

# Haunted Mountains



*A swift-moving story of the famous Hell's Angels squad of the Foreign Legion—and of a fight that repeated the famous "silent" battle of our own Civil War.*



By

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Illustrated by Hubert Whately

HELL'S ANGELS were hard-boiled on the subject of ghosts—though they would admit the existence in Africa of unseen powers of which the white man could pretend to know nothing; but this region was sure a spooky place! The Betana, the Arabs of the Camel Corps called it, a tumbled and tortured area of volcanic mountains rising abruptly out of the sands. And all about were mysterious tombs, rock dolmens so ancient as to be prehistoric.

It was one of those dead October nights when the Sahara has not a breath and the silence is profound. Everywhere the jinn were talking—the faint whine and groan and crack of rock contracting after the scorching heat of day. The sough and rush of wind usually covered those mysterious noises. But Ressay's Camel Corps troopers never failed to have superstitious qualms when the desert was silent and the voices of the jinn could be heard. When the jinn talked, men died on the morrow—so ran a proverb that experience had shown well grounded. At that moment the entire platoon of the Erfoud *Méharistes*, as Ressay's unit of the Camel Corps was officially titled, were praying and filled with blue funk.

Sergeant Texas Ike chewed solemnly as Commandant Knecht approached the P. C. with a map in hand. The big and burly and genial *chef de battalion* bore a twinkle of malice in his eyes as he noted that the Hell's Angels squad had appropriated one of those tombs and were building a mulligan fire in it. "Ouff! Is it that you will boil the *mar-*

*mite* over the head of a king, my Buffalo Bill?" he inquired. "*Quelle théâtre!*"

Ike stopped chewing. "Meanin' thar's a corpse under them stones, Giner'l?" he asked. By the wooden expression of him, Knecht could gather nothing of Ike's reaction to this news. But his humorous twinkle expanded into a grin in his bushy black beard as he pursued this casual investigation on how Hell's Angels would take it.

"*Oui! A squelette!*" Knecht said vivaciously. "These are the tombs of ancient Garamantian kings. You would enjoy a ghost for company tonight, no?" the Commandant bantered.

"Provided he don't put no sand in our mulligan, sir," said Ike imperturbably. "We likes 'em well-behaved."

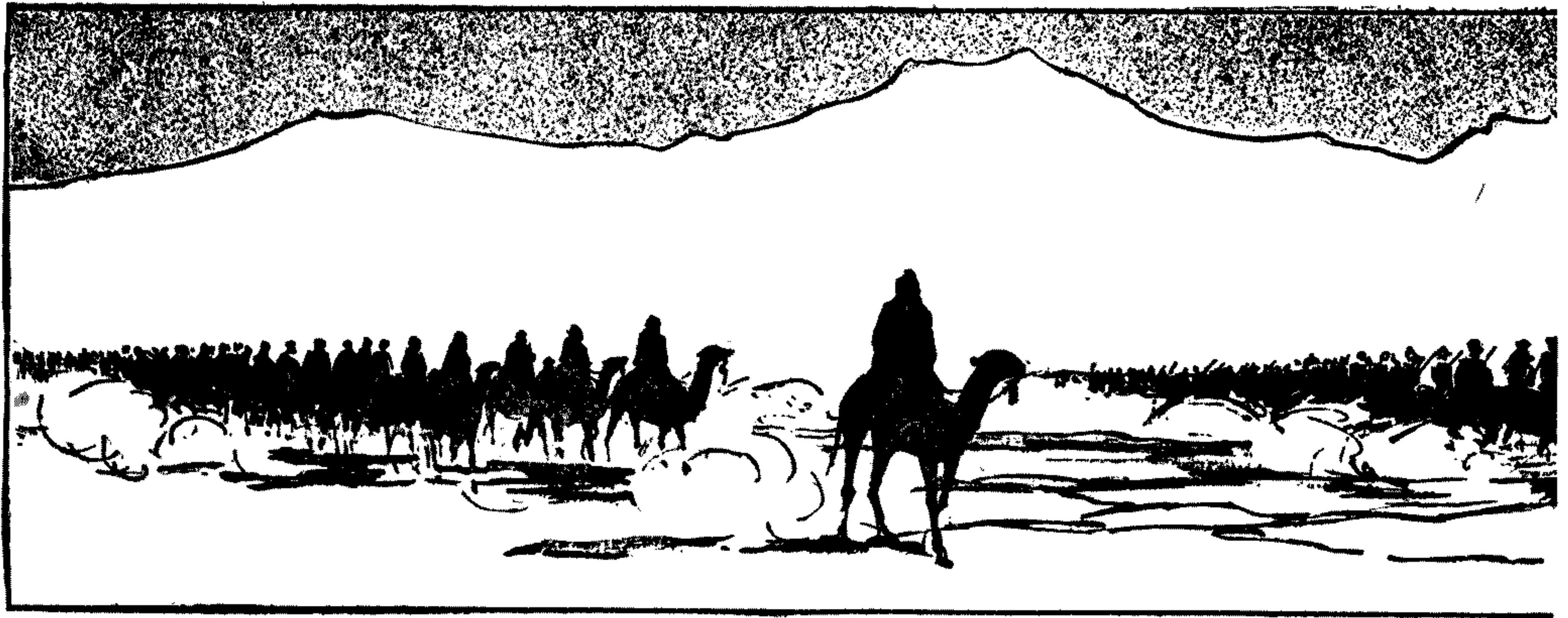
"*Bah!* You Americans!" chortled Commandant Knecht. "But have you no reverence for the mighty dead, that you build a fire over him?"

