash in his head against the wall. The guard strung him up by the thumbs to bring him to reason.

"I guess I spoke out of turn," Vance acknowledged, when the liquor died within him.

He was a sick boy about then, so I didn't rub it in. I knew he was in for sheer down-right hell on earth, and I pitied him.

WHEN morning came, I was sent without even *cafe et pain* to clean an Arab's sewer. But not Vance. He wasn't to escape *gymnastique des bleus*. It was always the same for recruits then. Fall in with full equipment and march to the drill grounds. Then, "*Formez les faisceaux! Sac à terre!*" When knapsacks were discarded and arms stacked, it was "*Pas gymnastique! En avant! Marche!*" That and no more. "At the double—march!" March or die, dog trotting round and round, with the sergeant saying monotonously, "*A droit—droit!*"

I didn't see Vance until first soup call at ten thirty. He was lying on his bunk, spitting blood. His face was a fish-belly white, his eyes black and sunken. Every breath was an agony.

"My God," he wheezed, "this is worse than the Roman galleys; Thirty minutes at a stretch. Running. Men vomiting blood. Sobbing like children. Terrible. If you fell

down that dog of Von Bissemmer kicked you up. See? I'm black and blue. Those who refused—thrown into cells and strung up. Oh my God, why didn't I blow my head off?"

I never felt sorrier for anyone in my life, but that was no time for sympathy. "So?" I said. "You're a quitter, eh?"

He stared. "A quitter, is it? Say, what do I owe these rotten French, anyway? Taking a man in as a soldier and then making him do work that they can't even hire natives to do. A quitter, eh? Well, mark me down as a rebel—anything you like—I'm for beating it out of this as soon as I can get some money."

"Oh!" I said. "You're going to write to dad, eh?"

With that he gave me an ugly look. "I'll see him in hell first!" he exploded.

"Attaboy!" I cried. "In the meantime, keep this in mind—you'll get hardened before long, and then, when you've toughened up, you'll thank your stars some day when you're on the march. That's what the running's for. When the Touaregs are riding on our flanks, God help the poor devil who can't keep up with the column."

"I'll keep up with the column!" he choked out. "Long enough, anyway, to get that devil Von Bissemmer!"

I really think that jibe I gave him about quitting was the turning point for that kid. Anyway, "Long enough to get Von Bissemmer!" became a sort of slogan with him. After the first agonies, he toughened to the



drill. He ate like a wolf, and began to fill out. In spite of the fact that he spent his first two weeks drilling during the day, and going to cells at night, he grew tough as whipcord. At every opportunity Von Bissemmer singled him out for more punishment, but the kid bucked straight ahead. If his shoes had a spot on them he was sent to stack forage for the Spahis. If there was a spot of oil on his gun stock he was given two hours' extra pack drill, with a hundred

pounds of sand on his back. Yet Vance gritted his teeth and stuck it out. At the end of three months you wouldn't have recognized the reckless kid in the tanned, square-shouldered legionnaire who marched at my side.

"He'll not get me!" he promised me. "I'm a better man than he is, down deep, damn his soul."

I KNEW that, by this time; but I knew, too, that the odds were with Von Bissemmer. He had no intention of throwing off his blouse and giving Vance a show, man to man. He'd swank about with his swagger stick when the sergeant was putting his platoon through its paces, and then say something like this:

"The men have done passably well, Sergeant—except that mistake for a man in the third squad." With which he'd point at Vance. "Give him an hour's extra drill for spoiling that last wheel." And he'd smile, without separating his teeth.

It almost came to murder one day when Vance came in from fatigue detail. Mind you, the boy was in fatigue clothes, and had been digging sewers. No chance to bathe as yet. Von Bissemmer ran into him. "Take this man," he said to a sergeant, "and have him scrubbed off with sand under the showers. He's filthy."

I grabbed him when he came out of that, for they'd worked on him with scrub brushes and sand, taking the hide off in patches. He'd have gone straight to Von Bissemmer's quarters, bayonet in hand. But I hustled him out the gate.

