"They're mean guys."

NINE PICKED MEN
Third of four parts
By GEORGES SURDEZ

"Chesty" Maddock, former football ace, had seen his college career blasted by scandal and tragedy, and had fled to the Legion, enlisting under the name of Brandon.

Now, one of a recruit detachment at Sidi-bel-Abbes, Brandon had learned that there are easier ways to escape from the world than behind the iron fists of the Legion.

From the very first, he had been marked for special attention. Detesch, his room corporal; Kolb, the sergeant at barracks—officer after officer had signaled him out for special punishment. After whipping the former in a café—and spending months of punishment duty to make up for it—Brandon was ready to listen to any feasible plan to escape from a life that had become intolerable. And in the person of Matloka, a Spaniard who offered money and safe conduct in return for escort across the Spanish frontier, Brandon had found the way out.

From Dar-Kaid-Hassan the nine picked conspirators whom Matloka had chosen pulled strings to be placed in the same scouting detail. The rest was easy. Disarming the sergeant in charge, they struck across the desert—not toward the sentry posts, but for Spanish territory, three days' march away!

CHAPTER VIII
THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

They were across.

Sometime, somewhere, in the fleecy morning mist, the detachment had passed the unmarked frontier between the French Protectorate and the Spanish Riff. Matloka and Janreich, standing on the crest they had reached, checked with their maps and notes, picking out landmarks. At last they nodded, satisfied, and shook hands joyously. The others gathered close for confirmation.

Nine men in full French uniform, bearing arms, on foreign soil, nine de-
sертers who had accomplished the first leg of a strenuous journey. Alone, Lambke seemed shaken, nervous. Brandon looked at him with vague pity, for he trusted these men who had managed the undertaking so capably.

The leaders were speaking together in rapid German that beat on the ears like a drum. There was some discussion as to the best direction to take, the first port of call. Matloka had a sheet of very thin paper in his hands, on which were typed two columns of names. Brandon learned that in the first column were the names of outposts, in the other the names of their commanders. Jardins was asking how long ago it had been written, and shrugged when he was told it was over three months old.

He was of the opinion, Lambke translated for Brandon, that Matloka and the group should head for a large center, close to the coast, there to hide and negotiate with some important officer, a major, a colonel, so as to have several hundred bayonets on their side immediately. But Matloka shook his head: It did not enter into his plans, manifestly, to have come so far to apply for a post as second-in-command to one who would reap the power and the credit.

"Tabrettin is nearest. Lieutenant de Torrealta is in charge." Matloka had shifted to French again. "We served together and were more or less related. He is as sick of the swine as I am, I happen to know. Native soldiers in the garrison. Let's go."

A quick gesture stilled possible protest. They followed him, marching openly on the trails now, in plain sight of villages. A native passing, perched on a small donkey, looked at them and gaped. Then he dug his bare heels into the animal's flanks and trotted away faster.

Brandon walked on, filled with pleasant thoughts. In another week, possibly, he would be boarding an Italian freight-er at Melilla. Another week to Genoa, time to get in touch with his family through the consulate, to establish his identity, then passage home! He could be in New York inside a month, three weeks if he took a fast steamer.

The path led uphill, through pebbly embankments four feet high, separating groves of trees. For some minutes, an unnatural silence had prevailed around them. Then a sharp challenge resounded, and a soldier stood in the road. He was clad in brownish khaki, wore espadilles instead of boots, the flesh showing through the lacings between the canvas uppers and the rolled puttees. He was young, swarthy, and appeared very resolute.

Matloka held up both hands, strode forward slowly, talking fast. Brandon understood that he was asking for the officer. Lambke touched his elbow, hung back. "Looks bad. They're tipped off, meeting us halfway."

"Sure," Brandon retorted. "The French notified them that a gang of us was on the loose. They don't want a lot of armed foreigners prowling about."

Another man had come in sight, a third. One of them wore chevrons, probably a non-com. He was arguing with Matloka, pointing at the Legionnaires standing some distance away.