"I wouldn't tell 'em, sir," counseled Ike with practicality. "They'd dig him up, to see has he got any gold or jewels onto him. An' be all night a-doin' of it, when we ought to git some sleep for the fight tomorrow."

KNECHT laughed over that picture of the looting propensities of Légion soldiers. The ghost would not trouble them, unless he happened to have valuables buried with him, in which case they'd trouble *him!*

"*Pardieu*, you have reason, Sergeant. There are four thick slabs of stone over the crypt, and three feet of sand on top of that—no, they never had ornaments





buried with them," he hastened to add as a gleam came into Ike's eyes over these difficulties in the way of getting at any ancient treasure. "We had best let the poor ghost lie, since you would loot him—much less be afraid of him! It is Ressot's Chaamba that I am uneasy about. Listen!"

DOWN on the sands below the P. C. could be heard a muttering growl: "Allah! Allah-il-Allah! La illahi illa Alla-ah-h!" The entire Camel Corps platoon to a man was down on its knees and murmuring that formula ceaselessly, in varying accents of superstitious fear and religious fervor. Usually those Arab troopers were laughing and shouting, squatted in groups playing at their interminable game of *naar*—a burnous held up across a squad of six, hands passing a coin behind it, the opposite group watching to guess who had it when all the clenched fists were upraised. Now, however, they were all praying.

"These shore is haunted mountains, Commandant," said Ike. "The most hellish place you ever brang us into, if you asks me! Spooky, like. 'Taint a fit country for mortals. And now the wind has to go flat."

They sat listening awhile to hear the desert talk. Unearthly, eerie, shivery, those long-drawn moans, those sullen faint explosions, those whispers and mutterings half-heard! It was no use for your reason to tell you that these rock masses were heated to a hundred and forty in the sun, and cooled down at night so that they spalled and cracked and broke open new fissures constantly. The desert talked with the voices of its jinn—and calamity followed.

"Oui! Calamity," said Commandant Knecht aloud as if that word had entered both their minds simultaneously.

"This *harka* numbers seven hundred guns. They leave the Tafilelt and go to raid Tindouf, in company with their cousins, the Reguibat of the Iguidi desert. I take a hint from the great Stonewall Jackson and strike them before they can either join the Reguibat or return to the Tafilelt. For that reason we have come a hundred and fifty miles from Poste Erfoud, Sergeant. But it will take all our command to beat them. Nor will I retreat without giving battle," he added with force. "Peste! What can a commander do when his whole left wing is *cafard* with superstitious terrors?"

"Chow! Come and get it!" That shout in Corporal Criswell's voice broke in on the Commandant's perplexities. Ike said, hospitably: "Will you jine us, sir? We has mulligan an' speckled pup."

Knecht wrinkled up his nose. There was a perfectly good bottle of wine and a roast of lamb with green peas preparing for him by Balbuti, his Soudan orderly; but he loved to sit around the camp-fire with his Anglo-Saxon squad, they were such original and versatile devils.

"Merci!" he said. "I have never eaten dog, my Buffalo Bill, but this pup sounds intriguing. Is he roasted or boiled?"

"Rice and raisins, sir," Ike laughed. "An' don't say nothin' about that there stiff, sir, please."