"It's just the chance Von Bissemmer is looking for," I told him. "He'd shoot you like a dog before you got within reach. Even if you succeeded it would only mean a firing squad." And I weakened, thinking of the way he'd been lying on his cot of late, staring at the ceiling. It was high time to watch a man when he commenced doing that—in the Legion. Suddenly there'd be a screech, and we'd have a madman on our hands, slashing with a bayonet—or he'd go running straight off into the desert, to be cut up by Arabs.

"You'd better write to your dad," I told him. "Yes, I mean it. Get money and pull your freight. There's nothing but the

prison battalion ahead of you here, with Von Bissemmer on your trail."

HE WAS almost hopeless himself at the moment, and what he would have said I don't know, for just then a young woman came driving along the street in an American car. At sight of her Vance stopped dead and rubbed at his eyes.

"Blix?" he muttered. "In Sidi-bel-Abbes? I'm seeing things."

"Blix?" I said. "Blix who?"

He didn't seem to hear me. Just then Von Bissemmer came around a corner, and doffed his cap. Yes, to the American girl. She stopped, and smiled—and this Von Bissemmer could certainly bow gracefully from the hips! Ah, he was a handsome devil, and a polished devil, too—when it suited him. It suited him then, for Blix was a stunning girl. Her eyes were fairly shining, and he was quite unconscious of the fact that Nat'alla was watching from a window across the way. By the beard of a poilu, *her* eyes were as green as a cat's in the dark!

There was a situation for you—all in a flash. I knew that this was the girl who put the burr under Vance's saddle; I knew it before he spoke, for his face was chalky white under the tan. A tall, dark-haired independent young girl, with carved red lips and a resolute chin. Smiling winsomely at Von Bissemmer, while Vance snarled murderously under his breath, and Nat'alla slowly withdrew behind the curtains, her hand on her heart.

"Wait here!" Vance said, a moment later, when Von Bissemmer tipped his cap and started across the square. Then Vance marched straight toward the machine, calling her name.

I saw Von Bissemmer stop and stare; he seemed about to return, but evidently thought better of it. Meanwhile the girl started, and stared at Vance, with two high spots of color in her cheeks.

What they said I couldn't hear. She didn't smile, though, as she had at Von Bissemmer. Her chin was up, and she seemed to be retorting passionately, disdainfully to whatever he had to say. I could see that he was trembling, too. When he spoke it was with a low vehemence that shook him.

THEY didn't talk over five minutes. Then the girl started her car with a vicious jamb of the levers and whirled by me, her blazing eyes straight ahead. Vance came back to me, biting his lip. We walked on as much as two or three blocks before he opened his lips.

"That's the girl," he ground out then, between his teeth, "the girl whose picture I tore up. We've always scrapped, since we were kids because—because—oh, damn it, I don't really know. Engaged one day and off the next. That time it was serious, though—she went off to a house party in a villa in Nice, with a perfect rotter, and I objected. Said I couldn't dictate to her, and all that sort of thing. Well, that's that—but now she's here. No, it's no happenstance—her uncle is a military attache in Paris. Her father's got oodles of filthy lucre, and she's been in France about as much as she's been in the States. Went to school a year with our colonel's daughter. Well, when I disappeared, she thought of the Legion, and her uncle checked up—just in case. Then she cabled my dad. And that's why she's here."

"With a discharge?" I ventured.

"No. Couldn't pull it. With money to fix things up so I can be smuggled to the coast. Her brother's yacht is in Oran now."

"Then why are you looking so down in the mouth?" I cried. "We can both pull our freight now, man!"

"Billy," he said ruefully, "I didn't think of you. I really didn't. You saw her smiling at that hound of a Von Bissemmer? I spilled the beans, Billy. It seems that she met him last night at the colonel's, shortly after she motored down. He has a title, you know—Baron something or other. I said something, and she came right back at me, and then when I found out that the money wasn't coming from dad—he absolutely refused to come through—why I told her to keep it. I'll be damned if I put myself under obligations to her!"

I'd seen too much of the world to argue with him. When two hot-headed young

idiots strike fire like that, they must work it out alone. They had both been spoiled, and she rebelled at the age-old ball and chain. Reason plays no part whatever between two youngsters like that—it's a hot word, and another, and then chins are up, and they're off to the races.