"He says we have to lay down our arms right away," Jardins explained to the rest. "Matloka says he will not surrender except to a commissioned officer. He's smart—he doesn't show that he knows who it is. Now the other guy is saying that they have a lot of men all around. Matloka keeps asking for the officer. I think the guy's going to call him—"

In fact, the sergeant left, while the two privates barred the way, bayonets ready. A few minutes passed, slowly. Matloka brought out a package of cigarettes, offered it to the soldiers, who refused, took out one, lit it. His hands were steady, but Brandon could see that
the knee of his left leg jerked every few seconds. He was not as sure of himself as he had pretended to be. Or perhaps, no matter how sure he was, the stakes he played for were so enormous as to affect his nerves.

At last the sergeant returned, accompanied by a taller, slimmer, younger man, who wore a garrison belt and had metallic ornaments on his cuffs, colored tabs on his collar. A handsome, dark fellow, with an easy smile and great love of life, that was sure. Brandon warmed to him instantly.

And his sympathy increased, when, with six paces of Matloka, the young officer halted suddenly, saluted, then stepped forward respectfully to shake hands. It was the beginning. Matloka would win them over by one, just as he had just done with this man. The soldiers with the purple sashes—Spanish regulars, Jardins said—grounded their arms.

MATLOKA led the lieutenant a few feet away from his men, talked earnestly. At first, the other nodded approval. Then Brandon, his heart sinking, saw that he was opposed to what the deserter suggested.

The two came toward the group of Legionnaires. Matloka’s face was tight, his eyes blazed with anger. His companion appeared apologetic. They exchanged glances, Matloka grinned as if to say, “Well, go ahead and see how they take it,” and the Spaniard started to speak in French.

“My duty should permit me no hesitation. You are on Spanish soil and should surrender your arms at once. However, your comrade assures me you will refuse. I don’t care to take the responsibility to shed blood, so I make you the following proposition: If you are unwilling to give up your arms and await decision by higher authorities after due investigation of your case, I shall permit you to return to the French side, under guard of my men, but preserving your own weapons. The frontier is but five kilometers south of here, and in an hour this unpleasant situation would be out of my hand. So far as I am officially concerned, you may have lost your way, and in this region, strict rules cannot be adhered to.”

Janreisch looked at Matloka, who shook his head. Then he consulted the Legionnaires with a sweeping glance. He saw that all realized, as he did, that by the time they attained the border, French troops might be waiting for them. In any event, what would be the purpose of remaining loose on the French side?

“This gentlemen,” Janreisch stated, indicated Matloka, “is our chief. Let him make the decision.”

The lieutenant was cracking, Brandon could see.

“I have sixty men within call,” he declared. “Sixty—”

Matloka resumed speaking in Spanish. The younger man shook his head, started to walk back to the sentry post. Matloka followed him, threatening, pleading. It was no use. The officer halted, and called out: “You have five minutes to lay down your arms, or to head for the border. After that, force must be used.”

To show his resolution, he drew a big automatic pistol from his holster. Matloka then stood in the middle of the path, raised his voice, declaimed resounding sentences. Brandon recognized such words as liberty, honor, traditions, soldiers. The officer called out for him to stop. It was his duty to end seditious speeches.

Matloka continued his harangue, addressing the soldiers.

“Los renegados perjudicados—”

There was a shot, then three more. Brandon dropped to his knees, instinctively. And the scene before him decomposed itself into tiny incidents, each
one detached, separated.

After firing, the officer and his men had vanished from the road, taken cover prepared in advance. The three warnings had been given, the Spaniards were within their rights. Matloka was standing as before, but both hands grasped his middle; he was bending forward, his mouth agape, his face twisting with pain, like that of a drowning man gulping for air.

Then he collapsed, face down, huddled in the roadway.

"STEADY," Janreisch said.
"Watch the embankments. Shoot anything that moves. Who has the automatic? You, Krüger?"
"Me," Konnor declared; "I use it better."
"All right, cover the road ahead. I'll see how badly the captain's hurt. Come along, Brandon."

The American followed him, his shoulders hunched, his palms moist. More shots could whir down the lane any moment. Janreisch grasped Matloka, started to turn him over on his back. But the man startled them by rising himself.

"The swine knew where he was shoot- ing—through the belly—" he explained, panting for breath. "But look—" He opened his capote, the top of his trousers, lifted his shirt. Instead of the bare flesh, he revealed a sort of leather corset, made up of small pockets, flaps shut by brass snap-fasteners. "That's how I keep my gold money. A cuirass of gold, as it were! But even at that, a nine millimeter slug has a kick. I thought I was dying."