Ike looked at the ancient Garamanian tomb with more interest as they moved on it together. Its upright pillars of split rock were sagged apart by the pressure of the sands. Gleams of ruddy fire-light came through the cracks. The roof, if it ever had one, was long since gone. Two tall splinters of rock facing south marked the entrance. The skeleton was to be found sitting in the crypt below, under four slabs of rock; its bones would crumble to the touch.





They maintained a discreet silence on all this as the Commandant bulked into the enclosure and all rose at salute. Ressot was there, his uniform gleaming with the new captain's insignia of his promotion. With him was his Chaamba sheik of the Camel Corps, Sif-en-Nazr. Lieutenant Hortet sat puffing a vile pipe with his back against a broad pillar. A great off-duty loafing place was wherever Hell's Angels happened to be setting up housekeeping on campaign, for they were an exceptional lot and always interesting. Besides their giant Michigan corporal, Criswell, they still numbered Anzac Bill, the Australian soldier of fortune; Mr. Dee, the Count di Piat-ti; Calamity Cyclops, the best sharpshooter in any army for all he had only one eye; and Mora, the dark Spanish bull, who was logy but courageous as El Cid in a tight place. Knecht had put them in charge of a special combat unit invented by Ike, two horses carrying automatic rifles in saddle scabbards, and a led-mule for the great quantity of ammunition which the two machine-guns required.

Commandant Knecht spread out his scouts' map while the mulligan was being served, and proceeded to a business that his soul delighted in, planning a battle.

"Here, then, is the *sebkra* where they are camped, gentlemen," he said as Ressot, Hortet, Ike and the sheik squatted about the sketch in the firelight. A *sebkra* was a swamp in rainy weather but pasturage most of the year. "You note that she is cut in two by a low height of ground, this swale. Here is a plateau commanding that division at easy rifle-range. You will take position there, Sergeant, with your two automatics. Hortet takes half the battalion and rides around through these ragged hills to

get on the west end of the *sebkra*. Ressot takes the Camel Corps and circles the east end. When he hears Hortet attacking them at dawn, he rides down the *sebkra* and takes them in the rear. I will be with Ike's unit and have the reserve back of me, the other half of the battalion, in case it goes not too well. Zero hour will be four-thirty in the morning. *Entendu?*"

THEY all nodded. It was a simple battle plan, needing only prompt movement by Ressot, on hearing Hortet's guns, to roll up the Ait Khebbash. The battalion scouts had reported the entire *harka* of the tribesmen encamped in this long narrow swale about five miles to the west. So little did they dream that Knecht was pouncing on them from distant Poste Erfoud, that they had not even guards out. A surprise attack early in the morning should not fail. And Ike with his automatics commanded any escape up the rocky slopes that surrounded the *sebkra* on all sides.

Ike ruminated over the battle plan. It was all right, but—well, there was one hole in it that seemed almost ridiculous to mention, a natural phenomenon that had once nearly ruined a battle plan very like it. That word *sebkra*, swamp, was awakening an old tale in Ike's memories. He had heard it from his father, a Confederate soldier who had fought at Seven Pines, that peculiar "silent battle" of the Civil War. Swamp—the swamps of the Chickahominy—the low-lying vapors between the two armies, rattle of musketry and roar of cannon on both sides—and not a sound of it could be heard, less than a mile away! Ike's memory could even hear the old warrior's vigorous description: "Lawd God, it was mighty spooky! Them Yanks fit right smart. An' we could



see Longstreet's boys goin' for 'em hell-bent; yit not a sound of them volleys comin' to us, not even the cannon. Him an' Hill had fifteen batteries in place, mind ye! An' us gittin' no orders to move, when anyone could see we'd ought to be right thar. We was Joe Johnston's left wing, thirteen brigades of us, but he wa'n't hearin' nawthin' either. Didn't know Longstreet was at 'em accordin' to battle orders. Slow, he allus was, ol' Dutch Longstreet."

More about that incredible battle. . . . The old Confederate never could explain it; something to do with the fog, maybe, but they nearly lost the fight because neither wing could hear the other. Ike noted that Knecht's plan involved exactly the same conditions, an attack by both wings and a long swamp between them. He thought of bringing the objection up, but things were spooky enough in the Betana now, without springing such an unheard-of phenomenon as a silent battle on the harassed commander! The chances were a thousand to one it would never occur again. Lots of battles besides Seven Pines had been fought in fogs.