IN THE meantime I remembered Nat'alla's eyes, and I was hoping that Blix would leave. She didn't, though. She stayed on at the colonel's—and she kept driving around with Von Bissemmer. Sometimes I thought she was doing it merely to rub salt in Vance's wounds, but at others I wasn't so sure. Von Bissemmer, as I've said, was anything but unattractive. And the motives of Blix counted for nothing in Nat'alla's eyes. She'd been thrown over—poof, like that!—and I knew that hell was brewing in her heart.

It was at the end of the second week—and this was in July of '14, with war clouds gathering in Europe—when our platoon got orders to escort the colonel's daughter and her guest to Fort Bismallah, two days' march from Sidi-bel-Abbes. We were sending supplies there, and Blix, we heard, wanted to see something of the desert.

That night Nat'alla sent for me. "Is it true that Mademoiselle Americaine goes with you tomorrow?" she said. "Or is she leaving for Oran?"

I knew, somehow, that Nat'alla was quite certain that Blix was not leaving for Oran; she had heard a rumor, and she merely wished to verify it. So I told her the little I knew.

"So she's not going away!" she said, with her eyes half closed. Her hand clenched. "Of what use is pretense?" she blazed suddenly. *Par le bon dieu*, it was as though a sheet of flame shot from her eyes! "It is not the woman I hate—ah, no, no, no. It is that dog, that ingrate, that renegade German baron. I made him here—yes, I. He was to marry me. A-h-h-h, I could have his heart out!" And she was up and storming around the salon like a tigress, running her hands through her black hair, beating her breasts, shaking with dry sobs. I left her when she motioned me away and threw herself on a divan, biting the pillows and



kicking like a madwoman in her impotent despair.

I HAD a chance for a word with Blix that evening, and I took it. "Make any pretext you like," I said, "but don't go on that trip."

I wouldn't give her any reasons, just urging her to trust me. She kept staring at me, speculatively, curiously, but my features were wooden. She was half angry, in one breath, and wheedling in the next; she tried both pouts and smiles, but neither worked. I didn't intend to involve Nat'alla. All I told her was that this was Africa, and that it would be better for her to stay out of the desert, platoon or no platoon.

"Well, I'll promise this much," she vouchsafed at last, "I'll think it over."

Next morning I was much relieved to hear that she had pleaded a headache, and we were to start without the girls. But Von Bissemmer took the orderly's message with a muttered curse. He got it just as Vance was asking a sergeant for leave to draw a pair of socks before the hike.

"What's that?" snarled Von Bissemmer, overhearing.

"Some one stole my socks last night, sir, and I had to put my shoes on bare feet."

A twisted smile distorted Von Bissemmer's face. "Fall in, dog!" he snapped. "You'll learn to take care of your socks or go without."

Of course there were fellows in the lay-out who had extra socks in their kits, but Von Bissemmer saw to it that no one slipped Vance a pair that day. And it was bad enough with socks between your feet and that burning leather. Overhead a glaring, blazing roaring sun, beating down upon you from a glazed blue sky without a cloud. An inverted steel bowl to confine the merciless heat. Heat swimming like a mist before your eyes. Heat rising from the red-hot sand to sear your eyeballs and transform the saliva in your mouth to balls of white cotton. Red slag-like patches from which wind had blown the sand. Hot gusts of wind from between the endless panorama of sand dunes, whipping gritty, cutting sand through the dead, dry air. Slogging along, with your head down, your face cloth down to your neck, and the sand sifting through to mix

with your flooding sweat, getting under your arm pits, and down the back of your neck. And each step—even with socks—making you think of a furnace door. That's what a march in the desert meant in the Legion.

YOU can imagine what it was without socks. Poor Vance was blistering the soles of his feet before we'd covered a kilometer. Later on, when he began to stumble and shamble like a broken-backed beetle, with his eyes coal black and sunk in the sockets, Von Bissemmer snapped, "Tie him to the wagonette!" By the wrists, mind you. Behind the wagon. When he fell, Vance was dragged. Dragged like a dog. It was "March!" in those days. "March, Legionnaire, march or die!" *C'est terrible, mais c'est la legion!*

"I'll murder him!" Vance groaned at a halt. "I'll murder him if it's the last thing I'm ever able to do."

