



*Unerringly they  
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footprints*

# Outguessed

*by Ralph Milne Farley*

LIKE a blazing, red-hot ball of molten copper, the tropic sun sank slowly beyond the heat-shimmering sand-hills of the desert. The barren wasteland, still baking from the prolonged heat of the long, cloudless day was breathlessly quiet.

To exist in that furnacelike atmosphere, human life needed water—water, far more precious here than glittering gold; cold, sparkling water to cool feverish lips, to stir hope, to gird human machinery for the uneven battle against time and heat.

Out into the blue-blackness of the sweltering tropical night, from the little oasis which held the French encampment, sneaked Private Jean Jacques Arnaud, deserting from the Foreign Legion.

It would take only three days' time for him to reach the coast, where he would find friends to aid him the rest of his journey to France to his dying mother. He knew he could make it. That is, if the emergency ration in his belt and his supply

of water held out, and if that accursed Captain Lutain did not outguess him.

Private Arnaud had planned for this getaway for months—months of suffering under a brutal commandant. He had studied maps. He had volunteered for all expeditions from the fort, a duty usually shunned by Legionnaires; and had stored his memory with every bit of information which he could pick up, or observe, as to the surrounding terrain.

As a result, he knew the country for many miles to the northward, more thoroughly than most men know their own backyards. He knew, too, the perils that would beset him on the journey. But, of these, he really feared only one: the lack of water.

He was counting now on his carefully stored knowledge, and on the large quantity of water which he was carrying, and even on the known brutality of Captain Lutain to deserters, which brutality he himself had many times

witnessed, and from which he was now fleeing. His was no simple, direct plan of escape. Every detail of his own actions and of the anticipated actions of his enemies must click exactly, in order to accomplish his end.

Although his absence would undoubtedly be discovered at bunk-check after taps that night, his corporal would probably conclude that he had merely overstayed his evening's leave in the native village four miles deeper in the desert. And, even if his absence was rightly interpreted as desertion, the tracking party would not set out in pursuit of him until sunrise.

That would give him nearly twelve hours start. A man can do a lot with twelve hours, especially if his plans have been well laid.

At ten o'clock the next morning, the searching party, a squad patrol, mounted on camels, following Arnaud's clearly marked footprints, came upon a canteen lying in the sand. The cloth at the bottom was damp, but the canteen was empty.

The hard-faced corporal in charge grinned. Private Arnaud had not figured on a leaky canteen. That would cut down his water supply.

At noon of the blistering day, they caught up with him, staggering dazedly in the heat. Unerringly, they had followed his footprints, which showed clear and distinct in the desert sands, marking a bee-line toward the coast. He had not covered as much distance as a man should in twelve hours, but the hard trudging in the soft sand had undoubtedly delayed his progress.

Toward the end of the trail his tracks had wavered, indicating that the wiry Legionnaire was fagged out. His lips were swollen and parched. There was not a drop of water in his last canteen.

Arnaud welcomed them as rescuers.

He kissed their tanned hands, and begged to be taken back to camp. Also he begged for a drink; but this the corporal, under express orders from Captain Lutain, refused to give him. Arnaud raved and stormed, until at last the squad had to tie his hands and feet to keep him quiet. Then they boosted him onto a spare camel, and set out for the return trip.

When they neared the fort late that afternoon, the corporal cut his bonds, and forced him to dismount and walk—made him run, in fact—prodded by bayonets all the rest of the way. The other members of the squad patrol had been given plenty of water to drink, and had drunk it as ostentatiously as possible in front of poor Arnaud; for Captain Lutain had picked the most hard-boiled members of his outfit for this "rescue."

On arriving at the fort, the deserter collapsed to the ground, and lay moaning through swollen lips. The searing sun beat down upon him. Captain Lutain came through the gate, twisting his black, waxed mustache, to receive the report of the corporal. Promptly, he kicked the prisoner in the head.

"Get up, you son of a camel!" he roared. "Have you learned now that a Legionnaire cannot leave the Legion until his term is up—no matter if his dear old mother is dying?" He said these last words with a sneer.

But Arnaud only lay quivering on the sands, and groaned, "Water! Water, *mon capitaine!*"

"What!" exclaimed Lutain, in mock surprise. "Has not this poor sufferer been given something to drink? Quick, men, fill up his canteen."

Arnaud raised his head, and fixed on the hated captain a look of childlike gratitude. Then with trembling fingers, he unslung his empty canteen and handed it

up.

Captain Lutain took it.

“Fill it!” he commanded, passing it over with an almost imperceptible wink to the hard-faced corporal. The corporal stooped and filled the canteen with handfuls of dry desert sand.

Private Arnaud collapsed once more to the ground, his lips lathering.

“Water!” he moaned.

The captain’s teeth showed slightly below his waxed mustache, and his leer was not a pleasant one to see.

“Oh, a thousand pardons, *monsieur*,” said he, with a courtly bow. “Is it water that you wish? Quick, orderly, a glass of water! Iced water, please. The gentleman is thirsty.”

The orderly departed within the stockade, and soon came running out again with a brimming glass in his hand. He held it to the officer. Once more Private Arnaud raised his head, and hope shone in his eyes.

Captain Lutain held the precious beverage out to him, cool and sparkling in its frosted glass. But, as the parched man reached for it, the officer fumbled and dropped it, spilling the entire contents on the sun-scorched sand.

With an agonized groan, the thirsty soldier flung his body forward and lapped at the moist spot where the water had fallen; but the commandant, with an oath, kicked his head away, and then rubbed the spot into the dry sand with the heel of his riding boot.

Arnaud clasped the officer’s legs in entreaty, only to be kicked aside.

“So!” hissed Captain Lutain. “You would run away from us, eh? You would prefer the dry and waterless sands of the desert to the cool shades of our pretty little oasis. Go, then! You are free to go. No one

will follow to bring you back. But you must go without water.”

“No! No!” cried the deserter.

“Bah! Drive the dog away!” commanded Lutain.

This was more than even the thick-skinned squad could stand. It had happened before. It would happen again. Each one of them could picture himself some day in the place of poor Arnaud. A murmur of disapproval arose from the ranks.

Captain Lutain’s black eyes glinted frostily. “Silence!” he thundered, his waxed mustache bristling. “The next man who questions my word goes with the deserter, on his waterless march to the sea.”

The men subsided.

Arnaud was kicked and prodded to his feet, then driven off to the northward at bayonet’s point, into the shimmering heat. Staggering, stumbling, zigzagging, he disappeared over the ridge of a large sand dune.

As the dune cut him off from the view of those at the Fort, his body suddenly became more erect, thought he still continued to stumble and zigzag, for the sake of the tracks which he would leave. A smile of triumph contorted his parched lips.

For there was water ahead! A full canteen, which he had hidden in the sand just beyond the next rise, the night before. And beyond that, there was another canteen, and yet another and another, stretching all the way to the spot where he had been captured that noon. Enough water, if he were careful, to last him to the coast!

Arnaud had known of the brutal habit of Captain Commandant Lutain, to turn deserters loose to shift without water. And he had banked upon that habit.