The feed was now set on the sand, and Knecht folded his map as a movement to go into a huddle over it in the tomb shelter began.

"Please, sir!" Criswell, as host, gestured to the Commandant's place. A bowl of steaming mulligan stew, half a loaf of Légion bread looking like a brown béret, a canteen of *vin ordinaire*, and a kit-lid of that delicacy of raisins and rice known to the ungodly as speckled pup. Coarse but ample soldier's fare—but there was another guest below, an ancient king, dead two thousand years.

They had not reckoned on Di Piatti about that! The old Roman pagan in Di Piatti bade him pour a libation at this juncture. He dropped a gill of wine on the sands, looked around with a grin and said: "To you, Squelette!"

**T**HEY all stopped eating. Anzac Bill reached for his trench pick. "Skeleton? Where? Any loot buried with him, Count?" There were movements on shovels and bayonets.

"Right under us!" Di Piatti declared, though the Commandant was looking at him blackly, with raised eyebrows. "Might be an emerald or a piece of jade as big as your fist, Bill!"

Plates were abandoned. Hortet had grabbed his and gone out, crossing him-

self abruptly. No eating over a corpse for the superstitious old Gaul! Ressot was looking angrily at the Count, though his native sheik did not seem disturbed. The Anglo-Saxons were all for commencing a mine, and Knecht hastened to head that off.

"Nonsense, Di Piatti! You know very well there is nothing buried with them. The skeleton—"

*Huhhhhhhhhhhh!*

That ghostly, shuddering whisper soughed through the tomb and struck everybody silent. The grin left Di Piatti's face. Ressot held his breath, one hand on the sheik's arm restraining him. The Anglo-Saxons sat like so many wooden images, listening. Knecht looked puzzled. There was a physical explanation for that voiceless murmur, of course, but he could not lay tongue 'o it.

A tiny singing whine, inexpressibly weird, came from underground somewhere, and then again that gibbering exhalation—*Huhhhhhh!* The two together were extraordinary in their suggestion of a haunted tomb. The sheik leaped to his feet and went out with the unnerved croak: "*Mashallah!* The jinn be upon us!" Ressot flung himself after him to stop him, to reason with him before he fled shrieking back to his troopers. Knecht sat eying Di Piatti sternly.

"It's a jerboa, a little jumping-mouse. But did you put it in the crypt, Di Piatti? This is no time for jokes."

"On my honor, I didn't, sir!"

Ike chewed. "Them squeaks, sir, ought be a pack-rat, or somethin'. But that there winnowy noise! 'Taint mortal—"

"Air! Nothing but air!" the Commandant assured him. "Look for a draft-hole to the crypt, Sergeant. Every queer noise has its natural explanation."

"Not in Africa, sir! I'll believe anything here, till proved otherwise." Ike sat with troubled visage. Knecht looked on them with astonishment. Hell's Angels, his pet squad, his rock to rally on in disaster, his spearhead in action, getting the jitters over some curious noises in an ancient tomb! He could not believe it. They sat with untouched plates, with hands on picks and shovels,—but they seemed to have given up the idea of mining for any loot with this particular skeleton!

*Woooooooooooo!*

That noise was certainly in the air all about their ears! Everyone decamped



without further delay—leaving Knecht to deal with his ghost alone, as best he might. The Commandant stood his ground. There *must* be a natural explanation, but—

**A**FRICA was, in fact, truly a place of darkness and blood and violence. Her soil reeked with the spilled blood of mankind, as deep as you cared to dig—and *then* you would come to thousands of flint weapons that were witnesses of slayers and slain when the prehistoric beasts roamed the earth. Unlike Asia, she had never lifted her face to any God. Without God-ideals, unlimited injustice and hellish wickedness reigned unpunished, the agonies of tortured souls wrenched from life by cruelties inhuman, diabolic. . . .

*Huhhhhhhhh!*

The Commandant looked nervously over-shoulder at the third recurrence of that sound like a breath through the grinning jaws of the skeleton below. He half expected to see it peering in his face, in the shadows of that firelit tomb! Then he threw back his head with resolution. All this could be explained by some fact connected with the walls of this tomb and the crypt below. But at present he had a defection of half his command on his hands, perhaps a mutiny of the Chaamba—never a nice thing in the open Sahara. He could hear Ressot's angry expostulations outside, the abrupt retorts of the Sheik Sifen-Nazr, and the voices of Hell's Angels seconding Ressot's entreaties. Curiously, having been routed from the tomb themselves, they were most eager now to convince the sheik there was nothing to it but mouse-squeaks and drafts of air. The sheik brushed them off passionately: "*La!* None but fools fight when the jinn are awake and seeking whom they may devour! We be lucky if the wrath of Shaitan-the-Stoned does not fall upon us all! Nay, Captain, we flee this country of haunts and devils."