Janreisch smiled thinly. "You're lucky. But as long as we are all alive and well, how do we get out of this? They don't seem to fall for your speeches, as you led us to expect. Better hurry up and find that cousin of yours."

Matloka laughed. "That was he! But he has sworn allegiance, he says—forgetting that he had sworn allegiance before, and not under compulsion. Told me that he was under special supervision, and could not take a chance. That his men would not obey him if he departed from instructions. And that was once a gentleman!"

"What do we do?" Janreisch kept to the point.
"Swing north."
"As Jardins suggested this morning?"
"Exactly," Matloka agreed. "Events proved me wrong. That often happens, you know."

"Not often to the same man in this line of business," the former staff-captain reminded him. "You almost had an excess of proof a moment ago."

Matloka gave him a hard glance, but made no reply. He ordered the detachment to climb the right embankment, and they emerged cautiously into the open, among the small trees. There was no sound. Yet there were sixty men very near, sixty armed men. And they were nine—no, they were eight.

For Lambeke, finding that his speculation was failing, had vanished like a shadow.

"Well," Matloka remarked. "We can do without him. Come on."

He took the lead. Brandon's opinion of him had altered with the rest. Matloka, despite his financial backing, was not a genius. But he was to be admired for his courage, his energy, his physical endurance. In addition to the common burden of pack, weapons, ammunition, he carried gold, which is no light metal. He had overreached himself, that was obvious, but that is likely to happen to anyone who starts a difficult mission.

A hundred yards, two hundred. The party paused to scale a small wall dividing fields, a partition of uncedmented dried stones. And a string of coppery, spasmodic detonations ratted out from the left, an automatic weapon. They
huddled down, crouching below the crest of that fence.

"I think Breiss caught one," Konnor announced.

Breiss had caught one, below the left arm-pit, through lungs and heart. He was on his side, his face very calm, and the perspiration slid down his hardening flesh as on brown marble. Brandon looked at him, unbelieving. Dead!

He had seen few dead men in his life. And he had never seen anyone pass over from life to death with that horrible simplicity, one moment thinking, moving, and the next nothing. He had not been four feet away from Brandon, and the bullet which had entered his flank and "stopped his clock," must have passed within inches of the American. His throat tightened, but his chief sensation was one of terrified indignation.

"They're killing people here," he mumbled stupidly.

They had killed a man and were trying to kill more. Bullets flecked the stone wall, whining shrilly, in long, curving streams of sound. Brandon, flushed and furious, snapped the breech of his rifle open and shut, sliding a cartridge into the chamber. They wouldn't get away with it!

Two from nine left seven—seven, after ten minutes!

IN the lee of the wall, an argument was raging in German. Janreisch had suggested that so far they had not fired a shot, hurt no one. Matloka invited him to quit if he felt like it, reminded him, however, that he had accepted the trip of his own free will, and had received pay which he had done nothing to earn. Jardins agreed with the chief that a bargain was a bargain, that they had not expected to find everything quiet and peaceful.

A detonation nearby broke up the conversation abruptly. Dankowitch was ejecting the empty shell, showing his even white teeth under the blond mustache.

"Eh bien, Janreisch my friend," he laughed; "I'm afraid someone has been hurt." He indicated Breiss with a lift of the chin: "He's paid for. One to one."

"And Lambeke?" a voice inquired.

"Oh, Lambeke? They can have that coward for nothing."

"You're a man, Dankowitch," Matloka complimented.

"Thanks. Yes, I'm a man, and a man who's lived long enough not to have reason to surrender to a pack of garlic-eaters. Your pardon, Matloka! I'm a Russian; I'm a Legionnaire. If they want my gun, they'll have to earn it."

Brandon, fired to emulation, peered over the top of the wall, pushing his rifle ahead. He could see a few silhouettes moving about beneath the trees. He selected one, pressed the trigger—and missed. But he must have come very close, for the chap dived behind a trunk.

"We better get moving," Matloka outlined. "We'll be caught from the rear if we halt here too long. Brandon, take Breiss' ammunition. No need to take away his breech-block."

