



He found himself against a wall too high to vault.

UNDER CONTRACT

By GEORGES SURDEZ

YOU would like to know what was done with the Germans, Austrians, Bulgarians and Turks who happened to be in the French Foreign Legion when the World War started? Nobody could tell you better than I, because my name is Beylen, I am a German and once I was a sergeant in the Prussian service. I enlisted in the summer of 1913, for reasons of my own, so that I counted only one year of service when the armies were mobilized.

Of course, Legionnaires belonging to the allied nations and to neutral countries immediately wanted to go to Europe to fight. They formed the cores of the various field units that fought on the Western Front, at the Dardanelles and

in the Salonika sector. Naturally, those who had acquired French citizenship went with them.

And the rest of us helped hold North Africa for France. That was correct, according to our signed agreement. We had no kick coming, because no one had asked us to enlist for five years, and we had made no stipulation as to what we would do in case of War. You may call us traitors, renegades, and you will be wrong. Because you cannot judge a Legionnaire like an ordinary man. His very presence in the corps indicates that he is different.

And then again, talk is easy: The seas were closed, there was no way of getting back. To join the natives that

we had been fighting seemed somehow more treasonable than anything else, for most of us. I don't say that we were faithful to France. But we respected our officers and stood by the Legion. There were some desertions, of course, and a few of the most hot-headed chose the concentration camps. But the most of us made the best of an awkward situation, obeyed orders.

Sure, there were some clashes among us. But our own chiefs understood and managed us as we wished to be. Occasionally, there would be trouble, bickering, when an officer fresh from France came down. That was the case between Captain Castagne and Sergeant Hebermal.

Never heard of Hebermal? Well—

We were sergeants together in a march company campaigning in the Middle Atlas when Castagne reported as our new lieutenant. That was in 1917. He was a tall, raw-boned man of about thirty, with a swarthy face and very black hair. There were grooves down his cheeks, as if he had suffered a great deal, and he had a big beak of a nose. He looked like a fine soldier.

We had heard all about him days before he came, because that kind of information drifts about very fast. We knew that he had started the war as a sergeant, had been commissioned for bravery. He had been wounded twice, and he had a lot of decorations, about all there were to get for a line officer. Some months before, late in the summer of 1916, he had been taken prisoner by the Germans, on the Western Front. He had got away on his second try, through Switzerland, and that was why we had him.

During his successful escape, he had killed a sentry, so that if he were captured again, which was possible, he might have been called a murderer and shot at once. So he had been sent to Africa, to avoid all risk of this happening.

He was a typical Frenchman, which means that he had not knocked about outside of France much before the war. And, although someone should have warned him when he arrived he did not know anything about the Legion, be-

lieved it to be composed of Poles, Italians and Spaniards. He had little, deep-set, steel blue eyes that drilled right into you, and you should have seen them the first time he listened to the roll-call.

"Ackermann . . . Becker . . . Schoeuter . . . Schwob . . . Stein . . . Weisgerber. . ."

I was a sergeant already, in the liaison group, and I heard him grumble to the senior-sergeant, who chanced to be one of the few Corsicans with us then: "A pack of Boches!"



EVEN now, that word Boche is not in general use in the Legion. And our own officers, who knew us, were careful about it. But he spoke the truth—we were a pack of Boches, for all our capotes and képis. And, without any exception, all former members of the Kaiser's army.

And there was Castagne commanding more than one hundred Boches—Castagne, who hated Germans as they were hated then. He had better motives than most, I will admit. One of his brothers had been killed, another maimed for life, a third was fighting somewhere on the Somme, with a Chasseur battalion, which did not lead to a long life. His father, mayor of a small village in Champagne, had been executed without trial in 1914, in reprisal for shots fired upon a cavalry patrol from one of the farmhouses. His old mother, his wife and two kids were on the German side of the lines. Maybe it was not good sense to hold us responsible, but those were not sensible days.

Oh, Castagne was a man, and remained polite enough in words. But he could not help it if his glance, bouncing from man to man, felt like a slap across the mug. Possibly he did not stop to think of how he might have felt if forced to wear a German uniform and to fight against his own side. You could tell that all he could think of was that he had seen pans like ours under bucket-helmets in the trenches of France.

