



DUTY

A Story of the French Foreign Legion

By J. D. NEWSOM

ME? WHY, I guess I've been in the Foreign Legion almost fifteen years. Yes, it is fifteen years next March. That's a long time. I'm beginning to forget how to talk English. The words don't come as glib as they used to. I have to stop and think.

No, I don't want to go home. Things have changed too much over there. I wouldn't know where to go or what to do when I got there. I'd be worse off than a bohunk immigrant. Relatives? They're gone, heaven alone knows where, and I don't give a damn. I did write a few letters after I cleared out, but nobody ever took the trouble to drop me a line. They were glad to see the last of me. I was pretty wild in those days.

Just between you and me and this bottle of Kebir wine (good stuff, ain't it?) I was even worse than that. I'm not boasting, but I don't mind telling you I was

headed straight for the chair. If I went home I'd have that staring me in the face. Even if the Chicago police have forgotten me, what do you think I could do? Me, a sergeant-major of the Legion?

Over yonder on the skyline, that streak of blue—that's the Tafilalet range. I know those hills as you know your own backyard. I've humped a pack from one end of the range to the other. It's lousy with Chleuh tribesmen who can shoot the badge off your cap at five hundred yards. They're tough babies—tougher than their own goats; but their women are fine. The best looking women in Morocco. I remember when we took Ksar-es-Souk you could buy the pick of the bunch for fifty centimes. Bargain prices. And then they tell you a Mohammedan is careful of his women. Some are and some aren't, and that's the long and short of it.

How's that? Fighting? What do you

think we do in the Legion, hemstitching? When there's any fighting to be done in this neck of the woods you won't have to look far to find the Legion coming up hotfoot through the dust. That's our job, fighting. We've mopped up half the world all the way from Fez to Hanoi. But there's nothing we can't do, from bridge building to painting frescoes. No matter what trade you may need you're sure to find a Legionnaire who knows something about it. The queerest bunch of *salopards* you ever came across. Russians, Heinies, dagoes—everything. All sorts, good, bad and indifferent.

You hear a lot of talk about the discipline of the Legion, but where would we be without discipline? You've got to handle these birds with an iron hand. They wouldn't be in the Legion if they were law abiding, God fearing citizens like you; they'd be home with their wives and their brats, toasting their toes by the fire, instead of forming fours in a barrack yard. They're here because they couldn't fit in anywhere else. They don't understand mercy and kindness. Certainly not! They'd think you were weak. Drill hell out of 'em, treat 'em rough, make 'em clean and smart whether they like it or not and sooner or later they'll begin to understand a thing or two.

There's a motto on our flag, "Honor and Fidelity." That tells the whole story in a nutshell. A man's no good to us until he understands what we mean by duty. It's hard to explain because it means so damn much.

Look here—I'll try to make it clear.

When I enlisted I was just plain no-good. I can see that now. I didn't know what I was letting myself in for and I thought every guy with a stripe on his sleeve was out gunning for me. All I wanted to do was drink and run around after the girls. The wine's cheap at Sidi-Bel-Abbes and, as for the girls, you can use your own imagination. It was quite some change from Chicago, believe me.

I had a chip on both shoulders and every time anybody gave me an order I took it as a personal insult. I thought I

was being smart! Oh, sure, that's the sort of coot I was, telling the platoon sergeant where he got off and all that sort of thing. But it didn't get me anywhere at all. It was my funeral. Every time I tried to start something I landed in the guardhouse or the cells, and they managed to get along without me. The hours of pack drill I've done. *Bon dieu*, what a fool!

Well, anyway, I struggled along somehow or other for four months, until I was passed out of the awkward squad and transferred to full duty. All I wanted to do was desert first chance I got, but the Legion has been in existence almost a century, and what it doesn't know about handling men isn't worth knowing. They didn't give me time to turn around. I was shot out of the depot at an hour's notice, headed for the Fifth Battalion at El Mesquine.

"Maybe you can find a black Jew at El Mesquine who'd be willing to buy your kit for twenty-five francs," says the drill sergeant, when he hands me my marching orders. He knew all about me, you see. "I hope you desert, my lad; I really do. You'll be on active service once you're with the Fifth. They'll line you up against a wall, when they catch you, and pepper you with bullets. That's what you need, you wall eyed camel—a dose of lead poisoning. It'll do you a lot of good."

I was feeling mean, for I knew that he had put me down for the draft a month ahead of my time, so like a fool I tried to clout him on the jaw just to get even with him. He was wide awake and hunting for trouble. Almost before I could clench my fist he caught me in the stomach with the butt end of his rifle—and I went to El Mesquine with handcuffs on my wrists.

We were a week getting there. It's just north of the Djebel Horad hills. There was no railroad line in those days. We had to march. Thirty kilometers a day, tripping over stones, floundering ankle deep in sand. That's one hike I won't forget. My wrists were so swollen and raw I could barely bend my fingers. See

the scars? The bracelets did that. The sun made 'em so hot the skin stuck to 'em and came away in strips. I had a grand time, all because I didn't have guts enough to keep my mouth shut while I was being bawled out.

