

Chapter II

REVOLT IN THE FOREIGN LEGION

WHERE the Foreign Legion is today the big battle will be fought tomorrow. "Where is the Foreign Legion today?" Everywhere I went I asked and sometimes I came very close to it, but it was not until the end of my year as sole war correspondent with the French expedition in Syria that I became involved with the Foreign Legion.

"Involved" barely expressed it. It was my destiny not only to find the glorious regiment but to see it go into battle, to visit it in the captured capital of the enemy, to find my American hero, to be accused of causing a mutiny in the desert, and to be the instrument for saving a human life.

I knew the French had divided the Legion into its component two regiments, one to fight Abd-el-Krim in Morocco, the other to subjugate Sultan Pasha Atrashe whose stone capital lay in the hills of Syria, overlooking the Palestine frontier and the rolling desert to the south and east.

I sought the Legion because I was determined to find an American soldier in its uniform, and on this nail I could hang the whole dust-bitten tableau of the revolt in the desert. I needed just one American. Through him the Syrian war, the dreadful sunshine, the suffering and horror, victory and defeat, sacrifice and bravery, hunger and thirst, could be brought home to the millions of American readers.



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First there was the battle of Rashaya. In the besieged citadel was a small part of the Legion which fought in the tradition of its organization. In a savage and bloodthirsty battle in which the French were forced into primitive barbarism by attackers who knew nothing of the codes and ethics which modern warfare had imposed, the opponents murdered the wounded and used teeth and nails in hand-to-hand encounters.

When relief came the Legion got drunk. They emerged from the charnel house and sang and looted. Into the eight neighbouring villages they ran sparing neither friend nor foe, they made no distinction between Christian Syrians and Pagan Druses. They killed and took.

Rifle shots could be heard all around as I walked down the road into the valley towards the cliff on which the Citadel of Rashaya was perched. The sun was low, the desert suffused in gold, the white cliffs gilded. Towards me came a bed walking.

It was covered with numerous feather quilts, sheets, two pillows; bed-clothes dragged behind it and from it protruded night lamps and candles. Under it a Legionnaire could be seen as the motive force.

The soldier had a double load: he was drunk.

"Well, how goes it?" I said in French.

"Wass?" he replied.

"Who are you?" I asked in German.

"Wilhelm Bloemler," replied the Legionnaire, "aus Bonn, Rheinland."

"What have you been doing?"

"Helping myself to what the Druses left behind," he replied.

Then without any questioning he volunteered this bit of Legion information:

"The French officers are all right. We like them. They know

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how to treat soldiers. But our *sous-officiers* — non-coms — they are swine and devil dogs. They are all German non-coms. *Gott verdammt!* They have spoiled the Legion. Didn't I have enough of them during the world war? Would I have enlisted if I had known the *feldwebel* was going to be a German? Pfui!"

And he staggered merrily away under his bedding.

My next encounter with the Legion was at Moussifrey. It was here that all French forces were gathered for the great attack on Atrashe's capital, Soueida.

Commandant Muller, who had built the great Roman camp at Ezraa, had invited me to assist at an armoured car reconnaissance, to feel out the Druses. Some ten thousand of them were in the field. They had surrounded three French infantry companies, some artillery and some small units in the citadel of Soueida and were starving them to death. In turn the French were moving in from Ezraa, Deraa, Moussifrey and other towns. The Land of Job was again flowing with blood and tears.

The sortie was made with the usual grey-blue armoured cars.

"How far are we going?" I asked Commandant Muller.

"I don't know," replied the officer. "This isn't European warfare and all our means of information are not sure. In France we knew every outpost of the trenches, the position of every gun, the disposition of all the men of the enemy. Here it is like your wars against the American Indians. Guerrilla warfare. We shall proceed with our reconnaissance until we draw fire. When you see rifle bullets knocking up the desert sands or hear them clicking on your armoured car, you will know that the enemy has been located."

So we went first to Bors-el-Harriri, through the bad-lands flanking the Arabian desert, through nothing but sand and

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volcanic black stones scattered like seeds by a drunken sower, sometimes strangely stacked up like ugly idols in the fields.