He took a particular dislike to my friend Hebermal, who was a sergeant. Hebermal was quite a big fellow, as tall as Castagne but much heavier. He had

one of those lean, long, sardonic Prussian faces, and his shoulders, his big, tanned neck, everything, showed that he had served in our army a long time.

He had signed for the Legion, and he was honoring his signature. But he hated the French, and France. Bringing him and Castagne together was like striking flint on steel. You could see the sparks.



WHEN their eyes first met, hatred flared, as strong and fresh as if it had existed for years. They were natural enemies, like a cat and a dog. Hebermal acknowledged the introduction with a salute, which Castagne returned. But you could see that they had fallen on guard, that a duel was starting.

It was Lieutenant Castagne who made the first move. He had watched Hebermal silently for several days, noticed his pride in his efficiency. And when he slipped up on some trifling detail job around one of our camps, Castagne summoned him. It was a beautiful job of the sort, a cold, cutting bawling-out. He ended with:

"The Germans were wise to get rid of you!" And the moment he had spoken, you could see that he realized that he had been unfair. But he was stubborn, and struck again to show how little he cared: "What a valuable man they lost!"

Did you ever see a man sneer without lifting a muscle of his face? On the surface, Hebermal's expression did not change. But it was as if the light inside had changed.

"We'll soon see, *mon lieutenant*," he replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I signed up for five years in 1912, Lieutenant. My contract is almost over."

"You'll desert?"

"A time-expired man does not desert, Lieutenant. He leaves."

"He leaves for a concentration camp, Sergeant."

"We'll see, Lieutenant."

Castagne prodded and prodded, trying to make Hebermal say something rebellious.

But before he could succeed, the captain arrived on the run and broke up the conversation. Somebody must have tipped him off as to what was going on. He dismissed the sergeants, asked Castagne to follow him into his tent.

That captain was a good Frenchman, remember, but he had been in the Legion fifteen years, and was very fond of Hebermal. When Castagne emerged, he was red to the ears, quivering. He must have got an unholy rating inside.

Our captain was not given to making long speeches, but the next time we had a job to do, he stood before us, his big belly pushing against his belt-buckle, his face scarlet, his thick legs propped wide apart. He looked at us for a few seconds, cleared his throat, and said:

"Men wearing the Legion's uniform are Legionnaires, that's all. And a Legionnaire is the best damn soldier in the whole world. The fellows on the other side may wonder who you are, too, and why you are here. You carry your documents of identification at the points of your bayonets. Go show them! Hebermal!"

Hebermal took four steps forward, presented arms. The old man looked at him and nodded unconsciously, as he always nodded when he saw a soldier properly rigged.

"I hear you're getting to be quite an orator. You will take charge of the first section and display your other talents."

We all knew who was intended to be impressed.

"Thank you, *mon capitaine*."

If you want to know what our company did that day, look up the records under: Combat of Souk-el-Malek.

The Moroccans always fight well. And the gang we were up against had brand new repeating rifles and a lot of ammunition which they were crazy to try out. They had been told, too, that the French were being beaten on the Western Front, and they were mad with hope. See, if they had licked the Legion, hesitating tribes would have risen against France, and perhaps swept the Europeans into the ocean.

We fought for seven hours on the slopes, and after that we had to storm a village with bayonets and grenades.

The natives acted as if they had been doped, because you had to kill them to stop their fighting. We'd think we had got rid of them, and a new bunch would stream from a side street, yelling and shooting.

When it was over, Castagne wiped his face and looked at us.

He was a Frenchman, that was true. But war had made him a soldier and he was fast turning into a professional. He knew what we had done, how good we were. And he knew that a battalion of Zouaves, all French, with many guys who had served in the trenches, had been checked, beaten back on our right. We had had to help them out with a flanking fire from our machine-guns, after we had reached and passed our assigned objectives.

He looked at us, opened his mouth once or twice, could find nothing to say, and shut up. But even if he hated us quite as much as before, he had respect for us. Maybe he was beginning to understand that it was harder to die when your heart was not in it!