Brandon overcame his reluctance, unbuckled the dead man's harness, and slung the belt holding the three leather pouches over his head and across his chest, like a bandolier. It weighed ten or fifteen pounds, and was awkward to carry. Yet cartridges might be needed later.

"Could you rid us of that automatic of theirs, Konnor?"

"Sure thing—"

The gunner had improvised an embrasure for his piece. Brandon himself had located the enemy's weapon. The Spaniards were firing from behind screening bushes. The long magazine was snapped into place, Krüger knelt by, holding another ready in his hands.

"What would you say, Janreisch,"
Konnor asked: "Three hundred and fifty?"

"About right."

Konnor lay stretched out full length behind his weapon, which seemed a prolongation of his body. He fired five shots, too high, well over the heads of his targets, five shots too low, into the ground. Then, with a grin, having ascertained the exact spot, he let go with fifteen shots in quick succession.

Brandon saw men rising, to get away; there was the brief pause as Krüger replaced the ejected magazine, and the men were blasted away. As the last one dropped out of sight, the automatic stopped short, precise to a split second.

"Thirty-seven?" Konnor asked, as Krüger removed the unfinished magazine to insert a full one. The other counted the remaining cartridges, nodded. "Two over what I thought. They don't take cover as quickly as bicos. We're showing them what we are, eh?"

Having gained the respect of their foes, the Legionnaires climbed over the wall. They marched on the slope in open order. Only a few shots greeted them.

Brandon continued like a cork in a torrent. He refused to think of the difficulties ahead: Miles to be covered in hostile country, toward an unknown destination and a reception that was growing highly speculative. He was wanted by the French Government for desertion with arms and baggage, eight years of prison at the minimum. And now he was wanted by the Spanish Government as a murderer.

CHAPTER IX

"NO MAN ESCAPES!"

MELILLA might as well have been located on the moon.

Again all was quiet, save for the cracking of equipment, the rattle of weapons. Brandon wondered if the pursuit had ceased, if the others had been content to report them to the next garrison. After an hour more, he grew hungry and ate some of the soggy Arab bread he had stuffed in his musette-bag yesterday afternoon. The others likewise ate as they walked.

All were oppressed by the sensation that no matter what Matloka said, they were adrift, without definite goal, lacking purpose. When an extravagant scheme fails, it falls very flat. And Brandon's mind played with the same thought that occupied all the others:

"Why not ask Matloka to split his money, scatter and allow each man to make out as well as he could?"

They reached a stream, a thin trickle of clear water oozing in a deep bed. And they halted to refill the canteens. There was nothing in sight on either bank for several hundred yards, nothing save brown boulders and thick bushes.

Brandon uncorked his metal bottle, dipped it in the cold water. But before it was full, he had to leave, bounding upward, until he crashed to safety in the middle of a bush. The air had whispered again, the shooting had resumed. When he looked back, there was only one man near the water, sitting, grinning foolishly. It was Jardins. The left leg of his trousers showed a widening patch of darker color.

"Come on, get out of it—" one of the Legionnaires called.

"I'd like to," the Hollander shouted back: "But I think my leg's broken. I can't use it. No, keep out of it, you fool—" for Krüger was rising as if to go to his help. "All right, I'll try it!"

He planted the butt of his carbine on the ground and started to hoist himself erect. A burst of remote detonations, the splashing of water, cracking on stones, and he dropped back and moved no more.

"Get his ammunition—" Matloka
started, looking around to designate a man.

Dankowitch shrugged.

"Too risky for what it's worth, old man! And we have plenty left for the six of us. By the way, those compatriots of yours are not unintelligent. They cover the spots we must pass with a few sharpshooters, and intend to pot us at leisure. Haven't seen one for a long way, and I've been looking!"

The party had gathered some thirty feet from the stream, among the bushes. Brandon became aware of a sensation of cold down his leg, and saw that his opened canteen was leaking water. He screwed in the plug mechanically. But a few moments since he had removed it, and nothing was changed in the scene, save Jardins out there and the absence of the white birds.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Janreisch asked. He was using French now. "Surrender would be unhealthy. Your people appear to have hit a plan to decimate us time after time without much danger to themselves. Can you guarantee that—"

Matloka shrugged, shook his head: He could guarantee nothing.