To make matters worse I'd packed along a bottle of cheap cognac. As soon as I started drinking I cracked up. You can't drink bad hooch and tote sixty-five pounds of kit around on your back in the desert. It can't be done and that's all there is to it. On the third day out I went down flat on my face and, instead of calling for the *cacolets*, the sergeant tickled my ribs with the toe of his boot.

"It's up to you," he told me. "*Marche ou creve*—march or croak. You can lie here for all of me. I don't mind. The neighborhood is full of Beni-M'Zab who'll be delighted to carve you open and fill your belly full of stones. It's a playful habit of theirs when they find a drunken Legionnaire."

I knew enough to know I didn't want to have anything to do with the Beni-M'Zab. They're bad actors. I'd been shown photographs of troopers who had fallen into their hands. They're the worst swine in creation.

I got up, and I reached El Mesquine. How, I don't pretend to know. You get so you can march in your sleep. The oasis looked so green and cool I could have cried when I caught sight of it if the last drop of moisture hadn't been sweated out of my hide. I was in bad shape, weak and sick and mad as hell.



AS SOON as we got in I started making complaints. I wanted justice. My ribs were all bruised where the sergeant had kicked me. What I thought I deserved was a bed in the infirmary, a couple of months' furlough and a front seat on the parade ground the day the sergeant lost his stripes. I was sure they'd court-martial him as soon as I started yapping about his brutal ways. I hadn't done a thing. Oh, no!

I was as innocent as a new born babe.

Well, I was hauled up before the Old Man. Colonel Grandet, it was, in those days, a long, skinny son of a gun with a brick-red face and a white mustache which grew out halfway across his cheeks.

He folded his hands across his stomach, sat back in his chair and let me talk. He took it all in, nodding his head now and then, and smiling at me as much as to say, "My poor fellow! What you've had to endure makes my heart bleed. It's monstrous. I'm mighty glad you've come to me with your troubles."

That's what I thought. I had a lot to learn about poker face Grandet.

When I stopped he started.

"I don't expect my men to be angels," he told me, "but I do want men who can swallow their medicine without whimpering. You—you're a cheap and nasty blatherskite. You're not fit to serve with my battalion, not in your present condition. I'm going to send you to the blockhouse at Ras-el-Ghazer. Maybe they can sweat some of the nastiness out of your system. When you show signs of improvement maybe we can turn you loose among decent men."

And that's all the good complaining did me.

I didn't stay at El Mesquine long enough to find out where the canteen was. The supply column was leaving for Ras-el-Ghazer the next morning. When it pulled out I was hobbling along with the rear guard, eating dust by the peck and cursing a blue streak. Mad? I was so flaming mad I'd have put two feet of cold steel down the *vaguemestre's* throat if they hadn't taken away my bayonet. I couldn't see I'd brought it all on myself, mind you. I thought I had a grievance. They weren't going to bulldoze me. No, sir!

Ras-el-Ghazer. The name didn't mean anything to me, but I soon found out a whole lot. There's only one way to describe that place, and that's hell on earth. Even now it makes my hair curl to think of it.

It's fifty miles from El Mesquine—a small blockhouse built of red stone, squatting down in the middle of the pass between steep red cliffs. Everything was wrong with that damn place. There isn't a tree or a twig or a blade of *alfa* grass. Nothing but stone and sand and those damn hills trembling in the heat. It's hot all right down there in the pass, hotter than anything I've ever known. The wind blows twenty-four hours a day, so that you live and eat and sleep in a cloud of gritty dust.

Dust! Hell, how I came to hate it. Dust in your food and in the bottom of your cup; dust in your teeth, in your clothes, up under your eyelids. It wears the skin off the soles of your feet and chafes your lips till they crack open and bleed.

And the water at Ras-el-Ghazer. One good drink of that stuff, unboiled, is enough to put you under the sod. And the flies! And the vermin! And the eternal, everlasting scrape-scrape-scrape of the sand piling up against the walls . . .

But all that was only the frosting on the cake, as you might say. None of us were sent to Ras-el-Ghazer for our health. We were there because we were the scum of the battalion—the soreheads and the jailbirds who couldn't be made to fit in. I thought I was a tough *hombre*, but alongside of some of those *salopards*, why, I was as simple and good and obedient as a choirboy.

What that gang needed was discipline. It got it good and plenty. Discipline with a capital D, and then some.

A captain called Bellot was in charge of the blockhouse. He looked as though he'd been made for the job; the hardest man, bar none, I've ever met. Six foot two, thickset, bullnecked, with little pig eyes and a mouth like a rat trap. When he hit you you stayed put for the rest of the day. And he used his fists if you so much as batted an eyelash in his presence. He had us lashed to the mast.

To back him up he had a squad of fifteen hand picked noncoms, sergeants and corporals, who seemed to enjoy being

at Ras-el-Ghazer. I wouldn't have them in my company today on a bet. When I come across a soldier who won't do his stuff I hand him over to the *Zephyrs** and let 'em take care of his training. What they do is none of my business. But those *chiourmes* of Bellot's might have been his brothers. They kicked first and gave their orders afterward. We did everything on the double, dress, eat and work. On our toes all the time.