As for us, we hated him back. But we liked his work. Even in the Legion, he proved better than a fair officer.



THEY did not give us much rest.

Two days later, we were in another show. The Chleuhs made one of those surprise attacks they specialize in, and were leaping among us before we saw them. Castagne was knocked down by a guy who wrapped both arms around his legs, and another fellow knelt on his chest and tried to slice his neck.

Hebermal saw him drop and ran to him. Big as he was, the sergeant was swift and deft as a cat. He interposed the bayonet between the lieutenant's throat and the blade, knocked out the first guy with a kick under the chin, brained the other with a smash of his gun-butt. I ran up with a couple of other fellows, but all we had to do was finish one of them, who still squirmed.

The sergeant, with a polite smile, helped the officer to his feet. Castagne spat out some grit, dusted the seat of his pants like a man who's tripped on a

sidewalk, looked at Hebermal, grinned and offered his hand.

"It seems as if I owed you some sort of thanks, Hebermal," he said.

"Oh, Lieutenant! You owe me nothing." Hebermal pretended not to see the hand stretched out to him: "I'm under contract to do this sort of thing."

That made Castagne feel foolish, because it was as good as telling him that Hebermal had saved him only because it was part of his job, and that if he had been a free agent, that Moroccan could have hacked away as much as he pleased. Castagne hated to be ridiculous, and he knew that this episode made him appear funny.

He had been saved by the man he hated most!

And he accepted Hebermal's words literally. He strove to treat him casually, as if he owed him no gratitude. And perhaps you can imagine how it feels to scold a man who has kept your head and your body together!



WHEN our old captain left us to take a turn of duty on the Western Front—those veteran officers collect campaigns as some kids collect stamps—and Castagne was promoted to replace him, we grew a little nervous. Not for ourselves, because Castagne had learned how to handle matters by that time, and we could not have wished a more considerate chief, but for Hebermal. The old man had served as a buffer between them so long—and he was gone. And, say what you will, when a company commander stalks a mere sergeant, that sergeant will lose out.

Hebermal knew it, and watched himself. He felt that if Castagne had a chance to break him and held off, the accounts would be squared. And, being human, he liked to keep the edge.

Although we were considered as enlisted for the duration of the war officially, the old routine continued, and in due course Castagne received in his mail a communication concerning Hebermal. The sergeant's enlistment was drawing to a close. He had but a few days to serve before being entitled to complete discharge. The new captain sent for him.

"You intend to stay with us, of course?"

"My conscience does not permit me, Captain, to sign now."

"You have a career here, a career of your own choice."

"Circumstances have altered, Captain."

"Unless you renew your enlistment, for the minimum period allowable, I shall have you guarded and sent to the rear."

"At your orders, Captain," Hebermal replied. He did not have to add 'but not for much longer'. His eyes said that.

As he refused to sign on again, in due time he was sent north with empty carts bound for Meknes, under escort. In theory, he was already a prisoner of war, but the fellows in charge probably grew careless, as he wore a French uniform. In any case, the next thing we heard was that he had hopped it for the hills.

No need to ask where he had gone. We knew he had joined the Moors. That was his right, as he had served out his time. And he would find a fairly numerous company, for the number of deserters living among the hostile tribes was on the increase during that period when things looked fairly good for Germany.

And don't think that all of them were Germans, either. I think there were at least as many Frenchmen, guys escaped from punishment camps and the African light infantry.

The majority of those deserters remained out there what they had been always, pretty fair fighters, but men of small merit and without the sense of leadership. Hebermal was an exceptional type for a deserter, one in five or six hundred. He had been well educated, and we knew, although he had never boasted of it, that he had been in the regular army in Prussia, a captain. He was a born chief, and I felt from the first that he would not be content to be a casual hanger-on of a tribe, doing odd jobs repairing arms, fighting only when forced.

Less than a month after he had deserted—or left, if you like—the French learned that they had something a bit new to handle. Hebermal had gathered

around him a small band of Europeans, some Germans, others French, which formed a nucleus for a well-drilled, perfectly disciplined formation of picked tribesmen, guys who could shoot straight, crawl around at night without making noise, understand fairly complicated plans of action.