"You'll get your chance," I thought, remembering Nat'alla. And it came, too, much sooner than I expected. For the Touaregs jumped us about noon, rushing out from behind the sand dunes on their tall rangy, swift camels that compare to the draft animal as an Arabian charger compares to a Percheron.

It was well conceived, that attack. They came at us from all sides, from behind a dozen dunes. Big strapping Touaregs, pirates of the desert, with black veils and burnouses. Bellowing, "Illah el Allah!" and counting any sortie against Christians a holy deed. Wrist swords swishing around their heads, rosaries of ninety beads around their necks, and shot full of *kif*—a form of hashish. Tommy will tell you of the Paythans in the old days, but your Legionnaire can tell you that a Touareg will give you double buckets full of bloody froth in a rush. The strength of a gorilla and the ferocity of a wolverine—that's a Touareg.

I MADE one flying leap for Vance, and I was able to slash his wrist bonds with my bayonet—we filed them razor sharp for our work!—and then we were into a bloody jamb, with squealing camels tumbling down around us, and screeching devils coming at us with three bullets through them. Crawl-

ing over the sand at us, with both legs shot through and through! The column all scattered, and squads forming little last stand circles, here, there and everywhere.

There was a beautiful chance, after a few minutes of this, to get Von Bissemmer. An easy target, not far away. Vance shoved his gun across the rump of a camel, and aimed. There was Von Bissemmer, as cool



as you please—no more flustered than he might have been at parade. A hand on his hip, and sighting his pistol at a big hairy giant who was charging straight at him on a monstrous camel. "Bravo, *mes enfants!*" he was

shouting to his men. And Vance grimaced and shifted his aim. Von Bissemmer's pistol missed fire, but Vance brought the sheik down in a heap with a shot through the head.

"I couldn't do it!" Vance groaned. "I'm a soft-bellied American, I guess."

There was a moment of respite soon after that—for the legion is the legion. Though half the platoon was down, we'd driven the Touaregs back. And there was work for knives, *toute de suite*. There's little quarter given by men who have seen the handiwork of Touareg and Arab women on Legionnaire wounded.

Well, there was a big giant of a Senegalese with those Touaregs, though this was unusual, when they were fighting. He lay wounded before Vance and me. It was Vance who had shot him. The boy had just given the black a drink from his canteen when Von Bissemmer came round the end of the wagon.

"Cut the beast's tongue out!" Von Bissemmer ordered. "Sit him on a stake."

In hot blood more than one Legionnaire had given a wounded Arab a quick coup de grace; but torture—Vance gulped and spat. "I'll see you in hell first, you murdering hound!" he spat out, his face black with a rush of blood.

"That'll mean the prison battalion—if you pull through!" Von Bissemmer came back at him—and how he smiled! It was just

such a chance as he'd been looking for. Then he jumped at poor Ben Amoud—the wounded Senegalese—with a knife in his fist.

Vance raised his gun to swing it, but a Touareg saved him the trouble. The Touareg had been shamming dead. He leaped up and swung his wrist sword. The blow wasn't well aimed, and my bayonet partially deflected it, so Von Bissemmer only received a crack on the head with the flat of the blade. But it felled him like a poled ox. As he went down I finished the Touareg.

SO THERE we were, with our officer unconscious, and the Touaregs making another rush. It wasn't their last, either. Between rushes the Touaregs began to circle round us, using their rifles—which they'd scorned to use before, looking upon them as coward's weapons, or something to be used when the steel fails. So for three hours we fought there, with those twisted slugs knocking patches out the dead camels, or showering us with sand. Slugs screeching, and the sun beating down. Ah, that was hot work!