"Ya Sidi! I pray you consider: Would ye come this far and not strike?" Ressot was entreating—when a voice like a pistol-shot broke in on them.

"Sergeant!"

The tone of it snapped everybody to salute. Knecht's face was a study in wrath as they faced him. There was such a thing as Discipline! They gathered that—as Knecht went on, in a voice like a file: "Take a platoon of men. I want them in full battle kit and march-

ing rations. Go down there and bring me the Camel Corps rifles—all of them! If any resist, shoot him down." Knecht came a step nearer and said to the sheik, cuttingly: "Ya Sidi, your Chaamba are our allies. We subject you to no discipline such as holds with the rest of the Army. You are free to go, to fight or not as you choose. Your Lébels and ammunition are loaned you by the Republic, not, *pardieu*, as ornaments, but as the weapons of strong men to fight your enemies and ours with. Name of God! I'd rather strike the Aït Khebash with the Légion alone than depend for one moment on allies who fear silly noises of cracking rocks and gusts of wind in an old tomb! Take your troopers home, Ya Sidi! But La France insists your rifles and their ammunition must first be turned in! —Sergeant, you understood my order? Execute!"

Knecht turned brusquely on his heel with that command, leaving the sheik gasping, his eyes aflame with wounded pride and mortification. Ike had barked out the orders to fall in, and Hell's Angels were moving off in military formation to get the rest of their platoon and disarm that squadron of the Camel Corps now exclusively occupied with Arabic theology. His heart sang with relief. All this spookiness wiped out with a single stern gesture! Wasn't it like Knecht, though? He would go with you as far as you liked, if it was a mere interesting amusement; but the moment anything tended to vitiate morale in the command, he was prompt and stern. Ike heard a low growl of approval as they marched by the tomb in the dark. Lieutenant Hortet, that grizzled old Gaul, it was, going to rejoin his commander, with an empty tin of mulligan in his hand. Ike heard him say: "*Morbleu!* Let us strike them *now*, my old one! Use the other half of the battalion—and no reserves."

"*Oui!* No reserves!" the Commandant agreed. "Hurry back, Sergeant," he called after Ike. "I propose a night attack. As soon as we can get in position. These ghosts do get on one's nerves!"

A jovial laugh as Ike marched on out of hearing toward the Légion camp. There were bitter snorts, but not much said by Hell's Angels, for they were all somewhat ashamed.

Arrived at camp, Ike called out his platoon of two hundred men, ordered them into battle kits, gave them a brief



inspection. Then in column of fours the long file wound down the slopes to the Camel Corps camp on the sands below. Ressot had left it in his usual military formation, the camels parked in rows with their feed-mats spread out in front of each animal, the rifles stacked in regular *faisceaux* at intervals along the front. There was not even a sentry on patrol. A mass of humped burnouses covered the sands, chanting in the last stages of religious excitement. That *Allah-il-Allah* of theirs had reached the state of mob hypnotism, now. As fighting men, they were as useless as so many Hottentots under the sway of voodoo. Ike barked the order: "Right files deploy! Line of battle! Open order! *Houp!*"

The entire right flank of his column spread out in a long line between that mob and the stacked rifles, covering them from attack.



"Halt! Each man takes a rifle and bandolier from the *faisceaux!* *Houp!*"

The clatter of arms followed that execution order. In a few seconds Ressot's troops were disarmed. Poor devil, Ike thought. Ressot, with his new captain's stars could not help but feel disgraced.

The Camel Corps were still praying, not even aware that they were disarmed. And then the Sheik Sif-en-Nazr burst down upon them with cries, followed by Ressot, still expostulating. Ike did not stay to see the effect. He gave the brief order: "March! Battle line falls in as rear guard! *Houp!*"

Up the hill moved Ike's column, now doubly burdened with rifles and bandoliers. Behind them they left an indescribable uproar, shouts, imprecations, yells of despair. The voices of Ressot and the sheik could be heard trying to restore some sort of order. They still had their swords, without which no Arab trooper ever moves—their own property, as were the camels. They could be ugly if they got out of hand—but it would be a mere slaughter against Ike's rear guard. It was painful; but it was war. Poor Ressot!