His very first job had the master's touch. He captured six mules loaded with rifle ammunition, the most coveted loot in the hills, plucking them right out of an escorted convoy. If you took a map and drew a diagram of the various moves, it looked like a ballet performance. Shots here to draw attention, a simulated 'real' attack elsewhere, then the raid on the mules in the midst of confusion.

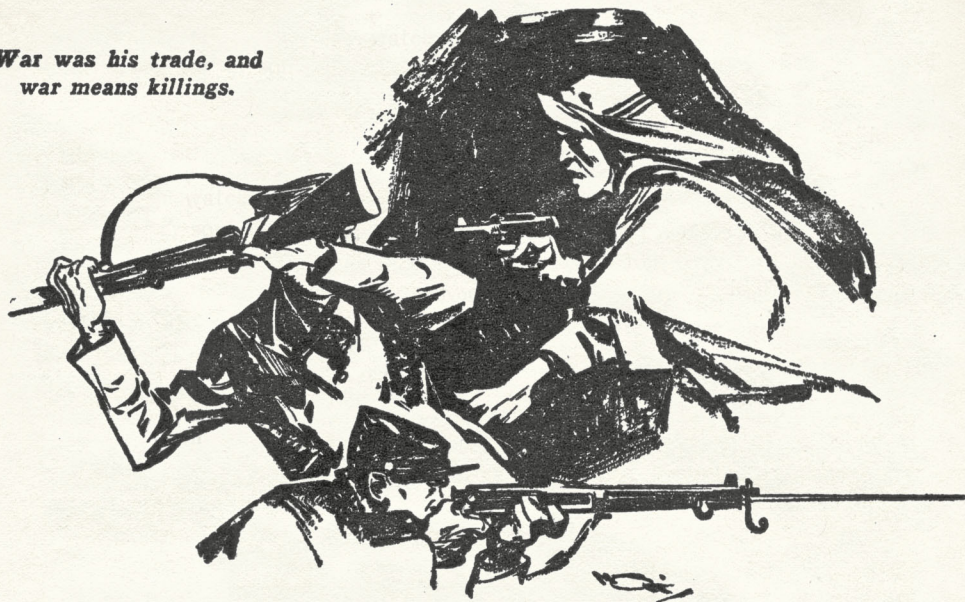
Do not get the idea that Hebermal was a sort of book renegade, knightly and merciful to his former comrades. War was his trade, and war means killings. His private declaration of hostilities against the French Republic was found pinned to the naked breast of a beheaded European sergeant, pinned with the dead man's bayonet.

Many deserters avoided clashing with the Legion, partly because of sentiment, partly because they knew that Legionnaires were tougher to handle than most people. Hebermal did not seek out the Legion, but he never hesitated when necessary. He had a great advantage over us, as he knew all our tricks and traps, had in fact trained our counter-raiders. In addition, the choice of time and terrain invariably was his.

Within two months, he had become a man of mystery, an awing phantom, even to me, who had shared his quarters for months. He was reported everywhere at once. One day he would be seen in a raid on an ammunition party in the hills, the next he would appear before some blockhouse along the narrow gauge tracks near Taza.

Our company was made somehow more nervous than any other. Why? Suppose you knew a murderous maniac roamed at large, you would be worried—but if you knew that maniac was your brother with special motive to seek you out, you would be in terror. He spared our sentries no more than those of other

*War was his trade, and
war means killings.*



units. Men who had been his close pals were knifed, mutilated. How much of this was done with his own hand, how much by the savage fellows he led, he was the only one who really knew.

When his presence was reported near us, our outposts would be doubled. He grew so important that he was mentioned by name in official orders. A court-martial solemnly tried him, sentenced him to death, by default.

Which meant that anywhere, any time that he was caught he could be shot at once, without further ado. But capturing him was growing to be quite a problem. Hebermal was well informed, seemed to know all that went on around us, appeared to have overheard private conversations!



CAPTAIN Castagne was furious at the former sergeant's swift fame. He scoffed at his reputation. He gathered us sergeants for a lecture.