All through this Von Bissemmer lay unconscious. Meantime I caught a slug in the leg, and had to do the rest of my fighting sitting down with my back against a smelly dead camel. But Vance was still up. One noncom after another kept going down—I remember well how Sergeant Bourget staggered in circles down the whole length of our position, clutching at his eyes before he slumped down, dead—and through the last hour and a half Vance took the lead. Yes, that American recruit. There were no noncoms left. He was running here, there and everywhere, while the slugs spanged into the sand between his legs. Collecting ammunition from our dead. Propping up a wounded man so he could fire. Shambling about on his poor blistered feet, yelling "Attaboy, Legionnaire!" to buck up those Austrians and Germans and Apache *camarades* who were beginning to lose hope.

"Stop that!" he yelled once, kicking Private Hines's rifle aside when the German tried to blow his own brains out.

"There's only a dozen of us left and

they'll put us to the torture!" Hines panted in broken French.

"We'll stand 'em off yet if you fellows keep on shooting!" Vance cried. "There! *Voilà*. You got that one through the gizzard, Hines. *Voilà, mon bon camarad! Caput! Vive la Legion!*"

Name of a dog; I hadn't much hope myself. I didn't have any, to tell the truth. Those devils kept edging in, or forming for new rushes. I shot till my shoulder was as sore as a tooth that is ulcerated. Still they kept at us. We piled them in heaps, and they kept at us. It was heartbreaking—but that boy Vance was *there*.

"Hang with 'em!" he'd yell, "we'll show these scum what side their bread is buttered on yet! Hoopla!"

THEN they got into us for a last rush—and poor Hines blew his brains out just in time. The Touaregs got in some hellish work among our wounded. Ben Amoud was helping us by that time—wounded in the leg like me, but shooting—the big, grinning, scar-faced beggar. Because, he told me, we'd saved him from Von Bissemmer—and he wasn't in love with Touaregs, anyway. Then Vance went down with a slug that ricocheted and slapped him spang in the head. When we shot down the last Touareg close in, there were just four of us left alive. Von Bissemmer, Vance, Ben Amoud and myself.

That's the way it was just before the relief column came in sight from behind the dunes. There were still a dozen Touaregs out there listening to a howling sheik who was exhorting them to make a final rush. Ben Amoud and I were both so weak from loss of blood we couldn't raise our rifles. We didn't know the relief column was coming—it appeared afterward that the eighth company had been out on a practice hike, and had heard our firing. But before we saw them, that dog Van Bissemmer came to.

I heard him mutter something as he shook his bloody head and cleared his eyes. Then the Touaregs started, and he grabbed up a rifle.

So that's the way the relief column saw us when it came loping along at the double from behind the dunes to northward. Von

Bissemmer the lone defender! Von Bissemmer the hero! Blazing away in a lone stand against a dozen Touaregs, under the blood-smeared tri-color of France!

Of course the relief outfit cut in with a murdering fire, saving the day. And of course they swarmed round Von Bissemmer, shouting, "*Tres bon, mon brave!*" I kept



my senses long enough to tell them what Ben Amoud had done to help—and then things went black.

When I came to Vance and I were in hospital in Sidi-bel-Abbes. Vance was looking at a letter in his hand.

"They're decorating us," he informed me. "*The Croix de Guerre*." And he spat.

"What's that?" I exclaimed. "Decorated? I thought Von Bissemmer would have us sent to cells when we got out of hospital. Why the gloom?"

"What in hell do I care about the decorations? They're decorating Von Bissemmer, too—and promoting him. Moreover, Blix was in to see me. Know what Von Bissemmer told her? That I knocked him out—from behind! But that he wouldn't report it because we were rivals!"

"And you let her——"

"Believe it? Certainly. She's engaged to him, damn his eyes. A swanking, monocled hero."

"I'll tell her!" I raved. "Why, if it hadn't been for his treatment of Nat'alla, there wouldn't have been——"

"Any attack. I know. We can't prove that on Nat'alla though. Ben Amoud said it was just a pinprick. He's to be pardoned because he helped us, and will join the colonists. And you won't tell Blix. She's gone to Paris. I've a letter here from my dad, with a money order. He's relented. So, my boy, we'll pull our freight before Von Bissemmer gets another crack at us."

"*Tres bien!*" I almost shouted.