You get the idea? They had us out on the parade ground ten hours a day, drilling to the tap of the drum; a gang of half starved scarecrows. There wasn't a whole uniform in the detachment. When our shoes wore out we went barefoot—and Bellot fined us for "damaging government property."

That's the kind of a lad he was. He went too far. God alone knows how we stood it. We envied those who died, but we didn't bother to put crosses on their graves. It was every man for himself at Ras-el-Ghazer.

But that sort of treatment did us no good. Discipline without justice is a joke. It made liars and hypocrites out of some, but most of us simply went from bad to worse. If Bellot and his noncoms hadn't carried revolvers they would have been torn to pieces.

There were fifty of us cooped up in the blockhouse, but the biggest scoundrel of all was a man by the name of Vaillard. A bad egg, if ever there was one. Bad? He was crapulous. He must have been about fifty; a short, broad shouldered fellow with a gray beard full of lice and a big, red veined nose stuck in the middle of his face like an overripe tomato.

He was what we call a *débrouillard*—a wire puller—clever as a fox. He never missed a chance. We though he was great. The rest of us were on short rations (stale goat's meat and stale bread) but Vaillard lived on the fat of the land. And as for wine, he must have had duplicate keys to the wine locker in the sergeants' mess. In fact, I'm sure he had. We knew where to go when we wanted a

* Penal Battalion.

drink. Vaillard always had a cache somewhere about in the blockhouse. That's one reason why he was so popular.

For another thing, he had the gift of the gab. He'd been a professor of political science at Rennes University. When he was drunk he could spout international politics by the hour. Interesting stuff, too. He'd sit there cross legged on his cot, all green and bloated in the moonlight, picking cooties out of his beard while he told us about all the dirty deals the different governments were putting across.

When he was very drunk and maudlin he used to boast about how he had cleared out of Rennes, leaving his family in the lurch—a wife and three kids. He used to gloat over it and call 'em every dirty name he could think of. I don't know why he quit teaching. That's one thing he never mentioned, but it must have been some damn dirty business, judging by the man he was.

But that don't explain the hold he had on the Legionnaires. He used to preach mutiny almost within carshot of the sergeants, but other men did that too. At first I couldn't dope out why he had so much power. I found out more about him after I'd been at Ras-el-Ghazer about a month. Our room corporal was found in a gully not far from the blockhouse with a knife stuck in his back.

"Some Chleuh marauder did that," says Bellot after one look at the knife. "That ought to teach you imbeciles not to wander about in the pass as though you were promenading up the Champs Élysées."

And he let the matter drop. Even then I had a hunch he was lying. He didn't seem to be as cocksure as usual, and he kept looking at us out of the corner of his eye as if he were trying to catch us off our guard.



THAT night there was a good deal of whispering in the hut, and the man in the next cot to mine said in my ear:

"Vaillard got him. That's his fourth.

One of these days he'll get Bellot, and Bellot knows it."

Vaillard wasn't saying anything. He was picking cooties out of his beard and smiling like a heathen idol.

"How about it?" I asked him a couple of days later. "Did you bump him off?"

We were out on the road at the time, leveling the sides of a *oued*. The platoon sergeant was standing on the bank above us with a rifle tucked under his arm.

Vaillard looked up at him, then he looked at me. The whites of his eyes had turned yellow.

"This pick," says he, holding the weapon under my nose, "this pick has got a loose head. I should detest intensely, my dear Porter, to see it fly off and come in violent contact with your skull. The result would be simply disastrous. Get back to work, you baboon, and don't bother me with your foolish questions."

That held me for quite some time. I didn't want to wake up some morning with a bayonet in my heart.

After that, though, we rubbed along pretty well. He used to kid me about being an American—said I didn't show the proper pioneer spirit. When we were out breaking stones on the road, and the thermometer stood at a hundred and ten, he'd start telling me about the American Revolution and why the French came in on our side. He was a nut all right.

But I wasn't thinking about the War of Independence. I was too busy sweating blood. Ever since the murder the noncoms had been riding us for all they were worth. They were just beginning to be a bit rattled—all the more so because Bellot, who drank like a fish, was slowly going to pieces. It wasn't nice to watch; a big fellow like that getting all fat and puffy and soft. One minute he would be all over us, slobbering because we were having such a tough time; the next he'd fly into a crazy temper and hand the whole gang a week's punishment drill. We didn't know whether we were coming or going.

We were all set for a blow up. You could feel the strain growing worse and worse, day by day, week by week. One man did go crazy. We didn't have side-arms, so this fellow sharpened the edge of his tin spoon and hacked his throat open. It was a messy job, you can take it from me. He was two hours dying. His death rattle woke me up, but we didn't interfere. There was nothing we could do. Vaillard, standing stark naked by the bed, paddling in the poor devil's blood, gave him absolution . . .

