
SOME STORIES OF THE LEGION.

By VERE SHORTT.

THE French Foreign Legion has always been the happy hunting-ground of the novelist and writer of fiction generally in search of a picturesque background. Since Ouida wrote *Under Two Flags*, probably dozens of ill-used heroes (in fiction) have exchanged the scarlet tunic of the British officer or the silk hat and frock-coat of a man about town for the blue *capote* and red trousers of the legionary, and, after suffering incredible hardships and brutal punishment, have at last emerged triumphantly to the music of wedding-bells, with their names cleared, and the Legion nothing but an unpleasant memory. This plan was quite ideal from the

novelist's point of view. No one knew much about the Legion, nor for that matter did the novelist; Algeria was a long way off, the surroundings were picturesque, and, given a certain amount of imagination and a fluent pen, the Virtuous Hero could be made to have quite a satisfactorily bad time before he came into his own again.

Now, as an ex-legionary, I may as well say at this stage that there is very little romance indeed to be found in the Foreign Legion. Ruined lives there are, probably hundreds of them; but the possessors do not talk about them, and as a rule only wish to be forgotten and left

to themselves. The great majority of men in the Legion have come there because of some slight offence against the laws of their own country, or else from pure love of soldiering and adventure. Some three years ago I met a man in Paris—a journalist—who had been in my company of the 1st Regiment *Étranger*, and in the course of conversation he told me that he joined the Legion for no reason at all except that after finishing his three years' compulsory service in the French army he did not like civilian life, and that he would be glad to have the experience over again. The life and the discipline are hard, and necessarily so, but not hard enough to break either a man's spirit or his self-respect. The Foreign Legion is above all a fighting force, and cowed or broken-spirited men would be the very last material in the world to do the work which the Legion requires of its members. There are many men of good family in the Legion, and occasionally a letter bearing an historical name arrives at one of the Legion's stations, and is eventually claimed by the legionary Jean Dubois; but the majority are much the same type as used to fill the Cape Mounted Rifles and Matabeleland Police in the old days—that is to say, military adventurers pure and simple. Still, when one has served in the Foreign Legion incidents come under one's notice—sometimes humorous, and sometimes tragic—and some of these may be of interest to the reader.

First of all it must be stated that the cause of nine-tenths of the unusual occurrences in the Legion is *le cafard*, or, in other words, unbearable ennui with one's surroundings. When a man has been for some time in a place, seeing the same faces day after day, and with a dozen palm-trees and miles of sand for his sole outlook, he is more than apt to develop *cafard*, and it depends entirely on the man's nature what form the *cafard* is going to take. It may break out in the shape of what practically amounts to homicidal mania, or it may express itself in the form of more or less elaborate practical jokes. I have known a man to arm himself, for no apparent reason, with his rifle and ammunition, and keep up a fusillade on every one within reach; finally explaining, when captured and disarmed, that he was bored to death, and wanted some excitement. There have been many similar cases in the Legion, and unless it is absolutely necessary to kill the victim of *cafard* before he will allow himself to be captured, he is usually treated more as though in need of medical attention than as a criminal. Almost all the long-service soldiers of the Legion are *cafards* in one form or another, and so long as their *cafard* does not bring them into direct conflict with authority they are treated with great forbearance.

The following is an instance of the other form which *cafard* sometimes takes. About six years ago the battalion of the 1st Regiment *Étranger*

stationed at S. was notified that a certain Commandant M. from the 2nd Regiment would arrive on a certain day to take up command. Now Commandant M. (a stranger to his new battalion) possessed what every officer in the Legion possessed, an *ordonnance* or soldier servant, and also what every officer did not possess—that is to say, a reputation for extreme austerity of life and conduct. On the day that he was supposed to arrive at S. to take command, Commandant M., not feeling very well, decided to stay at a small station about forty miles up the line, and sent on his *ordonnance* with his belongings to take over his quarters. This man was an ex-officer of the Austrian army, and had seen about fifteen years' service in the Legion. On arrival at S. he took his master's belongings to his quarters, then dressed himself in the commandant's uniform, and proceeded into the town. On his way down he passed several officers, and, as he looked just as a commandant ought to do (or rather more so), was saluted punctiliously by them. This was at about 10 A.M. At lunch that forenoon in the lieutenants' mess an officer arrived from the town in an intense state of excitement, and asked the assembled officers generally, 'Have any of you seen our new "old man"?' (the word used in the Legion among juniors for the commanding officer). Two or three men said that they had seen him that morning, and that there seemed to be no noticeable difference between him and other officers commanding battalions. But the new-comer was still excited. 'Well,' he said, 'you had better mind what you're about. He's in the town putting every non-commissioned officer he sees under arrest for being drunk or improperly dressed, or something, and he swears that this battalion is the slackest mob he has ever seen, and that he'll bring it under discipline if he has to break every officer in it!'