But it was at this moment that we heard cheering in the barrack yard. Like wild fire the word ran round that France was mobilizing troops. *La guerre, la guerre!*

The band started playing the Marseillaise. Sick men were leaving their cots and waltzing with their brothers in arms. Kepis were being tossed in the air. Hoarse throated men were cheering like mad.

"What was that I said?" Vance shouted in my ear. "Desert? Not by a jugfull. This is a horse of another color. *Vive la France!*"

So that was that. Von Bissemer was cock of the walk for the time. He came to the door of the ward once and looked in at Vance through his monocle. "Ha!" he said, then, with one of his faint grins—and turned away. We didn't see him again for a year.

BY THAT time Vance and I were lieutenants, and there were few of the original Legionnaires left. Von Bissemer was a major in command of a battalion of Senegalese shock troops. He'd been transferred to the colonials before Vance and I left the hospital in Sidi-bel-Abbes.

Between the time we left the hospital in Sidi-bel-Abbes and our next meeting with Von Bissemer in front of Chateau sur Vigny, on the western front, in the summer of '15, Vance had never willingly brought up the subject of Blix again. For him the book was sealed and closed. I know that he made no attempt to write her, and you needed only a glance at her chin to know that she'd have made no overtures, even if she hadn't been engaged to Von Bissemer. Where she was, or what had transpired in the interim between her and Von Bissemer we knew not. I supposed that she'd married the baron, but I didn't say much about it to Vance. It was a sore, sore subject with him. Being close to him, I knew that he was brooding over it when his jaw muscles knotted and he stared off into space.

I was with him when he met Von Bissemer in a dugout. That was the night before his outfit attacked Chateau sur Vigny. His blacks, swelled by additional companies to about a thousand men, were to go over at daybreak. Vance and I had been told off with other Legion officers to take over several platoons of Legionnaires, carrying machineguns and fixed to consolidate the position. So we were reporting for orders.

He hadn't changed any, that I could see. Started a little when he saw Vance, but

stuck his monocle in his eye and looked us over with the same old contemptuous stare. Then, after we'd checked maps and orders, he dismissed the others and detained Vance and me.

"Well," he said, searching Vance's face the while, "we meet again." He smiled, but it wasn't pleasant to see. "I knew that we would," he added.

VANCE was as white, yet there was a strange lack of animosity in his expression. He was older, steadier; a new gravity had settled in his features. He looked at Von Bissemer as one might at a subject under glass.

"There'll be no settlement between you and me," he said quietly. "She took you, and that's that. Aside from your bravery, you're a dog, Von Bissemer; but she took you, so——" He coughed, then his voice thrummed a little as he added, "Mark this, though. If we both pull through, and I hear that you mistreat her, there'll be no distance too great for me to get to you."

A smile was spreading over Von Bissemer's face. "So that's it!" he murmured. "Well, there is a settlement due, for let me tell you this—I *never forget*. You should have cut my throat when I lay unconscious that day in the desert."

"I'm unfortunate in that I didn't have the advantage of your training, Baron," said Vance.

"Get out!" said Von Bissemer. He ground the words between his white teeth in a sudden blaze of cold fury. "Get out; and may the shells spare you—for me."

WE DIDN'T see him again till next morning, when the day began to break, and we were in the jump off trench. By that time our artillery was going it to beat four of a kind in the preparatory bombardment, and Chateau sur Vigny, only two hundred meters away, was blotted out in a swelter of smoke. Our guns had Fritz's field pieces taped, too, and there was very little coming back at us.

Waiting out that last five or ten minutes before the zero hour was never popular with any soldier I ever talked to; and in this case No Man's Land was a sea of black mud with the unburied bodies of a battalion of

French poilus scattered about. Swollen dead horses. Stiff arms sticking out of the ooze. Skeletons propped against a canted gun with one wheel broken off. White flares going up to spread a ghostly light over it all. Brrrr!

But with these scar-faced tar babies in the jump off trench, there was something ghastly and awful about it. Every one of those black giants was stripped to a breech clout! Guns slung behind their bare shoulders. Gas



masks hanging against black naked breasts as broad as two doors bolted together. And knives gripped in their powerful white teeth. Long, gleaming trench knives that broadened at the end and turned at right angles there to form a nasty hook.