There was a jackal feasting on a dead camel killed in the recent battle. Hot gusts of desert winds ravaged the car, blinding white dust penetrated everywhere, cutting our eyes and stuffing our throats. Occasionally the terrible stink of a dead horse came in with the sand. Obscene fat white birds waddled out of the carcasses of camels, rose heavily and settled nearby to await the passing of our motors.

Suddenly I saw a great lake stretch itself across our path, inundating our auto road. But we never reduced speed. I tapped the driver's hand. "Mirage," he said. We sped towards the lake and the lake sped towards the hills.

"Yes, we have to fight mirages in this damned country," commented the driver, "mirages and tribesmen, heat and sand and lack of water. Only yesterday one of our airplanes directing artillery fire had to quit in the midst of a *régelage* because the observer saw nothing but water which wasn't there. Lakes, river, oases suddenly appear before columns of marching men and aviators. Imagine setting guns for direct fire against the enemy and finding them pointing into an ocean covering the enemy in the midst of an infantry attack. *C'est la guerre.*"

Soueida with its black stone houses, its red citadel and its white barracks was just ten minutes to the east when the Druses spotted us and began firing from behind stone piles. Their bullets puffed the sand before us and our cars halted. Two old Breguet planes which had started behind us now flew overhead, each carrying fourteen small bombs. Hardly had the Druses revealed themselves with futile rifle fire when the aviators were upon them, using their machine-guns and releasing a bomb or two, which fell in the silent plain scattering

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the stones, raising fountains of sand and scaring the tribesmen into the open.

The planes then radioed directions to the artillery and as our decoy reconnaissance returned to Bors-el-Harriri the guns were peppering the fields with steel.

At Bors-el-Harriri the sheik invited Commandant Muller and me to dine with the elders of the village in the communal hall. It was a strange one-room building, the outer walls covered with mud and dirt, the inner ones bearing signs of Roman origin. The arches were unmistakably Roman. Some red was smeared on the walls. A few odd things were fastened on them. Although the Mohammedan must not make a graven image or look upon one, there were some old chromos held up by nails, a large coloured picture of Lillian Russell in tights, and what was undoubtedly the "premium" of a popular brand of American cigarettes of 1890, a little picture of "The Yellow Kid."

In the centre of the floor a huge hole. It puzzled me at first.

The sheik clapped his hands and reed mats into which a green and red design had been woven, in Aztec-Mexican fashion, were brought us, and pillows. Commandant Muller stretched himself uneasily on his mat which bordered the hole in the floor. If this is oriental comfort, I did not realize it. Ill at ease, I did likewise on my side of the hole. The main sheik and the main priest occupied the two other sides of the quadrangle, and the food was brought in.

First we were given a circumference of damp flabby bread, thin as a dollar and big as a barrel. Then came the pilaff. It was an enormous plate, heaped with greasy rice, so much of it that it hid a whole lamb. The lamb, head included, had been cut into suitable pieces of a pound or two, and each man

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rolled up his sleeves, dug his fist into the mess, worked his fingers around until he struck something solid and pulled. Whatever he found he had to eat to a finish, or he would insult his hosts. Bones were spat into the centre. The hole in the floor was the Arab garbage system.

Servants stood around helping us and waving fans at the thousands of stubborn flies.

The enormous bread, which resembled a Roman shield, we used as plates, napkins, knife and spoon, and table-cloths.

A vile, bitter, sour, aromatic coffee was poured into a cup and passed from mouth to mouth. "Take it at least three times," the Commandant whispered to me, "or they will be offended." Grapes came on another woven mat and date water, slightly fermented, turning sour and sickish, was served. Well, starvation in the desert sands seemed preferable.

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The night at Moussifrey saw the bloodiest battle of the year. In slaughter it surpassed almost anything of the world war.

Knowing that the French had gathered the Foreign Legion there for the attack on Soueida, the crafty Druses came out of their capital and all the surrounding towns and attacked. Twenty-five loyal villages had answered the Pasha's proclamation, each with its war flag blessed in an imposing religious ceremony, each with its sheik.

At four in the morning when it was still dark, the vanguard of three thousand Druses galloped towards Moussifrey. Without a halt they charged the barbed wire and yelled. The horses caught. With flesh torn open they fell into the wire, struggling. Riders tried to disentangle themselves. Horsemen pressed those in front. They fired into the air. The gunners of the Foreign

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Legion poured devastating bullets into the mass of men and horses caught in the wire. Horses screamed, men shouted and a clatter of machine-gunnery arose from all of Moussifrey.

