



A Short Short Story
by Georges Surdez

Illustrated by HAMILTON GREEN

WHEN THE Inspector General, who had commanded a battalion of the French Foreign Legion at one time, beheld the Xth Company of that Corps, in a review at Sidi-bu-Makash, he almost wept. Your true Legionnaire has a "something" that sets him apart from all other soldiers, a "something" that has nothing to do with externals, with the old-fashioned kepi or the blue sash—an inner awareness of his important status in the world.

By an unfortunate coincidence, a captain come to North Africa merely to put in his turn of colonial duty had been placed in charge of an outfit in which new men predominated. He had been an honest man, a good chief according to his lights, but he had turned out weird hybrids, contented, overfed men who strolled the streets mildly and resembled line infantrymen in masquerade costumes.

"You should have seen them march," the Inspector informed the colonel commanding. "Looked like a firemen's parade in the old village square. Something must be done."

"I'll send them Captain Talifer."

"Ah?" the Inspector seemed a bit worried. "I wouldn't want anything too drastic, you know."

Nevertheless, Talifer was appointed. He was a genuine Legionnaire, of the pre-war brand, with a stern, bony face and bushy eyebrows. His jaws slanted to one side, and old-timers still talked of the time, somewhere near Rheims, when he had remained in line with a shattered chin for three days, rather than to consent to turning his Legionnaires over to an outside officer. The colonel gave him no warning, merely sent him down to take charge.

"Lethargic, lethargic," Talifer muttered as he inspected the men. "I'll have to shake their blood a bit."

He marched them twenty-five kilometers on the second day of his reign, under a broiling sun. And on the third day, he marched them forty. In all his time in the Legion, he said, he had never seen such marching! And the men did not mind their bleeding feet, their aching shoulders and flanks, as much as his sarcasm and his unrelenting endurance. For he had dismounted and covered the ground on foot, sneering at complaints, insulting the perspiring, groaning stragglers.

"What a gait! You should be issued market baskets instead of rifles. Legionnaires? You march like ducks!"

Over forty-five, tall and lean as a stork, he did not show a trace of fatigue. And the wondering men almost believed then some of the yarns they had heard. Talifer believed in fundamentals and on the days when there was no march, there was drill. The captain taught

them to salute, to pivot. His "rehabilitation" of the company, as he termed it, progressed.

"If I had to take you into action," he commented once, "I'd send the enemy a note of apology. After all, preparing to meet a company of the Legion and having you appear would be a serious let-down."

At the end of five weeks, the captain could stand by and watch the sections march by without explosions of temper, and with only half a sneer. The Legionnaires who had known had remembered, those who had never known were learning. And there were what the book regulations call "outward manifestations of an inner feeling", for they walked cockily.

Where a group of them could be herded by a native policeman a month before, now a single glance was enough to bring a curse. The traders and the men of other military units grew to realize that there were Legionnaires in town. Talifer, scanning the police reports, grinned with satisfaction, for he considered them the barometer of his men's spirit. Which did not keep him from punishing them severely, after getting them out of trouble with the cops.

He knew that he had brought them all, his Legionnaires, to a pitch of intense hatred of him. That also was part of his business. Better hate than contented softness. In a little while, he knew, he would be able to relax his grip a bit, and they would get to understand what he was doing and like him for it. And, anyway, in the army as in love affairs, hatred is preferable to indifference.

Late one afternoon, after a particularly strenuous session of drill, Talifer led his company back to barracks. Then he trotted his small, wiry Arabian through the gateway, rounded a corner and entered the narrow, cobbled street leading to his quarters.

From a window of the second-story dormitory, the muzzle of a Lebel rifle peeped out, wavered, set rigidly. A pale flame flickered through the sun-light, the detonation thudded from wall to wall. The copper bullet passed a fifth of one inch from the captain's right ear on its way down, smote a paving block, ricocheted to skim beneath his nose, bounced off a wall and went whining into space.

Talifer reined his horse, turned in the saddle to peer upward. All the windows were open, but not a face showed. His short mustache bristled in a fierce grin, his tiny eyes squinted a moment. He seemed about to continue, then shrugged, wheeled his mount about, and reentered the gate.

"Bugler, get me a bugler!" he roared. And when the man arrived, breathless, he ordered, "Call the sergeants!"

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The noncoms appeared, trotting, many of them buttoning their tunics as they ran. Of late, when a bugle sounded, men no longer walked in that company. And they lined up before Talifer, who had dismounted and strutted up and down angrily, swishing his boots with his riding-crop. They felt that this was but a beginning—he would order everybody out, there would be a general smelling of rifle barrels, an investigation. Well, he might be a pre-war Legionnaire, but he would find out that he did not know everything. Whoever had attempted to kill him must have taken precautions against discovery. It would be a good laugh to see his frustration, his helplessness, before almost two hundred blank faces.

For long minutes, Talifer walked restlessly, automatically halting before one of the sergeants from time to time, indicating a dull button, a mud spot on a boot. They restrained their amusement. He was so furious he could not speak, they thought, and in the meanwhile, that gun was being cleaned, regreased.

Suddenly, the captain stepped back, started to speak, in a surprisingly gentle voice, "In my efforts to make Legionnaires out of you, I appear to have aroused dislike. No—hate—hate strong enough to make some of you wish to kill me. I had forgotten that Legionnaires are also men, not merely machines that walk and drill. In the future—"

Talifer paused, shrugged, took a deep breath and roared out, "In the future, I shall remember that Legionnaires must not only walk and drill, but that they must know how to shoot. The usual marches and drills will be continued. But we shall insert two additional hours each day until further notice, for practice on the rifle range.

"Until today, I did not think there was a man among

you with the guts to shoot a man he hated. I was wrong, I apologize. I shall make no further investigation to discover who fired at me. And I refrain not because I am soft-hearted, but because I am ashamed. I have been in the Legion twenty-five years, but I never thought I'd see the day when a Legionnaire would miss a mounted man, with a rifle, at forty paces.

"That disgusts me. Dismissed."

HAMILTON
GREENE