There was not a man among them under six feet, and they'd cut and slashed their faces in youth to make themselves look more formidable. Yet with all their great rolling muscles, as thick as boa constrictors beneath their shining skins, there was a touch of pathos about them—just then. The shells scared them. Knife work they glory in—but shells are like their evil spirits. They come from nowhere and you cannot hit back at them. They couldn't keep still. Now one would drop on his knees and salaam three times, praying to Allah. Then he'd leap up again, to prance nervously with the rest of his chafing fellows—performing a sort of dog trot in one spot, with the clenched hands working in circles at the sides, and that trench knife gripped between his teeth.

CONTINUALLY, too, they kept looking at their white officers. There was something ludicrous and pathetic about it. It so happened that all their officers, save Von Bissemer, were small men. They were dwarfed by the black giants. Neat, calm, dapper little officers, dressed as though for parade, smoking their cigarettes nonchalantly, and carrying rosewood swagger sticks. Yet when a shell burst near us those big Senegalese would roll their eyes toward their officers, with the whites showing, like

so many great dogs, looking for comfort and reassurance. And they'd get it, with a kindly, "Now, now, *mes enfants*, patience, patience. *Toute de suite—caput!*" Whereupon their lips would curl back from the blades in a hideous grin. Yes, it was pathetic—and ghastly, too. Those little officers tapping those big black devils gently on the shoulders with their swagger sticks, assuring them that the djinns would not let the shells get them, and that there would be sweet work for the knives presently.

There was only one among them who did not chafe and stamp. That was Ben Amoud. He was the largest of the lot. He stood there, immovable, staring across No Man's Land from under lowered brows. a great carved ebony statue. With a sphynx-like expression on his face. But now and again his great head would turn slowly toward Von Bissemer. He'd stare a minute, then swing his brooding gaze slowly back to No Man's Land.

Then suddenly the officers were looking at their wrist watches—and the whistles blew. Wow! There was a roar from those blacks fit to split the ear drums. As one man they vaulted the parapet—and away they flew across No Man's Land. Like a stampeding herd. With the speed of the wind. With a growl in the throat as savage as the grind of clanking gears. By the beard of the prophet, there was a sight to thrill a Viking!

WE MADE no attempt to keep up with them, but walked, with our machine-guns. The blacks disappeared in the smoke, and we could hear the Germans screaming. Poor devils, that bombardment had kept them huddled in their dugouts. The first one I saw came screaming out of the smoke, with his awkward boots clumping in the mud, and his face chalk white, and wherever Fritz turned, there was a knife darting over his shoulder, with the hook before his throat.

In retrospect war is ghastly to contemplate. At that time our nerves were injured to death and violence, our memories hot with tales of atrocities in Belgium. Fritz had set out to make war terrible, and there were men among us who felt that sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. Yet

there were sick men among the Legionnaires—the Legionnaires, mind you!—before we had our guns placed.

Not so Von Bissemmer. No Frenchman ever hated the Germans more than this outlawed baron hated Kaiserism. He was holding a sort of hangman's court in the remains of the town square when Vance and I came near him again. The sun was up, and a herd of disarmed prisoners—nearly all wounded—were standing against a shattered stone wall. Von Bissemmer sat on a beer keg, taunting them in German. The blacks were waiting, like eager wolves, sucking their breath in through their gritting teeth. The shaking prisoners were offered a coin to toss. If it fell with heads uppermost, the man had a few more minutes to live. The reverse meant that he could run the gauntlet between two rows of blacks who nicked him skillfully, playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse till the end. When one broke away from the wall in frenzied terror, he was chased by a Senegalese and heaved on high, while a second black crouched with the butt of his gun planted in the street, and the bayonet pointing skyward—waiting.

The blacks were drunk with blood. Sheer, stark, raving drunk. So was Von Bissemmer. It was a madman's scene, a scene to revolt a vandal. Von Bissemmer reveled in it.