Unable to break through the wire the Druses withdrew, consulted, yelled and charged again. Again they rode into the barbed entanglements and upon the dead and dying horses and men lost in the first fury. Again they caught and again the machine-guns perforated their struggling mass.

The sun arose revealing the horror.

From four to ten that morning, in intervals of about an hour, the Druses made six attacks, until they filled almost all the entanglements with their dead. In the last attack those who had lost their horses, but not their fanatical courage, stripped themselves, placed their bullets in a rag held in their teeth, and charged over the dead, naked, clearing the three rows of wire, to fall dead and wounded at the very edge of the machine-gun nests of the Foreign Legion.

An elderly bearded sergeant who had fought alongside the American Marine Brigade when the Moroccan Division, placed between the American First and Second Divisions, formed a spearhead for the memorable attack of July 18, the attack launched from the Villiers Cotterets which marked the turn of the war in France, said of this battle of Moussifrey:

“No one ever saw such bloodshed as we did last night. Realize that the entire attack was at one point; the Druses hoped to fill in the wire with their own bodies, and charge over them! My machine-gun crew bore the brunt of it. Look, here lie two hundred and fifty-seven bodies of men. Certainly the enemy took another two hundred and fifty dead with them because by their religion they must do so. That makes five hundred killed by one machine-gun nest. Then there are prob-

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ably one thousand wounded. So it can be said one crew defeated an attack of three thousand and inflicted one thousand five hundred casualties. There was nothing like that in France. Think of the spirit of this enemy. It is beyond human belief. Now we must make ready to attack them. *Au revoir.*"

Pagans, Romans, Mohammedans, Christian Crusaders and Turks have fought for Soueida. Caesar's legions had called the spot where they found water, Dionysus. Napoleon's emissaries had visited it when he was trying to stir up their traditional hatred of the Turk the time he made the campaign against Acre, near by. Now the Foreign Legion was to lead the victorious attack.

"The Druses fought like a nation released from a lunatic asylum," General Andrea said, as, during dinner in Soueida, he described the final battle. "For example, twenty charged one of my tanks, trying to stop the wheels with their bare hands. Five were crushed under the caterpillar tractor; ten were shot down by the machine-guns, but the remaining five still fought. Once another twenty charged a machine-gun. The crew killed or wounded nineteen but the twentieth never paused until he had entered the nest and cut the machine-gunner's hand with the only weapon he had, a knife.

"It is a nation committing suicide.

"Three hundred of these fanatics sacrificed their lives trying to kill me. They hid in a ravine, letting our advancing army of 12,000 men cross over. Then they appeared right in our centre. It was clever but futile. We had to turn our cannon, which had advanced, backward, and fire point blank until we had annihilated the three hundred."

The general described the tank attack on the city. It was remarkable. The little Renaults, one protecting the other, had

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crawled up the slope until one actually knocked at the gate of the citadel where the heroic garrison, commanded by a French major named Tommy Martin, had held out for two months on food and shells and radio lamps dropped by airplanes. Other tanks had attacked the rows upon rows of stone houses which, joined by common walls, had made one vast fortress of the city. Some walls they crushed; arches built by Romans which had resisted centuries and wars, crumbled under wheels made in Ohio factories.

If only the Druses had remained in their fortress city!

Six thousand of them, fighting in that stone wall labyrinth could have held up the French indefinitely and could have saved themselves. But they chose to leave their defences and race wildly and in circles, almost barehanded, against guns and shrapnel and all the inventions of wholesale slaughter save gas.

And they had almost won. Despite machine-gun fire, mine throwers, grenades, artillery shells, and bombs dropped from airplanes, 3,000 Druses, by an impetuosity born of religious fatalism, had succeeded in joining the battle. It was actually hand-to-hand fighting in the open, until the column under Colonel Duclos arrived, a bayonet charge was ordered, and confusion was turned into decisive victory.

The guns were being mounted near the citadel when I was taken to see it and the graveyard from which the corpses of French dead had been disinterred by the Druses, the rotten flesh given to dogs, and the bones placed along the roads as a warning to the foreigner. As the newly placed guns were trained on more villages, and intimidation by 3-inch shells began, white flags appeared over tall buildings and the elders came to Soueida to make deep submission to General Andrea.