"You non-commissioned officers are partially to blame for the poor morale and nervousness of your men. You do nothing to combat that stupid legend of omnipotence, invincibility; you carelessly contribute to its growth by your yarns at mess. Hell, must I tell you that orderlies have ears? And tongues?"

"You have all known the renegade in question, you know he is flesh and blood. He is no more intelligent than you are. You remember that he had his faults as a sergeant. You should remember that anyone of you—"

He was about to conclude: "anyone of you could do the same in his place", but broke off. It was not his job to tempt us to desert and try our luck with the natives. Enough stories of Hebermal's luxurious living, of his harem, seeped to us to make many of us a bit restless and wistful.

"My personal belief is that many exploits are attributed to him wrongly, because we know his name and we like to brand things. I want all this nonsense cut out. He is reported in the region, and I don't want the sentries doubled. That gives him false prestige and gives us a sense of inferiority.

"By the way, although he has no reason to love me, Hebermal has never come within reach of my hands."

That was an unfortunate remark, for which Hebermal took cruel vengeance. At dawn the next morning, Captain Castagne awoke, looked in vain for his boots, his service revolver, his carbine, his field-glasses his decorations.

He went into a rage when someone calmly suggested that Hebermal had

taken the lot, and that he was lucky not to have been murdered in his sleep.

"There it goes! Hebermal, Hebermal!" He swore for thirty seconds straight before resuming. "Giving him a build-up, are you? To do it he would have had to pass through the outposts down the hill, between our sentries up here, parade through the camp, and go out again, carrying the stuff! Spread out, search around—those guns are hidden somewhere close."

"Search where, Captain?"

"Everywhere. Some sneak-thief took advantage of the prevailing funk to get away with a cute trick. Now—"

But a liaison man ran up, handed the captain a slip of paper.

"What's this?"

"Note for you, Captain. Thrown into one of our outposts tied around a stone, just after daybreak, Captain."

Castagne stared at the paper as if it had been a poisonous reptile. Then his trembling fingers took it. His face changed as he read it. And he did something more courageous than anything he had seen in action, he turned the note over to the nearest sergeant, with a rueful grin:

"With all my excuses, gentlemen!"

The note passed from hand to hand.

My dear little Captain:

Always admired your weapons, especially the American carbine. I called for them in person. Your horse is gone, but someone else did the job. He shall be well treated, don't worry—you know I don't fight mounted. Keep this as a receipt to present to the peace commission at the proper time. I can assure you that a victorious Germany will not quibble over payment, because I turned out to be a *very valuable man*. Would have liked to stop and say hello, but you slept so soundly that I feared to disturb you. But don't complain I neglect my former superior, eh? Signed: *Hebermal*, Squadron-commander, German Imperial Army, detached to foreign service.

I don't remember which one of us started to laugh. But soon all of us were bending over, right in front of Castagne. He tried hard to keep his temper, but I am sure that he was sorry that Hebermal had not cut his throat when he had the chance. He laughed with us, at least with his mouth, but his eyes wouldn't

join in. That fierce glance above the grin was comical.

"He scores, he scores," he murmured.



For several days, he was silent, acted like a man in a daze. Then he organized a counter-raiding band. Now, night scouting and raiding compose a specialized occupation. You need a natural talent for it and years of practice. Castagne was a very capable officer, as brave as a man could be. But he soon discovered that he was not cut out for those jobs.

Baffled on his own initiative, he hounded the native intelligence for private information, begged to be tipped off when there was a chance to capture Hebermal. The French had a swarm of secret agents among the hostile tribesmen and often knew in advance when something serious was underway. But, sly as a rat, Hebermal ate the cheese and avoided the traps.

One episode became famous throughout the Moroccan Army. Castagne had been informed that Hebermal was reported about to raid a supply of ammunition kept in a small hamlet back of our lines. The tip was good, given by a member of his own gang, who deserted to us and used his knowledge to purchase his life.

The captain rubbed his hands, gathered the company and picked out twenty men. Twenty men and every single one a German.

Castagne no longer worried about their loyalty. They hated Hebermal because they were afraid of him. He did not hesitate to kill Legionnaires or to have them killed. Not one of the lot but would have given six months' pay to sink a bayonet between his ribs.