The officers were much impressed by the keenness of their new commandant, and departed in various directions to worry their companies up to the required pitch of smartness. The next we heard of the new commandant was that he had been retrieved from a low café in the 'Village Negre' at 3 A.M. the following morning while performing a triumphal dance among the débris of the furniture over the bodies of the proprietor and customers, whom he had scientifically 'knocked out' with a chair. I believe the man received a term of imprisonment; but Commandant M.'s reputation for austerity never recovered. He was reduced to a state of frenzy for months afterwards by various undesirable characters presenting bills, &c., which his understudy had run up. Eventually he exchanged into another battalion.

Another occurrence, this time a tragic one, which was at first put down to *cafard*, but which was in reality due to other causes, occurred at S. A batch of recruits had come in, and, according

to custom, were distributed among the companies. A certain Lieutenant B. mentioned casually to a comrade that two of the new draft appeared to be already afflicted with *cafard*. He said that they were sitting on their beds looking at each other like 'two mad cows,' and expressed his intention of keeping an eye on them. However, in the meanwhile the two men in question had procured a couple of *fissas*, or Arab yataghans, and in rear of the mule-stables, and in the presence of their admiring company, had literally carved each other to pieces, one of them surviving just long enough to decapitate the other. This was highly unusual even for the Legion, and every one was extremely excited and astonished—that is to say, everybody with the exception of the dead men's captain. The latter was an Albanian, and he explained that the deceased were also Albanians with a blood feud, and if two men with a blood feud were put together, what *could* any one expect? His whole attitude conveyed the idea that to interfere with gentlemen's private quarrels was a piece of gross bad form, of which he personally would never be guilty. Well, the men were dead, legionaries were cheap, it was not very apparent what was to be done, and so far as I know nothing ever *was* done in the matter.

When the Legion is not on active service the life is apt to be monotonous to an appalling degree, and this, and the miserable pay—rather less than a penny a day—lead to many desertions, or, rather, attempts at desertion, as they are very rarely successful. To desert is, in the slang of the Legion, *aller en pompe* ('to go on pump'); and in the Legion, when one hears the cry, '*Voilà les pompistes*,' it means that deserters have either returned of their own accord or been brought back by Arabs. There is a standing reward of twenty-five francs for every deserter brought in, and the Arabs are very keen on earning it. Desertion is much more rife in the southern stations than in the more settled parts of Algeria. Many of the stations there are quite close to the frontier of Morocco, and Morocco to the legionary is a land flowing with milk and honey, or, rather, wine and wives; and in spite of the ghastly photographs of the mutilated corpses of legionaries, and the certainty of the same fate if they are captured by the tribesmen, the men are constantly making attempts to desert.

I know of only two cases of desertion which were at all successful. One was that of an Irishman named O'Reilly. He deserted from his station, and about ten miles out in the desert came across a camp of Taurags. He then waited until nightfall, and by some means or other managed to elude the sentries, got into the camp, and stole a rifle and ammunition. Then he crawled to where the camels were, killed the camel guards with his bayonet, took a swift *mehari* or riding-camel, and rode hard for the Moroccan frontier, about thirty miles distant.

He managed to get into Morocco, joined the army of one of the local pretenders, of which there were half-a-dozen at the time, and now I believe holds high rank in the army of the present Sultan. The other case was that of a mild, spectacled creature who was known as Lunettes, or, in vulgar English, 'gig-lamps.' This man had a perfect passion for desertion. He used to march out of barracks about once a month, seemingly with no very definite idea of what he meant to do, and invariably he was brought back again. The local Arabs got to know his times and seasons, and used to have a sort of competition among themselves as to who could lay hands on him first. After a while this was recognised as Lunettes' special form of *cafard*, and he was more or less leniently dealt with; but at last it was discovered that twenty-five francs a month for recovering Lunettes was not a paying proposition, being as a matter of fact about ten times the amount of his pay, and it was settled to give him a change of air and scenery by sending him to Tonkin. However, at Port Said, while *en route*, Lunettes, seeing the gang-plank down, in a fit of absent-mindedness walked ashore, and so severed his connection with the Legion for good and all.

The ethics of the Legion are peculiar to itself. The theft of tobacco, money, &c. will be punished summarily by the thief's comrades in such a way as to qualify him for weeks in hospital; but to 'decorate one's self'—that is, to take any articles of kit, &c., which may happen to strike one's fancy—is regarded as being rather meritorious than otherwise. I have heard of a recruit being taken to the canteen by two old legionaries and filled with wine, which he discovered too late came from the proceeds of a pair of white trousers of his own with which his hosts had 'decorated themselves' and turned into cash. The idea seems to be that some one has to pay for the 'decorated' article, and that so long as it is not one's self it is all right. A legionary would be much shocked if this practice was referred to as stealing. 'Decorating one's self' is a regimental custom, and, like many other customs, has grown respectable from antiquity.