My teeth were chattering. I think that was when I began to turn over a new leaf although I didn't realize it at the time. I went out in the yard—there was a new moon hanging above the pass—and was as sick as a dog.

It was some time after that that Bellot sent a confidential message to headquarters asking the colonel to send along another officer to assist him. He said he was sick and needed a rest, and he also told the colonel that the detachment was showing signs of unrest due to the pernicious influence of certain "dangerous elements" which he intended to deal with summarily as soon as help arrived. You could tell after reading the first couple of lines that he was in a panic. We saw the letter because the clerk steamed open the envelop and made a copy to pass around.

"That settles it," says Vaillard. "I suppose I am one of the dangerous elements referred to by our dypsomaniac. I'm a gentleman and a scholar and no swashbuckling mercenary can humiliate me. Delcasse once said to me, 'We are the only two men in France who understand the complexities of the Rousseau-Spolinski convention.' He was wrong; I am the only man who understands it. I could blow Europe wide open tomorrow morning if I told all I knew about Clause V of the secret document—and I'm at the mercy of a hog like Bellot who can't even write decent French. He's only said one true thing; he needs a rest. By and by I'll see he gets it."

Bellot's panic had spread to the non-

coms. They were as jumpy as hell. Some of them tried to softsoap us; others lived with one hand on the butt end of their guns. They were afraid to issue us with picks and shovels for fear we might use 'em as weapons. We spent our time drilling in the yard, with the white-hot sun boring into our skulls and the sand scouring our eyelids. One of the non-coms drilled us while the others mounted guard, ready to shoot.

Then one night just as I was dropping off to sleep Vaillard came and squatted on the end of my cot.

"My boy," says he in a whisper, "just between you and me, would you like to see a good deed done? I am on my way to cure Captain Bellot of cirrhosis of the liver directly attributable to his intemperance. You have fairly steady nerves; perhaps you would like to witness the operation. It will be quite painless."

"Nothing doing," I told him. "I do all my killing in broad daylight. And anyway, if you skewer Bellot they'll bring up a machine gun section and blast us into the middle of next week. I want to get away from Ras-el-Ghazer with a whole skin."

"You're a yellow bellied coward," says he, laughing all to himself. "A filthy, crawling, good for nothing coward. I'll have to do the job alone, though I am a scholar bowed down with years and learning. You'll follow me like a lamb when I say the word. It's only three hundred kilometers to the Rio del Oro border, and I'm the man to lead you there, like Moses pointing the way to the Promised Land."

Rio del Oro is Spanish territory. We couldn't have reached it, not in a million years, but no scheme was too crazy for us to talk about in those days. Talk's cheap, and it helped us to forget what we were up against at Ras-el-Ghazer.

Still I didn't like to be an accessory to the crime, as they say at court-martials. Creeping up on a drunken man and murdering him didn't appeal to me at all. And after all there was something to be

said for Bellot. He wasn't much good, but we were a darn sight worse. I said something of the sort to Vaillard. First thing I knew he was pricking the skin over my ribs with the point of a knife.

"Upon my soul," says he, blowing his breath in my face—and his breath smelled like a sewer for his teeth were nothing but green snags—"I mistook you for a forthright rogue, a Bayard of the gutter, *sans peur et sans reproche*. But I see that I am dealing with a typical Yankee, a sniveling, cant mongering Puritan. You have a conscience! Probably you think you have a soul. I am so disappointed that I am tempted to put you without further delay in a position to discover the non-existence of your Yahveh."

"You're wrong," says I. "I never belong to New England. I was born in Chicago."

At that he laughed some more.

"Then there's some hope for you yet," says he. "I'm told Chicago is almost as corrupt as some of our European centers of learning. But if you move while I'm away, Porter, I shall be compelled to kill you."

With that he tiptoed out of the hut. I stayed put. It wasn't my business to protect the captain; he had a whole arsenal in his room. So I sat up in bed and lit a cigaret. I wasn't alone either. Several other men were awake too. If I'd made a move they'd have piled right on top of me.

Vaillard had been gone about ten minutes when we heard a commotion in the courtyard. It was pitch dark. All I could see through the window was a group of three, four men standing by the gate. One of 'em was carrying a storm lantern. They were too far away for me to catch what they were saying. After a bit they moved away from the gate and headed toward Bellot's hut.

"They've caught Vaillard and shoved him in the guardhouse," somebody said. "They were bound to get him sooner or later."

That's what I was thinking too, but the next moment who should come cat-

footing into the hut but Vaillard, sweating with excitement.

"I fixed him," he told us. "I had to work fast. The hyena bit me while I had one hand over his mouth. He was squealing like a rat. I couldn't find his damn heart; he's got ribs like barrel staves, and I'm dripping blood."



I WAS all through with Vaillard from then on. That man was a ghoul. The glow of my match lighted up his bare, flabby body. He wasn't telling any lies. His arms were red to the elbow and he was streaked with blood from his hair to his feet. A mess.

I started to say something, but he shut me up.