Brandon pitied him. He was so bewildered, so astonished that events did not bow to his will. And these men who had called him captain now contemplated him almost with hatred.

"You aren't sure that you can swing anyone over, are you?" Janreisch challenged. "Well—"

"Eh, my dear fellow," Dankowitch interrupted him, "it isn't done, you know."

"What?" Janreisch asked, angrily.

"What you are doing. Protesting when your card does not turn up, when your number fails to come out. I don't know where you were educated, really!"

"But it is so stupid to lose one's life like this!"

Dankowitch looked at the ex-captain, removed the cigarette from between his lips. As danger grew more and more pressing, he was growing more and more calm, deliberate.

"What's your life worth?" Dankowitch shrugged. "Not very much. Matloka found you a Legionnaire, with seven years of Legion back of you. You were an officer—la belle affaire! Who hasn't been an officer at one time or another, somewhere or other? Suppose you are shot ten seconds from now—who loses anything? Not us, certainly not you. You get so excited over words, when the facts are so simple." The Russian held out his long arm, offering his hand to Matloka. "Dear friend, we do not blame you. If you die, die at peace."

Matloka grasped the hand, silently. Brandon would have liked to do the same thing as Dankowitch, but he was no Russian and could not discuss sentimental urges freely and elegantly, even now.

Their leader had played in poor luck. He was the greatest loser. The best proof of his belief in himself had been the gambling of his life. He had swayed eight men into sharing his fate, but Brandon felt less childish, less gullible, when he thought that others had believed in him enough to spend thousands of dollars and much effort on backing his undertaking. And those others had been more careful of their dollars, in all probability, than Legion-
naires were of their lives.

IT was odd, Brandon thought on, how differently from the expected various men turned out. Janreich, educated, confident, military, was repining like a fool. Matloka, the man of steel, was bending like a tin blade. Jardins, the placid Dutchman, who looked least like a hero, had thought of the safety of a comrade, even when he knew he was doomed. Lambek, a military medal man, had turned coward. And Dankowitch was emerging as the dominant personality in the surviving group.

"We better come to a decision," Janreich persisted. "If Matloka has nothing to suggest, let him allow someone else to take charge."

"Dankowitch," Matloka gave his choice.

And one after the other, Konnor and Krüger approved. The Russian's first reaction was to laugh.

"Of course, when the battle is lost, appoint a Rusky to command. Then defeat will appear normal. As a matter of fact, I am the ideal man for chieftain of a band of beaten counter-revolutionists, possibly the only one who's had serious experience. Konnor, the lucky fellow, was so drunk in the Crimea that he cannot possibly remember a thing.

"I compliment you upon your choice, if only for one reason: You are certain not to go through the process of choosing a leader again. For I am the last survivor, invariably. This will make the eighth or ninth time since August, 1914. Pardon me if I bore you.

"My decisions will be dictated by logic. We are convinced that the Spaniards have planted snipers at convenient spots for several miles northward, so that northward progress is suicide. On the other hand, we cannot surrender here, for the good fellows are so heated by now that they would kill us as soon as it was safe. That leaves the west, barred by a blockhouse, the east, which leads nowhere in particular. And the south, where our former comrades are waiting to greet us with open arms and a prison sentence. South we had best travel. Men escape from prisons; no man has ever emerged from the grave. With one exception—" he crossed himself, Russian fashion.

"I must point out that—" Janreich started.

"Silence in the ranks, there! I know that we cannot cross that stream immediately, that they are still waiting. We will therefore depart, as if keeping on northward. That is, five of us will depart, leaving one of us hiding here with a couple of hand-grenades. If I know anything about soldiers, as soon as we are out of sight, those who are watching this creek will come to loot our good friend's body. A Legionnaire with grenades and a repeating rifle should account for them, especially as we shall not go very far and will return at the double. Who'll stay?"

"I will," Brandon offered. But all had spoken at almost the same time.

"Experience is needed," Dankowitch told Brandon, kindly. "I believe Krüger to be the best man. Krüger, old man, you have one German to avenge, one German to atone for. Don't hurry, don't miss—and sock it to them."