When a legionary takes his discharge, which he does at the expiration of five years' service, he is given a suit of clothes and a ticket to any town in France he likes to name, also a franc a day for subsistence on the journey. A man invariably asks for a ticket to Calais or Dunquerque, as being the farthest away, and departs vowing that he has done with the Legion for ever. He generally receives a sum of about ten francs; and as it is a poor legionary who cannot 'decorate himself' with the necessities of life after five years' service in the Legion, he generally arrives at his destination with the money more or less intact. He then proceeds to have as good a time as possible, and at the end of a day or so, finding himself penniless, goes to the nearest

barracks and re-enlists in the Legion, to be sent back to Algeria at the expense of the French Republic. An officer will congratulate himself on having got rid of *le plus mauvais garniment* ('the worst character') of his company, and on inspecting a batch of recruits a month later be horrified at the sight of his old familiar legionary back again. Many men refer to this as their 'holiday,' and do it regularly at the end of each five years' service, instead of re-engaging in the normal way, with the certainty of increased pay. However, the only people who suffer are the taxpayers and the men themselves, and so the practice continues.

There are three methods of obtaining a commission in the Foreign Legion. An officer may be seconded from his line regiment after three years' service in France, and join the Legion with his full rank; or a non-commissioned officer may be sent to the infantry school at St Maixent, and after a period of instruction receive his commission as second lieutenant. The third class is that of foreigners who have been officers in their own armies, and join the Legion in the same capacity. This is fairly easy to do, provided that one can make a certain amount of interest at headquarters, and there are many foreigners serving in the Foreign Legion as officers who obtained their commission in this way. For ex-officers who wish for a commission, and who cannot make the necessary interest, or for various reasons may be under something of a cloud, it is necessary to join the Legion as a private. If a man can prove that he has been an officer in his own country he is made *élève caporal* ('pupil corporal') almost at once, and if he is efficient and well-behaved, is sent to St Maixent in due course. Many of the older officers obtained their commission in this way. One lieutenant-colonel was a Russian peasant who found himself stranded in Marseilles during the Franco-Prussian war, and joined the Legion as a private. A great many of the older men took part in that struggle, in which the Foreign Legion suffered very severely. In the officers' mess at Sidi-bel-Abbès is a chassepôt rifle with a strange history attached to it. During the Dahomey expedition in 1895 a certain Captain P. was fired at by a Dahomean marksman ensconced in a tree, and returned the shot with his revolver, bringing the man down. On examining the Dahomean's rifle the captain was astonished to find by the number on it and by certain marks that it was the identical rifle which he had carried as a private in the Franco-Prussian war. The rifle had passed out of service and found its way to Dahomey, and had narrowly missed killing its former owner. Captain P. obtained permission to keep it, and it is now in the regimental museum. Among other exhibits in this museum is the embalmed hand of Captain Danjou of the Legion, who, with his company, at the battle of Camaron, during the Mexican war,

was cut off in a house by an enormously superior force of the enemy. Five times the men of the Legion were summoned to surrender, and five times they refused defiantly, and in the end died to the last man. The museum of the Legion is full of objects of this kind—tattered uniforms, and flags, rifles, swords, and bayonets—almost all with a tragic history.

The officers' mess at Sidi-bel-Abbès, where the museum is situated, was built and designed entirely by legionaries. It is in the form of a Chinese pagoda, and is one of the most striking buildings in Algeria. The mural paintings, which are very fine, were executed entirely by two legionaries, one a captain and the other a private. There is hardly any trade or profession which can be mentioned members of which are not included in the ranks of the Legion. After a fight in the desert it is no uncommon occurrence to call for men with medical knowledge to look after the wounded, and to find three or four highly qualified surgeons in one company.

As I said above, the great majority of the men are of the class of which a professional army is always formed; but, on the other hand, it is absolutely impossible to discover what social grade a legionary may have occupied in his former life. Some years ago a private of the Legion died, and his body was claimed by the German Government and taken back to Germany in a warship with the honours paid to a royal prince. All that was ever known about him in the Legion was that he was a German, and a very smart soldier.

Romance of the type of the popular novel there is none in the Legion, but of romances of real life there are plenty. Most of these, however, will never be given to the world. The heroes or villains of them—and there are both in the Foreign Legion—prefer to keep them to themselves; and whatever errors these men may have committed in civil life, as legionaries at least they have never failed to die like heroes for the honour of their regiment and France when the need has arisen.

DREAMS GROWN OLD.

OH, skies of blue! I used to think
I'd reach your fountains cool, and drink;
But here, where falls your pitying dew,
I loiter still—how far from you,
Oh, skies of blue!

Oh, mirror true! 'tis you alone
Who know how long the years have grown;
You keep the grim reflection true—
None mourn with me but only you,
Oh, mirror true!

Oh, hair of gray! what dreams grown old
Once slumbered 'neath your gleams of gold!
Was it worth while to face the fray?
What has it given to us to-day,
Oh, hair of gray?

MARY ADAMSON.