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I met one pasha, one emir and a dozen sheiks, each the father of a town.

"These are my guests," said the general. "They come here to discuss peace. I am inviting them to remain until other villages learn wisdom."

This was his way of saying the princes and sheiks were hostages, whose lives were in pawn for the lives of French aviators who were being fired on continually by "civilians" in "neutral" villages.

"Have you got an American in your Foreign Legion?"

"Yes," replied General Andrea, "and I hear from his commander he is a real soldier."

This one American was worth journalistically many times the victory of Soueida to me. So away I stumbled over the volcanic stones to find him and the Legion.

I presented myself first to Major Kratzert, who recalled with enthusiasm the bravery of the American First and Second Divisions in the battle of July 18, 1918.

"Is your Legion today as good as it was then?" I asked.

"The Legion is always as good," he replied proudly. "You may fill it up with the men from any country, old or young, strong and weak, and in the end it finds the spirit and the tradition and the glory of the Legion. The Legion is always victorious — in France, in Morocco, here."

I asked for "The American."

"Find the American — don't mistake him for the Englishman," the major commanded an orderly, and in a few minutes we emerged from the tent to talk to him. He saluted his commandant smartly, looked at my civilian clothes and got a nod of permission.

"God, I'm glad to see someone from home," he exclaimed,



The White Man's Burden, or How the Orient is Ruled. Arabs, accused of various crimes, hanged in the Merje square, Damascus, by the French military. The signs detail the crimes and warn the populace. "Gilbert Clare" (Bennett S. Doty) photographed by the author, on the eve of his taking "French Leave" from the Foreign Legion at Soneida. This caused the Syrian Revolution. French military exhibiting bodies of twenty-four men they killed. The Syrian nationalists claimed the dead were martyrs, not bandits and the uprising followed.

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“when did you come over? I’ve been in nine months — haven’t spoken to anyone from home — ”

“Where are you from? ”

“Memphis, Tennessee,” he replied in an unmistakable accent.

“And your name? ”

“Gilbert Clare is my name. Yes, that’s my real name. Most everybody here gives you a false name. Some of these fellows may be wanted for murder, some of them had a fight with their girls — oh, any reasons — they don’t give their real names, but mine is my own — Gilbert Clare,” he repeated as I noted it on an envelope.

His insistence on his “real ” name puzzled me at once. It was only after I had started the work to save his life that I learned from the State Department that he too was giving a false name, the real one being Bennett J. Doty.

He wore the regulation khaki of the Army of the Orient and a pith helmet. He was bronzed and handsome: a blond moustache and a cheerful smile.

“Say,” he continued appropos of nothing, “we just stole a sheep. What the hell do we Legionnaires care about orders. We stole, killed, roasted, ate that sheep before our officers could start an investigation. We steal, we fight like hell, we die, but we are always victorious. That’s the Foreign Legion for you.”

“How’d you come to join it? ”

“I was in the Thirtieth Division. We didn’t get to France till late. I never saw much of war. Well, I was moping around in New Orleans, and one day, about a year ago, I decided to go to France and see some fighting. I’m glad I came. I came for adventure. Lots of fellows come for that. Harvey, that’s the Englishman, says that’s what he came for. Maybe. Some come because they have no jobs, some because they love France. The

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place is full of Germans and Russians who came because they had nowhere else to go. Nobody asks questions in this man's outfit."

"Did you get into the Moussifrey battle?"

"Yep. That was real fighting. So was Soueida. Not like France. No damned trenches here. You get behind a stone and blaze away at the enemy. Or you charge with the bayonet. Christ — !"

He shook his head as if to drive a horrible scene from his eyes. Companions were forming in a little semi-circle behind him, envying his talk with a man from home. There were bearded men, unmistakable Russians, blue-eyed fair Germans, blond and nordic, dark Balkanites and not a few Frenchmen, who, to atone for a crime or a desertion, had joined as Belgians or Swiss.

"We pity the poor devils," continued Clare-Doty, indicating the Druses in the villages and the fortified extinct volcano craters beyond. "They are fools. They fight machine-guns, tanks, airplanes as they fought the Turks. Say, you know they believe in the transmigration of souls. They'll never die but reappear in flesh and blood after a fifteen year rest in a Chinese heaven filled with beautiful chorus girls or such.