This time, Castagne was sure of himself. There would be no need to prowl about in the darkness; it would not be hinted that his heavy breathing or the creaking of his leather leggings had warned off the enemy and spoiled the show. He had a plan of the village and told each man just where to go as soon as night fell.

If Hebermal came he was a doomed man.

Castagne had selected a spot for himself, at the foot of a wall near the entrance to the village. The hours dragged by. Day broke, and at last he rose and gave the signal to abandon the undertaking. Naturally, he was stiff from his prolonged, motionless vigil, yawned and stretched. And as he did so, his eyes rested on the wall which he had so carefully hugged all night.

Unbelievable, miraculous, a large inscription sprawled white against the dried mud bricks.

"Cuckoo . . . I see you . . . Hebermal . . ."

The paint was fresh, as he ascertained with the tips of his fingers. Castagne and the rest of us could not be sure, of course, that some practical joker had not taken advantage of the situation. It seemed impossible for Hebermal to have done the job in person.

But you should have heard the laughing that day! How could we help it, whenever we thought of Castagne stretched out there, his pistol in hand, while some guy was painting a sign in the darkness, not ten feet away?

Whoever had done the painting must have known that the captain's hearing was rather poor on the right side. The thunder of guns at Verdun had affected him permanently. But even allowing for that, the swishing of the brush should have been loud enough—

Castagne earned his nickname of 'Cuckoo' that night. Even sergeants occasionally slipped and referred to him by that term. Some wit made up a little rhyme about it, which was sung at an entertainment. The captain sat there, in the front row, and grinned, grinned. But he was hurt. We thought he would die of pernicious anemia, he grew so thin and worn. His face was all jutting nose and fierce eyes.

No doubt he was tempted to ask a transfer, to go back to France, to the front, anywhere. But he did not wish to concede victory to Hebermal so soon, would not retreat under pressure.

"I'll get my hands on him yet," he stated at mess.

And he was laughed at. Before long, he was considered a bit mad on the subject.



IT was almost a year after Hebermal had left us that we were sent into a pretty serious attack on a native village. Our company had not suffered much from his raids in the past few months, and his name was almost forgotten. Some people claimed that he had been killed, others said that he was now a sort of adviser to the native leaders, and not permitted to risk his life in action.

The fighting was almost over. We were searching the houses one by one, using the bayonet or a couple of grenades whenever needed. You have to do that before carrying on, if you don't want slob to pop out and shoot you from behind.

We reached the central place, an oblong surrounded by houses, with Captain Castagne in the lead.

Suddenly, a big guy in a brown cloak darted out from somewhere and tried to get clear.

"Don't shoot," the captain screamed. "It's Hebermal, Hebermal!"

And with that he forgot that we had not completely cleaned out the place, threw caution to the winds and ran like a mad man. We followed him, panting like excited dogs. It was funny, when you think of it. We climbed over dividing walls, crashed into houses, and paid no attention whatever to other survivors we happened to find, unless they showed fight.

We were too busy, we wanted Hebermal.

Castagne cornered him in a courtyard, when the fellow found himself against a wall too high to vault. Feeling that he was about to be caught, Hebermal whirled on us, flourished an automatic. But he had no time to press the trigger.

Castagne was too ardent to think of using a weapon. He leaped into the air, butted Hebermal right in the stomach, like an Apache in a brothel brawl.

Castagne kicked the gun out of the other man's hand, and was standing above him, half-laughing, half-crying.

"Eh, eh, old chap! Here we are, eh? Small world, isn't it? Eh, old chap, eh!"

He was nearly hysterical, and I swear he giggled like a woman.

We helped the guy to stand. He wore

a beard eight inches long; he was thin as a stork, as dark as a Moroccan. Despite what the captain had said, we were not so sure he was Hebermal, until he spoke.

"Got a smoke, anybody?"

He got the cigarette. Then he explained that he had not been able to run very fast, because he had an old wound in his thigh. That was what had kept him from being so active in the past months. There was no good surgeon in the hills, and the hole was festering.

"I'll probably lose that leg," he concluded calmly.

"I don't think so," Castagne told him.