The five started off noisily. They walked through the bushes of the bank, edged up hill. Konnor had the automatic ready at his hip, and Brandon was at his side, with a replacement magazine. This made him realize that the group was getting short of hands. Or a comparative novice would not have been functioning as loader!

A shot crashed out ahead.

"A signal that we have moved away from the stream," Dankowitch explained. "Fired in the air. They have instructions not to draw our fire except from sure shelter. Good discipline
among your chaps, Matloka. Too good for us, eh? Slowly now, and look about you—" He strolled in the lead, rifle nestled in the hollow of his arm. Brandon thought grimly that he had nothing to worry about. That Russian, he was safe until the others were dead!

THEY all expected the explosions of grenades, yet the crashes caught them by surprise. One, two, three, four, in rapid succession, then two more, when the five Legionnaires already had turned to run back to the ford. And as they ran, they heard the detonations of a Lebel carbine—one-two-three—a pause as the clip was ejected, replaced—one-two-three—a pause—one-two!

Krüger stood on the bank, laughing, as they trotted up to him.

"Two got away," he announced. "I was so excited that I kept missing them."

Dankowitch gave him a shove. "Come on, nice work. Get across before they get wise—"

There were several bundles of khaki in the shallow gully of the brook, and Brandon saw others upstream. But it was only a fleeting vision, as he was running hard to keep up with the others. His breathing was labored, his back ached. He loosened Breiss’ ammunition belt from around his shoulder, tossed it away. He was crazy to carry it, as he never had a chance to shoot!

Dankowitch dropped to a fast walk.

"Their traps are not prepared to the south, and we're less than six kilometers from the border. Come on, Legionnaires, win yourselves a court-martial instead of a coffin."

"A fancy coffin they'd give us," Konnor opined.

"True, they must be angry with us. How many did you get, Krüger?"

"Four I am sure of. They came down, sure enough, as soon as they heard that signal shot. I let them bunch up, turn over Jardins. They're young fellows, green as hell, but mean guys. The one with the red chevrons, a corporal, maybe, laughed and shoved his heel down in Jardins' mug. After that, I didn't feel so sorry for them."

"I flung four pills quickly, and they all went down at once, so I got to thinking I was pretty good and had got them all. I threw two more to be sure, and I'll be damned if three of them didn't wake up and start to run upstream as if the devil was after them. I got one with my first shot, the one in the lead, figuring out that he, being the further, would be the harder. But when he dropped, the others started to dodge around, to leap on the bank and down again, never stopping for a second. I should have started at the rear, where the others wouldn't have noticed, and worked up to the lead guy. They were so scared that I started to laugh, and missed. One of them was hopping as he disappeared, so I think he caught one."

"You should be cited," Dankowitch complimented, "but I don't believe you will be. But we're not doing so badly, seeing we are up against regulars. Konnor got at least four, I got one—that's nine killed, one or more wounded, and fifty scared stiff, against two of ours killed. If they were only Spanish Legionnaires, the colonel would forgive us. He hates the Spanish Legion, because, he says, it cheapens the name. 'Musicians,' he said, 'Mountebanks, monks, Spaniards, anything you wish. But Legionnaires, never!'

They passed over the wall behind which they had crouched during the first attack. Brandon recognized the spot, saw the glitter of cartridges in the grass. Breiss' corpse was not where they had left it. They came upon it, a few yards farther, stripped naked, very likely by native marauders.

"We're making good time," Dankowitch commented. "We were a couple of hours from here when Jardins was
killed, and we've just made it in less than one. Let's keep trotting."

Suddenly, he stopped, looked at the others with a peculiar smile. The road on which they had met the Spaniard soldiers first was below them. Then he lifted his arm, pointed. "Five kilometers to the border. We have an officer's word for it. Is this guarded? One way to find out—"

And he leaped down the embankment, stood still.

"All right, come on."
They slid after him.

"Look there," Krüger said. He indicated.

Another nude body, ignobly mutilated. Forgetting their danger, the six crowded near. It was Lambeke.

"We misjudged him," Brandon said, prompt to contrition.

Dankowitch indicated the dead man's chest with the muzzle of his rifle. There were five small holes grouped close together, near the heart.