"You poor fools," he snarled at us, "haven't you any brains at all? Hell's going to bust loose in about two seconds. Didn't you see 'em out in the yard? That's the new officer they've sent up from headquarters to help Bellot tame us. I nearly bumped into him. Now listen; I've started something. It's up to you to finish it. You take no more orders from anybody except me. See these?" He held up a couple of revolvers he'd picked up in the captain's room. "First man shows any signs of wobbling gets a bullet in his nut. We've got to get the keys to the storehouse. We can't do anything without guns and ammunition. There's no hurry and dōn't get rattled."

Whichever way you look at it, it was a bad business. I didn't like taking orders from Vaillard worth a cent. And there were a good many other guys just like me—willing to crab all day long but leery about taking chances when we got right down to brass tacks. We'd been kicked about so much that we were sort of used to it, and at the back of our minds most of us were hoping to get away from Ras-el-Ghazer some day. Just then, though, our prospects weren't so hot.

Well, there was a good deal of shouting going on over in the officers' quarters where they'd found Bellot's body, and

before long we saw the lantern bobbing across the yard—coming our way.

Two sergeants and a corporal came prancing into the hut.

"Stand by your cots!" yelled Sergeant Kolinski. "Stand by for roll call and kit inspection. I'm ready to shoot to kill. The captain's been murdered and the *salopard* who hacked him to pieces is going to get what is coming to him."

I knew what he was after. There was no washing water at Ras-el-Ghazer (we did all our washing at the well on our way back from roadwork) and Kolinski was pretty sure whoever had killed Bellot wouldn't have had time to scour himself clean with sand. He had a darn good idea, too, who the culprit was, for instead of waiting for us to line up he made a beeline down the room for Vaillard's cot. That's where he went wrong. The corporal was holding the lantern above Kolinski's shoulder, and the light blinded 'em both. They were right on top of Vaillard before they saw he had a gun in his hand. At that range he couldn't miss. He shot Kolinski through the heart. The sergeant flopped over backward, knocking the lantern out of the corporal's hand.

Moulet, the other sergeant, who was standing just inside the doorway, covering us with a rifle, fired a couple of shots at random. We had him down, and the corporal too, before they could do any harm. We trussed 'em up with strips torn from our blankets and shoved them in a corner.

"Don't kill 'em," said Vaillard. "They may come in handy as hostages. We've made a good beginning—two revolvers and three rifles. We're not as helpless as we were. If I know anything about the mental processes of our little playmates they'll leave us in peace until daybreak. We're under cover and they know it. You can curl up and sleep. We'll post a couple of sentries just for luck."

Things panned out pretty much as he had expected.

Somebody opened fire on us with a light machine gun, but the bullets flew

wide or smacked into the stone walls.

As soon as it stopped Vaillard yelled:

"At the next burst of fire I'll prop Sergeant Moulet and Corporal Argotti up in the window and use 'em for sandbags."

"How about Sergeant Kolinski?" a voice shouts back.

"Kolinski's deader than cold mutton," Vaillard sings out. "One more shot from that *mitrailleuse* and Moulet is going the same road."

That did the trick. After that they left us alone. It was a long night, believe me. We didn't sleep much. We were too busy wondering what was going to happen in the morning.

I was expecting them to let drive with everything they had as soon as it was light enough for them to see across the courtyard. With a couple of those light machine guns they could have kept us bottled up in the hut until we were damn well ready to surrender. We had no water to speak of in our bottles, and in that heat we couldn't have held out more than twelve hours.

"Leave it to me," Vaillard kept saying. "When the zero hour strikes I'll tell you how to act. We have five guns and two prisoners; that's more than we need to put the fear of God into their black hearts."

I couldn't see it, but I didn't butt in. There's no sense in arguing with a maniac with a gun in his hand.

We had plenty of time to cool off. It was broad daylight before anything happened. Vaillard was yelling himself hoarse, threatening to shoot his prisoners if they didn't come over and parley with him. After awhile the door of the orderly room opened and out came the new officer—a young chap in a white uniform with his *képi* cocked over one eye. He looked right smart.

He stood on the threshold for a minute or so, listening to the things Vaillard had to say; then, as though he had all day ahead of him, he took out a cigaret, tapped it on his thumb nail and lit it.

"That's all right," he called out.

"Don't throw a fit. I'm coming right over."

Before crossing the yard he took off his belt, revolver holster and all, and dropped it in the dust.

"If you want to shoot an unarmed man," says he, "now's your chance. Judging by the sound of your voices, though, you're too hysterical to shoot straight enough to hit a haystack at ten yards."

And he ambled across the yard as slow as you please, keeping his hands well away from his pockets just to show us he didn't have a gun hidden in his pockets.

"Let him come," says Vaillard. "If we can lay hands on this young pup we can dictate our own terms. We're as good as in Rio del Oro this minute."

In came the lieutenant—a second lieutenant at that—a kid of about twenty-three; freckles on his nose and a small mustache. Nothing exceptional about him. You'll find much the same sort of junior subaltern in every garrison in North Africa.