Hebermal looked at him, understood the hint and started to laugh, softly, easily, as if it were really very comical.

"That's right, Castagne. I was forgetting!"

"Captain to you," Castagne snapped him up. "We never herded cows together, that you are privileged to call me by my name."

We all expected Hébermal to have a comeback for that one, because he had nothing to lose. What could be done to him when he was sure to be shot anyway? But he looked at Castagne—we could not be sure whether with respect or pity—and corrected himself:

"Sorry, Captain."

"No offense," Castagne said, mechanically. "Let's go."



IT was decided that Hebermal would be executed at dawn the next day, and that a native infantry unit would supply the firing-squad. But as the Legion had captured him, the Legion guarded him. We did not wish him to escape. I drew the job of sleeping in the tent with him, which was right, as we had been such close friends and they thought he might like to speak to someone he knew.

I expected him to talk all night.

But he just told me that if the Moroccans had been organized, supplied with ammunition, machine-guns and a few field pieces, they would have driven the French into the Atlantic long since.

He ate a big dish of stew, took a couple of stiff drinks, smoked a while, and

turned in! He slept all night, like a baby, while I sat by and did his worrying.

A little while before daybreak, I stepped out of the tent for a breath of air. I saw that there was some excitement, and soon a passing liaison guy gave me the news: The Germans had tried to shove through near Soissons, and Foch had caught them on the move. Four or five hundred tanks tearing through their flank. The officers were saying that the war was over, save for a year or so of mopping up.

A lot of us in the Legion felt sad that day. You can change your allegiance and your passport, but if something didn't survive deep inside you wouldn't be a man but a dog. And think of the good jobs some of us would have got if Germany had won and taken over Morocco, what with knowing the languages and the people! Or maybe we'd have been hunted down and shot for treason.

I was about to go inside and tell Hebermal, when Captain Castagne appeared. He was pretty happy, of course. But he grabbed my arm and said: "You have heard the news, Beylen? It won't be read until after the execution parade." He rubbed his nose in embarrassment: "So there is no need to inform him before."

I was surprised and almost showed it. That was the first time I understood how close Castagne and Hebermal were to liking each other. Because a certain kind of consideration and esteem, from one professional soldier to another, is very close to liking.

A squad of *Tirailleurs*, commanded by a French adjutant, marched up. They were coming for the prisoner. Troops were assembling, to witness the ceremonies.

Castagne nodded to me and we went into the tent. Hebermal sat up on his blankets and yawned: "Hello, Captain—hello there, Beylen." He stood up, brushed his clothes and rewound his turban. I handed him a tin cup filled with rum, which he drank.

"What's the war news?" he asked Castagne.

"Nothing startling," Castagne replied,

briefly. He was a poor liar, and grew red: "Never mind that. I don't forget that I was your commanding officer and I considered you a fine soldier. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Hebermal laughed. He handed the captain two crumpled papers.

"Oh, yes! You can dismiss that firing-squad, Captain. My execution would be illegal according to precedents—"

"You've been sentenced by a court-martial," Castagne said.

"Unjustly. Look at those—you read a little German, if I remember rightly?" And while Castagne read, Hebermal explained: "You will find that one is the notice that my enlistment in the Foreign Legion had expired, stamped by Headquarters at Bel-Abbès, countersigned at the regimental depot in Meknes. That proves I am not a deserter, one of the charges made against me.

"The other, as you will note, is a letter from the war ministry in Berlin, reinstating me in my former rank and detaching me to service with our Moroccan allies. If you compare the dates, you will discover that my first act of war against France was performed after the issue of the commission. The clothing I wear can be said to constitute the uniform of the people I served with, at my Emperor's orders. I am in no sense a spy, and I am not a deserter. Acting as I was under orders from my chiefs, all in the line of military operations, those silly charges of murder fall of themselves."

"How did you get these—hide them?" Castagne asked.

"You do not expect me to give you such information while the hostilities continue, do you, Captain?" Hebermal struck a match, lighted a cigarette: "You can execute me, of course. But I shall derive some consolation from knowing I was murdered."