"No. He surrendered, all right," the Russian stated. "And they executed him, probably after we started to fight. As for what's been done to him since, I don't like to think Europeans did it. Native prowlers again. Looks like a woman's job, eh, Konnor? Poor slob, he learned that what seems safest often isn't. See what surrender means. Janreisch? You're no longer fighting Muscovite barbarians."

"Cut out the war reminiscences," Janreisch growled, "and let's get going."

CHAPTER X
GANTLET OF DEATH

THEY kept to the road for a few hundred yards, then turned south on a scarcely discernible trail. They had followed this for fifteen or twenty minutes when a knot of men emerged from the thicket two hundred meters ahead, scattered rapidly and opened fire. But although they had had the advantage of surprise, and attacked resolutely, they did not hold their ground long.

Konnor raked their line with the automatic, assisted by Janreisch as loader, for Brandon had tired of being inactive and was shooting, shooting, until the metal of his Lebel rifle grew hot. The onset did not last two minutes. The regulars retreated to cover, pursued by carefully aimed bullets.

Then Brandon noticed something that upset him: Matloka was crying. He blamed nerves at first, then he understood: It was hard for a man to fire on his countrymen, perhaps harder to see them beaten when they were two to one. Dankowitch grasped the ex-captain by the shoulder, urged him forward.

"You'll get used to it. I had to. And, if it's any consolation, your murdering little cousin is done for."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He was the third man from the left, and the only one an officer, with a cross-belt. How many this time, Krüger?"

"Hard to tell. Five, six—there were about fifteen when they came out. Why?" Krüger shrugged. "What difference does it make? There were sixty, you know, and they probably got reinforcements since morning."

"Statistics," Dankowitch replied. "I'd say six." All this time, they were walking rapidly, across country, turning, watching. "I got two, I suppose you got one. Brandon? One? Konnor? Oh, you exaggerate! Four, indeed! Say two. All that fall aren't dead. Six, as I said. I have an eye for such things. Six and nine make fifteen! Against two—"

"Three—" Janreisch corrected.

They stopped and looked at him. At first, they saw nothing unusual, until the Austrian indicated his body, below the fourth button of his capote. There was a dark stain there. Dankowitch circled the wounded man, clucked his
tongue. The missile had pierced through, and Janreisch's loins were drenched with blood. How he had walked even this short distance was hard to understand.

"Bad?" he asked softly.

"I'm afraid you can't go much further."

"I do feel weak. But there's little pain yet."

"Good." Dankowitch mechanically patted the doomed man's arm. "We'll leave you your gun and cartridges. Maybe you can collect a few. You see, we—"

"Of course, naturally," Janreisch protested. "But see here—I may faint away. I don't want to be taken alive, manhandled, tortured." He was insanely calm, in voice and gestures. "Will you do me a favor? I have religious objections to suicide. Otherwise, I would have gone long ago. Will you please—"

Janreisch knelt, painfully, linked his hands over the bore of the rifle. Brandon felt his brain cracking. This could not happen. But what else was there to do? Leave him wounded, to be beaten before his death? Remain at his side and lose six lives instead of one?

"My duty," Matlokha said. He drew the automatic pistol taken from Fullard, verified the loading, approached the kneeling man. "Forgive me, friend," he said, and pulled the trigger.

Brandon was aroused from his horrified stupor by a vigorous kick in the pants, and Dankowitch, with a ferocious scowl, ordered him to move on. Already the other three were some distance ahead.

"I'm sick," Brandon protested.

The Russian shoved him again, and when he had the American moving, talked in a friendly tone: "The border can't be more than three kilometers away. Come on, lad, you're not the kind that gets killed on a first scrape. You have the sign on you. You'll live to go to prison and regret it."

THEY trotted and walked, trotted and walked. Brandon had discarded his bags, shoved the few articles he wished to keep in his pockets. The fatigue of the last three days tore at his muscles, numbed his brain. He was hungry and nauseated at the same time. When he closed his eyes to clear them of the burning sweat, the mumbling, quivering lips of Janreisch appeared to float ahead, and Matlokha's lean hand, the burnished metal of the gun, the little patch of the wooden handle, brown and criss-crossed with indented lines, showing above the flesh of the tightening fingers.