The battalion was mounted and ready when Ike reported up on the plateau. Their own horses had been saddled, and Ike's special combat unit was ready for him. Knecht greeted the returning column with approval and sought out Di Piatti, after disposing the extra arms in saddle scabbards.

"My Count!" he said. "A word with you: I cannot spare Sergeant Ike for the left wing. He and the Hell's Angels are now our center—all that we have. You commanded a regiment in Italy. You will take the left wing, then. Having two sets of rifles, you should maintain a terrific combat fire, *pardieu!* Our old war-horse Hortet takes the right wing as before. You advance when you hear his guns, after taking position across the east end of this *sebkra* where the enemy are camped. We have no reserves; but—a vigorous charge, with fire *bien nourri*, and we shall need none."

Di Piatti's eyes shone as he nodded understanding of this simple battle plan. Meat for the tall Florentine, was this chance to lead troops again! Ike heard the orders with qualms of regret for good little Ressot. Fine, for their dashing Italian, but it should have been Ressot and his Camel Corps troopers—*would* have been, if this whole region was not such a spooky place! Well, it could not be helped now.

The battalion moved out under the Sahara stars in a long column of jingling harness and creaking leather, to descend into the dreadful sand plains of the Betana. All around them rose now the gloomy and half-seen flanks of



arid rock mountains with tortuous passages of white sand winding in among them. A dangerous place for an ambush in case some scout of the Aït Khebbash had already spied them out and warned the *harka* of their nearness. Knecht had thrown out flanking squads against that very eventuality. The *sebkra* lay five miles to the west. It formed the beginning of a tributary stream that flowed, once in a while, into that vast network of ravines known as the Seguiet-el-Hamra, the Red Valley, cutting through Spanish territory in Rio de Oro, to empty into the Atlantic two hundred miles farther west.

Hours passed. The command plodded along over discouraging sand with Knecht and the Arab guide group in the lead. Haunted mountains that groaned and popped with the chill of night shut off all vision of where they were and where they were going. Always a lane of sand, leading on and on into the unknown. None of this region had ever been mapped. It was a refuge for hostile *harkas* to gather, and whence launch their raids—on Tindouf, on the caravan routes to the Soudan, on posts above the Tafilelt. If met by a superior force, they retreated and vanished. Knecht was audaciously carrying the war into enemy territory with his small force.

About three in the morning the guides stopped and pointed. Over that ridge to the south lay the *sebkra*, they said. Yes, there was passage around it, at both ends. Vague about the distance—two miles, three—what did it matter? The Aït Khebbash were encamped in there; let the Commandant fall upon them, in the name of Allah!

It mattered a good deal to Knecht, the time it would take to get both his wings in position. They must attack almost simultaneously, first Hortet, then Di Piatti, as soon as he heard Hortet open up. Otherwise the Aït Khebbash would overwhelm Hortet alone and then turn down the *sebkra* to deal with Di Piatti.

"*Oui*. Suppose we put it at dawn, then?" said the Commandant, eyeing his watch. "That gives each of you one hour to get into position. Time enough to go twice three miles, to dispose of the horses, to deploy the battle line. Sergeant Ike and I will climb up from here with his combat unit and establish a central P. C., where we can signal both of you if possible. Can you get the horses up there, my Buffalo Bill?"

Ike eyed the rocky slopes, chewing. "Yep. Take us a leetle time, sir. All we want is the ammunition mawl anyhow. The boys kin lug up them sho-shos. That mawl kin climb a chimbly if he has to."

"*Bien!* March, *alors!* I give you one hour, gentlemen."



The command split up. Hortet set off west with four hundred men down a ribbon of sand that led into unexplored fastnesses of the Betana. The mere word of an Arab guide said that they would find a passage into the *sebkra* some distance to the west. No civilized way to launch a battle! But such was campaigning in the Sahara.

It did not worry Ike, who was principally interested in getting that mule up a practically impassable mountain slope. The formation was not stratified but volcanic, ragged masses of black tufa, and not a ledge that went anywhere. The animal was essential, for it bore hundreds of rounds of machine-gun ammunition neatly packed in belts under a tarp and a diamond hitch, a combat invention of Ike's. With the two sho-shos and limitless ammunition, you had the mobility of cavalry combined with the fire-intensity of a whole



battalion of infantry. Once the invaluable mule was up there, Knecht had all the reserve he needed.