"I think," says he, brisk and matter of fact, "I think it's high time we talked things over. I am now in command of this detachment. It happens to be my first independent command, and I do not particularly relish the idea of beginning my career with a mutiny. It's not done. May I remind you of the fact that you are Legionnaires, and that your first duty is obedience. Your privilege is to be proud of your regiment and to do nothing that will injure its good name."

Positively, that's what he said. It brought down the house. Telling us, a gang of ragged, lousy, barefoot mutineers, that we had something to be proud of! We laughed till we choked.

The kid stood there, very quiet and steady, puffing away at his cigaret—but his lower lip was twitching, and I could see a vein throbbing fast as hell on his forehead.

By and by we stopped laughing. It wasn't as funny as all that. If the looie had been a few years older I don't think he would have stood a chance of getting

out of the hut with a whole skin. But, damn it, he was so confoundedly young and so much in earnest it took the wind out of our sails. We hadn't seen a clean shaven face or a clean uniform in six months.

"Hey," one man sang out, "is nurse here too? Run home to nurse, *mon petit rat en sucre*, before the bogey man gets you."

There was a lot more of the same thing. The looie waited until we ran short of ideas. He threw away his cigaret and folded his hands behind his back.



"IF YOU are quite through," says he, "perhaps you will condescend to listen to me for a moment or so. I shall be brief.

"In the first place, I have been sent here, not to second Captain Bellot, but to replace him.

"Secondly, battalion headquarters has decided, after a careful investigation, that this detachment has been stationed too long at Ras-el-Ghazer. I am to take you back to El Mesquine.

"Thirdly, a replacement draft is on its way here at the present moment to relieve you. It will arrive the day after tomorrow at the very latest.

"I hope," says he, "I make myself clearly understood. It is obvious to the meanest intelligence that you need a change of diet, a change of scenery, not to mention new uniforms and new boots."

There wasn't a sound in the hut. Quiet—I could hear the blood creeping in my ears.

I could see those three hundred kilometers of desert to the Rio del Oro border stretching out and out and out. And even supposing we got there, which wasn't likely, what was to become of us? We were in the Legion because we were not wanted anywhere else. We had no money, no friends, nothing. On the other hand, here was this kid telling us that he was to take the detachment out of the damn pass, all the way back to El Mesquine.

The young loonie let his words sink in. "I don't have to tell you," he went on after awhile, "that your present attitude is not going to get you anywhere. If you were to abandon your post and desert you would not get far. The replacement draft would be on your trail in short order. Moreover, this hut can be enfiladed from the windows of the orderly room, which would make your present position singularly awkward if anything untoward happened. You know that as well as I do."

We did. He didn't have to rub it in. "And now," says he, "we come to the crux of the matter. You have behaved most disgracefully, but as this is my first command and, also, because I realize from what I have heard that mistakes have been made on both sides, I should like to wash the slate clean and make a new beginning."

He had us on our toes. Vaillard, standing back of the gang, was clawing at his beard and muttering to himself, shaking his head from side to side as if he were trying to remember something and couldn't. We weren't bothering about him much just then.

"How do we know this isn't a trap?" somebody shouted.

"Because I say so," the lieutenant flashed back. "You know damn well I am not lying. But—" he held up one hand—"I am not through yet. Wait. Before we go one step further the murderer or murderers of Captain Bellot and Sergeant Kolinski *must* be placed under arrest."

Not one of us looked at Vaillard. I'll say that much for us. But you could feel the strain growing worse every second. My knees were knocking together.

"That's not making a clean start," one man pointed out.

The lieutenant shook his head.

"I will have nothing to do with murderers," he snapped. "I give you five minutes to decide what you want to do. My conditions are final; you must accept them or suffer the consequences."

Just them Vaillard came to life.

"Gangway," says he, shoving us aside. "Let me talk to this little squirt." He had a revolver in either hand. "Come here," he ordered. "Come close, I have a few things I'd like to say myself."

The lieutenant didn't budge.

"I am not taking orders from you," he answered. "Whatever you have to say, say it quick!"

So Vaillard had to go to him. There was a queer, angry look on Vaillard's face. His eyes were wide open and as round as saucers.

"First off," says he, "what's your name?"

"That's right," agreed the lieutenant. "I forgot to introduce myself. I am Lieutenant Jean Vaillard."

At that Vaillard threw back his head and roared with laughter. He was crazy mad.

"I knew it!" he yelled. "Look at him! God in heaven, it's my own son they've sent out to command the detachment!"

The lieutenant was as white as a sheet. His lips were moving, but he couldn't make a sound. He seemed to shrivel up, so that he looked about a hundred years old.

"So that pious, mealy mouthed mother of yours managed to give you an education, did she?" roared Vaillard. "You look like her! The same sweet, kind face, and the same steadfast eyes that drove me to drink. And you've come out here, you nasty little hunk of vermin, to give me orders!"

The lieutenant couldn't take his eyes off Vaillard.

"My father," says he and his voice was all shaky. "My father—Adrien Vaillard of Rennes University—I thought . . ."