CASTAGNE'S jaws sagged. I could see that Hebermal was winning the final trick. Naturally, I figured out easily enough how he had obtained those papers. The discharge had been turned over to one of his agents by a bribed clerk. The commission had come through

Holland, Spain and the Riff. Hebermal had probably concealed both stitched between the folds of his *burnous*.

The captain shrugged: "Execution of the sentence will be suspended, these documents presented to the proper authorities." He looked at Hebermal with an odd expression of disdain on his face: "All right, you have had yourself covered. You'll probably be pardoned, and you'll be shipped home inside a year. There is war news today—"

Hebermal grinned, nodded.

"The drive failed. We have wireless communications in the hills, you know! I was advised of what you've heard this morning at eleven o'clock yesterday morning."

Captain Castagne grew red once more.

"You'll understand why I withheld the facts, I hope. With this change in plans, there is another matter to take up: Two of your men were taken during the night—Vallodon, a Frenchman, and Heimos, both sentenced by default. They asked if they would have a chance to shake hands with you before dying. I promised them they would."

For the first time, I saw Hebermal lose his calm.

"Where were they captured? My instructions to them—"

"They've told me. You told them things would grow very unhealthy for them in the hills and to dodge out at the first opportunity. They had arranged to make a try for the Spanish Riff, in disguise, when they heard you were taken. Seems there were seven of them who decided to try a rescue—"

"A rescue from this camp?" Hebermal's face lighted up: "The presumptuous fools—seven against ten thousand!"

"Oh, you train your chaps well. It was an accident that they were spotted coming through our outposts. They fought. Five were killed, those two overpowered. They wanted you to know they hadn't quit, that they'd tried." Castagne nodded in approval. "I promised they'd see you. May I ask you to speak to them? There is no hope for *them*. Plain deserters, without commissions."

Hebermal stood silent for some time. I saw the perspiration seep on his brow,

slide down his thin cheeks. I did not envy him the task ahead of him, bidding those friends farewell, leaving them to die for having sought to save him.

He was still thinking when the tent flap lifted, and the adjutant of *Tirailleurs* stuck his head inside. "Beg pardon, Captain, but everything is in readiness. I have the receipt for the prisoner right here for you—"

Castagne was about to speak, when Hebermal interrupted him.

"In a minute, adjutant!" And when the flap dropped, he addressed the captain: "I have asked few favors in my life. But will you return those papers to me, forget them?"

He took the two letters, rolled them together, and Castagne held his lighter out. As the paper burned, they looked at each other and smiled.

"There are things a man can't do, Captain."

"I know, *mon commandant*," Castagne replied quietly.

Hebermal saluted him, shook hands with me, and he was turned over to the adjutant, who gave me a signed receipt. I could follow the progress of the detachment through the camp by the roll of the drums, muffled, sinister. And I followed, as if fascinated.



THE other two were there already, standing before the troops, the firing-squads making little bright knots of men nearer to them, with the panorama of the hills beyond. I had known Heimos when he had been in the Legion. He was a big guy who walked like a farmer

when out of the ranks. Not a very bright lad. Vallodon was a little shrimp, who couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and ten pounds. He was from Paris, had escaped from a prison camp.

They looked pretty lonely out there, before all those people, living their last minutes. And when they smiled as Hebermal appeared, I understood why he was doing this. No man could have gone to bid them good-by and walked away alive. They'd have broken, right there before thousands of men.

Hebermal's hands were tied, like theirs, so there was no shaking of hands. But he looked at them, grinned and nodded.

And you should have seen those two. They worshipped him, were glad to die for him. They had no idea what their deaths would cost him!

Hebermal took the end of the row. The others looked at him, to see how to behave. They had needed him, all right! They knew that whatever he did would be proper. For he was their chief. When he shook his head, refusing the blindfold, they shook their heads. Then they looked at the muzzles of the guns and waited.

Not for long. . . .

A gleaming sword curved through the sunlight, a volley cracked out. Then, four or five seconds apart, three pistol shots, the shots of mercy.

Castagne, standing not far from me, blew his nose hard. Then he turned away, with an odd gesture. Helplessness, admiration? Not pleasure, in any case, although he was a Frenchman, as French as you could find. . . .