"They fight to die. They want to die on the battle field so they can get to heaven quickly and honorably and enjoy themselves there for spell. I'd hate to be a tanker crushing them. We Legion infantry fight them fair.

"I thought they'd got me at Moussifrey. You ought to see them dancing as they dashed into the barbed wire which was full of their horses and men wriggling and kicking. Hundreds of dead. It only made them more furious. They are savages. They are good and crazy.

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“ When we were fighting around Damascus it was different. Those Arabs we fought didn't have one hundredth the courage. The Arabs did ambushes, dirty tricks, they never came into the open. Well, we were glad when our battalion got marching orders.

“ This was a great show. We were getting all ready to storm the place — every house a blockhouse — when they burst out of it and met us in the open. The guy next to me got shot in the neck. Killed. We fought for six hours. I didn't get a scratch. We went at it with bayonets three times. Our losses were light. Funny thing, we didn't find any dead Druses. I shot one, I saw him fall, then we charged and I looked for him, but couldn't find him. Ask the men — ” pointing to the eager group always expanding behind us — “ not one of them could find a dead Druse. They take them away and keep their bodies in the open so their souls can take their time in making ready for the trip to China and heaven and chorus girls.

“ The Legion takes no prisoners. Neither does the enemy. We enlist to fight; why ask, why grumble. Sometimes the food is bad. The water is bad. The heat is hell — and the fleas worse than hell. They could eat you alive unless you are tough — and we are tough.

“ The Germans are the best soldiers of the Legion. Their sergeant-majors are sons of she-dogs to their own people. The Russians are the friendliest. Mostly Wrangel men, officers and wrecked noblemen among them. They are real pals. The Germans are so damned stingy. Imagine companions facing death every minute who won't lend you a needle.

“ There's one Englishman, John Harvey. Glad I have someone to talk to. I guess Harvey is a fake name. But I don't ask him why or what. I guess I'm the only one who gives his

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right name. Our lieutenant, Vernon, speaks a little English, and now I parley-voo some too. I treat my officers decent. They can't make me out. They shake their heads and say 'crazy American' and laugh. I'm an American and they've got to swallow me whole."

Bugles interrupted.

"Say I'll be glad to get back to the South," he said, shaking hands. "I'm homesick I guess. Send me some newspapers, magazines, something to read in English. You may think I'm tough, when you look at me here, you wouldn't believe I was a gentle student in the University of Virginia not so long ago. When you write that piece, tell them in Memphis I came for adventure and I'm getting my bellyful."

He departed with a smile after saying he had something very important to tell me at reveille, at 4:30, but whether he wanted to hear about the new skyscrapers in New York or the latest Broadway wisecracks, or to tell me of his plan to flee the Legion I never found out because early next morning I begged General Andrea to let me take the first plane out as I had no desire to add myself to the casualties at Soueida.

Three or four days later, in my hotel at Beirut a French settler in Tunis, a friend of General Andrea and a semi-journalist who had visited the Legion with me, came back full of fever and dysentery. While I was giving him some of my large stock of malaria and dysentery medicine, he remarked weakly and casually:

"Too bad your friend in the Legion will be executed tomorrow."

My first thought was, it is Sunday and there is no one at the consulate.

"Desertion," M. Brochier replied to my question. "Yes, de-

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sertion and mutiny. He led the others. And you — I, personally, believe you guiltless — but General Andrea holds you responsible for mutiny in the Foreign Legion.”

It was Sunday and he was ill in bed, but when I sent in word that the life of an American was in danger Consul-General Paul Knabenshue came into action. He telegraphed to Damascus where Clare-Doty was imprisoned in the citadel, informed the state department, and went immediately to call on the High Commissioner of France, Henri de Jouvenal. I went to see the commanding officer at Beirut and prepared a statement to General Andrea, which follows:

“It was with great regret that I learned of the incident of the American Legionnaire, Clare, but I was greatly mortified to hear from M. Brochier that you held me responsible for the action.

“The facts of my interview with the American are just as I recounted them at dinner with your staff that night. I found Clare a real enthusiast for the Legion. He said he never regretted joining, loved the life, liked his companions, was proud to be the only American in the Legion in Syria and glad to be fighting for France. Not a single word he said indicated any dissatisfaction to me. He asked for some newspapers and I promised to send him some. Moreover, M. Brochier tells me he deserted the next morning, whereas it is a fact that I had intended staying another day in Soueida (were it not for the fleas) and that I had intended asking you permission to talk to Clare the next day, as he had asked to see me again.