"To hell with what you thought," snarled Vaillard. "That's me: Adrien Vaillard, professor of political science, pillar of the church, living in three rooms with a saint and a cherub. Smothered in your damn, syrupy respectability until I was so sick of it I could have killed her and you—the manly little fellow, the pride of his mother's heart!"

He caught the lieutenant by the arm and swung him around.

"This," he shouted at us, "this, gentlemen of the gutter, is my one and only son. I'll bet you any money he was brought up to worship my memory and to look upon me as the unfortunate victim of unmoral companions. Knowing the brat's mother as I do, I'm sure no evil word ever passed her lips. And this namby-pamby, mushy infant wants to tell us what to do and how to behave. We're too tough for you. You can't make a dent in our hides. We're through! We're going to dishonor our regiment and break your poor little heart. You can go back to that female you call your mother and tell her what kind of a man I am now."

At that the lieutenant flared up.

"You'll leave her name out of this," says he. "We'll settle this as man to man."

But you could tell that the kid didn't know what to say or what to do. All the starch had gone out of him.

Vaillard clouted him over the head.

"Don't talk to me in that unfilial manner," says he. "I won't have it. And don't make those cow eyes at me. I'm not a ghost even though I am the skeleton in the Vaillard family closet. A mighty hefty skeleton too, and don't you forget it. I'll wring your neck if you try to humiliate your gray haired old papa."

"There is no doubt about that," he said slowly. "You are my father. It is not for me to judge. You have lived your life as you have seen fit. But I warn you my duty is to my regiment. I intend to let nothing whatsoever interfere with the performance of what I consider to be my duty."

Vaillard laughed at him.

"I don't give a curse about you or your duty or your regiment. You'll do as you're told or you'll go the way Bellot went. If it comes to a fight we'll butcher every man with a stripe on his arm. You can't stop us. We're through with your *saleté* of a regiment. Through. We want the keys to the storeroom and we want

'em in a hurry. Go get 'em and bring 'em back to me. And you'll have that machine gun dumped in the courtyard where nobody can get at it. If you don't do as I say, these two men—" he pointed to the prisoners—"are going to die. Their blood'll be on your head. Take it or leave it. Now go!"

But the lieutenant didn't budge an inch.

"What you want is out of the question," he answered, looking his old man straight in the eye. "Altogether impossible. I can not help you." He turned to us. "This detachment will fall in outside in five minutes, as I said once before. At the same time Captain Bellot's murderer must be handed over. When these conditions have been complied with we can carry on."

Vaillard caught him by the throat and shook him like a terrier worrying a rat.

"You idiot!" he shouted in his face. "You poor, sniveling imbecile—I killed Bellot and I killed Kolonski! I'm the assassin you are so anxious to find. Here I am. Now what are you going to do about it? I'm the boss of this outfit. What I say goes. Not a man will lift a finger against me."

The lieutenant couldn't take it in.

"I don't believe it," he gulped. "You're lying, trying to shield the real culprit. You couldn't, you wouldn't do such a thing."

"Couldn't I?" bellowed Vaillard, shoving his hands under the lieutenant's nose. "Look at 'em! Look at my arms! See those brown streaks! That's Bellot's blood, by God! I ripped out his life, swine that he was. Get out of here, you little fool, and muzzle those hounds of yours. We want the keys to the storehouse and no interference." He put his paws on the kid's shoulders. "You understand, Jean-not, my boy, it's your own father who's telling you to do this. Your own father. Now go—go quickly!"

The lieutenant backed away from Vaillard's bloody hands. He gave him one last look, then, stiff as a ramrod, he turned to the right about and marched

out of the hut. I saw him stoop and pick up his belt before he went into the orderly room. He didn't once look back.



"THAT got under his skin," chuckled Vaillard. "I thought he was going to burst into tears. That was a master stroke, gentlemen of the gutter, a stroke of genius, if I do say so myself. He may talk big about his duty, but when it comes to shooting his own pop he'll curl up like that well known botanical freak, the *Minosa pudica*, which you know nothing about. We're safe! We're off! We're on our way to dear old Rio del Oro. In about one minute my little Jean will be running back with the keys on a red plush cushion."

We waited one minute, and we waited another, and still there was no sign of the lieutenant.

"We must hang together, brother scoundrels," Vaillard kept saying over and over again. "If you give way now you'll be breaking stones with the penal battalion from now until the crack of doom. Don't trust that kid. All that stuff about going back to El Mesquine is just so much hot air. Stand by me now and I'll see you through safely. Are you with me or against me?"

Most of us were sitting on the fence, too dumb to think, just waiting for something to happen.

A couple of years seemed to go by. Then the orderly room door swung open again and the lieutenant came out, chin up, shoulders well back, stepping out as smart as a whip as he'd been taught to do at the officers' training school.

He stopped in the middle of the parade ground; if the machine gun had opened up on us as we came out of the hut it would have caught him in the back first.

"De-tachment!" he sings out. "*Rassemblement!* Fall in!"

He knew how to give an order. No weakness, no hesitation. It came as crisp and clear as a bugle call.

"Fall in! Markers this way!"