"Trot—" a long, jerky interval. "Walk—trot—walk—"

Were those men made of iron? Was there no limit to their endurance? And all of them were several years older, all except Konnor much smaller men. But they had had the proper training; their legs had covered endless miles, their backs had borne endless burdens. They were professional soldiers, plying a trade that does not permit improvisation.

"Quarante-sept—forty-seven—"

That was Thorn's signal. But why was Lesley giving it in French? A shift, a shift—the American moved sidewise with an effort; a hearty thump caught him in the flank. "Sacre nom de dieu, rookie, look where you're going?" Shrouding mists in his head were ripped open, and Brandon saw Konnor's furious face. He apologized. "All right, all right, but you're pretty big to go blundering around. Well, what do you think of it?"

"Of what?"

"Forty-seven cartridges, that's all I used today. I got at least six guys. I think two more, but what's the sense of arguing? Say six. Eight cartridges apiece, with an automatic rifle. And Matlokha said when we started that we shouldn't use the automatic, that it wasted ammunition. What does he
want? With a carbine, Krüger got one with eight cartridges, and he's a good shot. You can't take Dankowitch into consideration—he shoots clean, through the head, up to four hundred meters—but you don't find a guy like him in a thousand riflemen. I bet you that out of the half dozen shots he's fired today, not a bullet was wholly wasted. He's an exception. What I mean is that an automatic, properly handled—"

Brandon listened to the big Slav's continuous chatter as he went uphill, tensing his leg muscles with distinct effort to haul his weight toward the crest.

"Some fellows, Brandon, can never learn to use an automatic properly. It isn't played like a hose. It comes natural to me—"

"Like piano playing to some people," Brandon remarked.

"That's it. Without boasting, I'm a—a—"

"A virtuoso," Dankowitch called over his shoulder. "A virtuoso of the automatic-rifle. Just like Krüger is good with the grenades. And that's why you're a grenadier when in regular formation, while Krüger handles the automatic. You never saw an army in the world that didn't spend loving care on sticking the right man in the wrong place." He called a halt, and they drank from their canteens, lighted cigarettes. "Well, we've covered at least four kilometers, but the devil only knows whether we're on French soil or not. Let's have a look at the map, Matloka."

Matloka shrugged. "Jannreich had it. I forgot—"

Dankowitch looked at him, his blue eyes flashing. Then the familiar, ironic smile flashed in turn. "Oh, well, I suppose one does forget things. You'd have made a fine Russian officer. I remember one time, in Rumania, when two batteries could not fire because some youngster had forgotten to provide alcohol for the recoil cylinders. There was plenty of water, but that froze."

"Sorry," Matloka started. "I seem to make an ass of myself—"

"We all have done that, or we wouldn't be here," Dankowitch consoled him. "We'll chance it and halt at the nearest convenient place. I don't know about you chaps, but I'm done in."

They plodded on once more. About an hour and a half of daylight remained; they had been on the go since before dawn. Dankowitch at last indicated a rugged hill, what the French term a piton, and they ascended to the top. There, they lifted loose stones to form a low parapet. Konnor laid his automatic rifle in position, muzzle facing north.

"In camp," he said with a cheerful laugh, "the artillery faces the enemy."

With their unshaven, powder-grimed faces, their torn, stained uniforms, they resembled bandits. Krüger's legs were bare to the shins, as he had used his puttees to make a huge turban, replacing his lost képi. They ate and they joked, and felt that life was worth living. Except Matloka, who could not laugh.

"When I first saw him," he said, speaking of the lieutenant whom Dankowitch had slain, "he was four years old and I was eighteen. His cousin was marrying one of my cousins. That was in Cadiz, and he had on a little suit of velveteen, with a white lace collar, like a little king from a painting. He entered my regiment as a cadet when I was already a captain. I got him out of his first scrape with a girl. That was only seven, eight years back. He kissed me and called me his older brother. Then he shot me in the belly—and he's dead."

"Melktoub," Dankowitch pointed out. "It was written, as our good friends the Arabs so justly say. That saves them a lot of wondering."

Brandon stretched on the hard earth as gratefully as on a soft mattress. He tilted the peak of the képi to keep the sun from his eyes, and dropped off to sleep as one dives into water.

(To be concluded.)