"Enough, for God's sake!" cried Vance, coming up. He was backed by the growl of a dozen Legionnaires—several of whom were Americans. "Those men have surrendered, and they're helpless!" he thundered. "Call off those damned cutthroats."

"Ha! So it's you, is it, you soft-bellied swine!" barked Von Bissemmer. "Well——"

JUST then Fritz opened up on the town. Our batteries were still pounding heavily all the photographed positions behind the German front lines, but some reserve guns had apparently moved in during the night. Beives of shells came whistling into the town, sending whole sections of walls tumbling over and over, high in the air.

There was a mad scramble for cover. Von Bissemmer, Ben Amoud, Vance and myself, with a half dozen others, including two German prisoners, reached the entrance of a dugout under the former town hall.

We were just under cover when a great .220 shell closed the entrance behind us.

We found ourselves in a long underground tunnel, fitted with bunks on either side, and a turn about fifteen feet from us. Before we reached this, another shell closed the second entranceway. We were entombed.

"Get shovels and start digging!" Von Bissemmer ordered.

These were always at hand in German dugouts for such emergencies, and we fell to. We were all working at one end, then, and Von Bissemmer was prowling around somewhere beyond the turn, when suddenly there was a swishing sound in the air. We had candles going, and Von Bissemmer had found a pile of German hand grenades. He'd thrown one of these right into our midst.

Not all of us fully realized what had happened at the moment. But some instinct had warned Vance. He kicked the bomb—and it exploded about ten feet from us, killing one Senegalese and wounding two others.

There wasn't any time for hesitation there. We knew there would be more bombs coming. So we rushed. A second bomb struck some one and fell just behind us, wounding two more. Von Bissemmer's pistol spat fire, too—but so did mine. He went down with a shot through the leg.

It was Ben Amoud who jerked him to his feet, while another Senegalese raised his knife.

"No, no," grunted Ben Amoud. "This will be done slowly. Ah, slowly!"

HE LOOKED round about at us then. Some one had lighted a candle—and I still remember the slow smile that started with a quiver of Ben Amoud's thick lips, and spread over his black face. "I will take a souvenir to Nat'alla!" he said. "It is kismet. *Oui*, it is written."

It was then that stark, craven fear turned Von Bissemmer's bones to water. "My God!" he shrieked at Vance. "I meant to kill you,



but not this way. You're a white man. Let it be the pistol. For the love of God, have mercy!"

"You would have killed all of us, just to square accounts with me," Vance retorted.

"Yes, but even so, man, you have the best of it. Yes, with Blix. She's yours, man, yours. She broke her engagement to me within two weeks."

Through this babel Vance cut with sharp words. He knew, somehow, that the man was speaking truth. And even with the memory of the scenes we'd just left, it wasn't in the boy to turn even Von Bissemer over to those blacks.

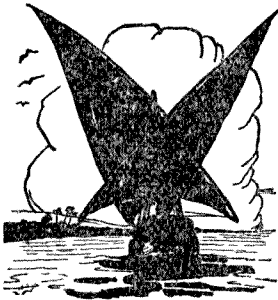
"If we get out of this," he said, "you'll get a fair court martial. Turn him over to me, Ben Amoud."

But at that moment there was a rending, a crashing, and an explosion, deep down. A penetrating shell had struck. The explosion, to one side of our tunnel, blew us in all directions, and bulged the sides. When we jumped up and relighted the candles, we were separated. Von Bissemer, Ben Amoud and two Senegalese were on one side, the rest of us on the other side of the bulge. Save for an aperture, about neck high, this bulge completely filled the tunnel.

"*Mon lieutenant,*" said Ben Amoud, sticking his black face into the hole, "I will stand court martial—if we pull through. It is written that we will, too. I will live to give Nat'alla a hide that tans well—with proper care."

And he grinned. God, how he grinned!

IN THE NEXT ISSUE



Fourteen Marines

A complete novel by

**FREDERICK J.
LIESMANN**

Fourteen—count 'em—and all trouble-shooters of the first order. So, when they found themselves on a highly unofficial expedition toward China that promised violent excitement, they grinned their satisfaction.