He was bluffing and we knew it, but somehow it got us. It was nine-tenths

force of habit, I guess, and one-tenth admiration for the kid's nerve. Out there in the sunshine, telling us to fall in! It was worth trying just for the fun of the thing—to see how it would work.

Not a word was said but, first thing you know, a dozen of us were edging over toward the door.

"You can't do that!" yells Vaillard. "You cringing dogs, are you going to let a sniveling *enfant de troupe* tell you what to do? Stand fast! I'll break him in two across my knee. I'm his father, whether he likes it or not and, by God, he's going to listen to me!"

By that time we were out in the yard, dragging our feet in the dust, not quite sure even then what we meant to do.

Vaillard ran out and stood in front of us.

"Stand fast!" he shouted. "Let me deal with this squirt. I'll teach him not to butt in when he's not wanted. Jean," he went on, turning to the lieutenant, "I'm warning you; don't interfere. You can't stop us. Nothing can stop us!"

The lieutenant's voice was as hard as steel.

"Soldier Vaillard, you are under arrest, charged with the murder of Captain Belot. You will be tried according to law by a duly constituted court-martial. I order you to put down your arms and surrender."

"Telling me to surrender!" roared Vaillard, bearing down upon the lieutenant. "Do you think I give a curse for your duly constituted court-martials? Do you think I give a curse for you? I don't. You're not going to send me to the stake—not if I can help it!"

"For the second time," said the lieutenant, "Soldier Vaillard, I order you to surrender."

"Be damned to you," said Vaillard. "You're not fit to live, you lousy cur. No man is fit to live who'll hand his own father over to a firing squad."

"I am an officer of the Legion," says the kid. "I have taken an oath and I shall abide by that oath. For the love of God, stand still!"

Vaillard lumbered forward.

"Your oath!" says he. "You blithering jackass, you talk like the school teacher I used to be."

He was ten yards or so from the lieutenant. I saw him raise his gun. The lieutenant stood like a rock.

It was too much for me. I started to run, but the others held me back.

"This is their show," one of 'em told me. "Man to man, let 'em fight it out."

"Will you give me those keys?" says Vaillard. "Yes or no?"

"No," says the lieutenant.

Vaillard let drive. The lieutenant didn't bat an eyelash. A red spot appeared on the left sleeve of his tunic, level with his heart.

"Soldier Vaillard," he called out, "for the third and last time, I summon you to obey the order of your superior officer—surrender!"

Vaillard had stopped dead in his tracks and was squinting down the sights of his gun, cocking his head a little to one side.

"I gave you fair warning," says he, "but you're too conceited to listen to reason. For the fiftieth and the last time, will you give me those keys or will you not?"

The kid's voice broke as he cried:

"Father, I can't! Father, I've got to do my duty!"

Vaillard fired again. He was a bum marksman: that's because the rank and file aren't taught to use revolvers. The bullet tore the *képi* off the lieutenant's head.

Vaillard let out a howl and ran forward, firing as he ran.

The lieutenant ripped open the holster on his hip and yanked out his gun. Very deliberately he raised the gun. I was looking straight at him and if ever I have seen a man in torment the lieutenant was suffering then.

He fired when Vaillard was within six feet of him. One shot. Vaillard pitched over on to his face. His feet drummed against the earth for a second or so, then he lay still.

And that was that.

For a long time the lieutenant stood

with his head bowed, brooding over the body, his face all puckered up as though he were going to cry. Maybe he was crying; I don't know.

After awhile he let the gun slip out of his hand and looked up at us, at the detachment. We'd learned our lesson; we were standing on two ranks—heels together, hands down, chests out—scarecrows on parade.

He couldn't quite dope it out. I suppose he was expecting us to lynch him. Bit by bit the truth dawned on him; the mutiny was all over. We were surrendering unconditionally.

Do you think he thanked us, or made a song and dance as some might have done? No, sir. He did not! He didn't ever mention his old man stretched out dead at his feet. He kept his thoughts to himself as an officer should do.

His left arm was dripping blood, but he didn't bother about that either.

He cleared his throat.

"You form up," says he, "like a pack of wall eyed recruits, which you are not. Up there, in the center! Eyes right—Dress! Steady! That's better, but it's still rotten. De—tachment, 'Tention. From the right—number!"

And that's what I mean when I tell you, in the Legion, it's your duty first, and your duty last, and your duty all the time. Nothing else counts. If the lieutenant hadn't acted as he did, today I'd be a bum knocking about somewhere in Rio del Oro instead of being what I am, a company sergeant-major.

Lieutenant Vaillard? Sure, he's still going strong. He's a captain now. Fact is, he's my company commander right this minute. He's all right; we get along fine. He knows his stuff. A tight mouthed, stiff necked son of a gun. Not once in fourteen years has he ever mentioned Ras-el-Ghazer. You wouldn't think he knew the meaning of the word sentiment, but it's a funny thing—do you know what he does? Every year, if it can be managed, he goes back to the blockhouse and puts a wreath on old Vaillard's damned grave. It's got me buffaloed.