“I have now discussed the matter with the officers at the serail here, and they are of the opinion that it may have been homesickness (“ca-fard”) due to his for the first time talking to an American, which caused the American to take the terrible decision to desert. While this may be true I must recount that in our talk Clare evidenced no great homesickness but his complete contentment in the Legion.

“Our interview was held in a group which included Major Kratzert and M. Brochier. They stood a little apart, but it was possible for M.

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Brochier, who speaks English perfectly, to listen to everything we said. I want to assure you on my word of honour that not a single word was used on either side which could in any way be termed subversive. On the contrary, it was a patriotic discussion on both sides and I was deeply impressed by the loyalty and good spirits of the American soldier. A clipping of the interview I have already mailed to Captain Georges Picot.

"You have been exceedingly kind and generous to me, and I have already written you to say how much I appreciate it. Of my attitude to you and to France there can be no doubt. I want to add that I came to Damascus despite two threats received in Beirut from the rebels that they would disembowel me if I ever entered Damascus. M. Lapierre knows of this and even offered me a body-guard, which I refused. I have within the past three days received another threat from Damascus, this time I am threatened with either hanging or kidnapping until the war is over.

"I hope I have made my position clear and I earnestly beg of you to alter any unfavourable impression you have of me."

Through the secretary of the American Consulate at Damascus, Donal McGonigal, I obtained the only statement the American Legionnaire made before his second court-martial.

"'A few hours after you left our camp near Soueida citadel,' Clare said, 'I was speaking to Harvey, the only Britisher in the Legion. Harvey was sore that he hadn't a chance to speak English to some one. We got gassing about home and suddenly decided to get away. Some Germans and others asked us where we were headed. We said to Palestine, and they said they would go, too. So we headed.

"'It is not true that we all carried rifles. We took one for self-protection. Well, we needed it. After taking French leave we went south through the Druse mountains. At day-break we spied a bunch of men headed our way. They began shooting. They were Bedouins or Arabs and probably wanted to rob us. We fought for our lives. I had the gun at the time and killed two Bedouins and the rest quit.

"'We headed at another angle. Again the Bedouins attacked. This time it was a big group. We headed around the oncoming first band.

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That night we tried to break through the encircling groups of Bedouins, all of whom were armed but couldn't shoot straight.

“The next morning the Bedouins were attacked by French and Syrian militia, which defeated them and captured us. When they came up we saw the uselessness of trying to beat them and the Bedouins, who were still cutting off our flight to the Palestine frontier, and we thought we might as well face death by court-martial as be cut to pieces by the Arabs.

“I am not afraid of death. I am told they do not kill deserters now as it is not wartime. I suppose I will get Devil's Island. Well, I have had my fling. I told you at Soueida I was getting a bellyful of adventure. Now I am fed up. Send me a tooth-brush and bed-bug powder. I am lousy. And tell the folks back home not to worry. I will get through somehow.’”

I had a consultation with Knabenshue twice a day. The officers at Beirut had said to me, “It was a case of mental suggestion, after talking with an American the Legionnaire got homesick. It is not unusual in the Legion where the enlistment is seven years and life is hard. But anyone who appreciates military necessity realizes that the court-martial decision of death for desertion and mutiny was justifiable. An army without discipline cannot exist.”

I told this to Knabenshue, who had already engaged a lawyer for the rehearing in Damascus.

“Will you care if the lawyer harps on your visit to Clare — makes it responsible for his homesickness and his desertion?” Knabenshue asked me. The case was considered so grave only an order from the president of France could save Clare. The French had informed the consulate that Clare and his followers had fired on the French who rescued them from the Bedouins.

I went to Cairo to escape the French censorship and filed

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the complete story of the desertion with the request that it be played up in the newspapers at home and in Paris so that a public opinion in favour of saving the man's life would be created and pressure brought on the president of France. All this was done. Clare, who had become Doty, was sentenced to eight years at hard labor, and after thirteen months imprisonment was reprieved and permitted to return to America. I never received a reply from General Andrea.