Hell's Angels appreciated that as they pulled and pushed and booted that mule upward over atrocious going. The creature was sure-footed, would not fall off the mountain incontinently like a horse, but he had the stubbornness of his race and had to be shown, every foot of the way—more than once had to have a fire built under him. It was all of an hour by the time a sweating and cursing group of men led by Ike and the Commandant had gained the ridge with a mule in their midst. The first faint tinges of dawn were paling the eastern sky as they looked about over what appeared to be a petrified sea of rock waves, six or seven hundred feet to their crests, rising out of valleys of sand. Only down below was it not staring white. Dark and colorless, rather, under the stars. The greenery of the *sebkra*, marshy cat-tails in the spring rains, and goats the rest of the year. A sleeping camp lay below, hundreds of fast gray mehari camels dotting the valley floor, riders snuggled up against them, the whole barely distinguishable in the vaporous gloom. The Commandant's glasses were busy searching the east and west ends of the *sebkra* for signs of the gleam of light on bayonets that would announce the arrival of his two wings. Ike and Criswell picked out two emplacements for the machine-guns. That low rocky saddle crossed the *sebkra* below here, cutting it nearly in two. Its slopes joined the two opposite ridges in a talus that was far less steep than the prevailing hill flanks—a place that invited attack on their position if the Aït Khebbash cared to come up, it seemed to Ike. He set the two guns to sweep it with a plunging fire, and put Anzac Bill and Mora at laying up rocks to protect them against flanking snipers.

**K**NECHT, however, snapped his fingers joyously at sight of that low saddle. "*Eh, bien?* She may open us to attack, that little rise, my sergeant, but she enables Di Piatti to come down the whole east end of the *sebkra* unseen by those dissidents *là bas*," he pointed out. "If we only could signal him not to halt, without springing the bomb ourselves!"

It was a gorgeous opportunity for Di Piatti to get in close if they had only known it beforehand, for the Aït Khebbash camp was all in the west end. That

little rise shut off the east end from their sight. They had not even a lookout on it, that anyone could see. However, there was nothing to be done about it just now. They could not helio till the sun came up. The action would be over by then, probably. Di Piatti would have to depend on the sound of Hortet's guns for the signal to sweep down what would appear to him to be an empty valley.

Daylight grew. They were stirring down below, the rills of smoke from camp-fire embers beginning to rise here and there in the still morning air. No sort of guard seemed to be set. Knecht and his watchers on the heights looked on with more and more impatience. The hour had already passed, and no sign of either wing in the rocky gorges that closed the valley at both ends. Unmistakably the *harka* was preparing to break camp and move on—probably eastward, and then south to join the Reguibat.

A sigh of relief escaped Commandant Knecht at length. "*Ha!* She goes to commence, our little affair!" he said with satisfaction. "*Voilà, Di Piatti!*"

**A** LONG file of Légion horses was winding out between two overlapping promontories that seemed to close the *sebkra* to the east. It moved haltingly at first, its outriding scouts scouring the valley floor to locate any camp of hostiles and returning to report. Slowly the main column pushed out till its leading files were stopped by the flanks of the ridge to the south. Then it turned into a line of battle, each man right-facing his horse. It moved slowly down the *sebkra* some distance, then halted.

"Pretty!" commented Knecht. "If he only would come on!" But there was no mortal way to make him do that. Di Piatti was waiting to hear from Hortet, according to orders. He was at least a mile up the *sebkra* from where that saddle crossed below them; from there to where Hortet would appear was another mile. Well, there was nothing to worry about; you could hear gunfire twenty miles in a quiet morning like this.

And then an element of drama introduced itself, quite unexpectedly. A second file appeared, moving out through that gap between the promontories to the east—a file of mehari camels it was, ambling at an easy pace, an officer in uniform leading them. The rest were



just Arabs. They wore no stunning uniform such as the Spahi; they carried no Lébel rifle strapped over one shoulder upright with the jaunty precision of that corps. But they were Ressot and his Chaambra troopers, just the same, and they were weaponless save for their swords.

A general exclamation broke from the group around the machine-guns as the Camel Corps lined up some distance behind Di Piatti, in parade formation, with Ressot now some paces ahead of their center.

"*Ah, bah! Les pauvre enfants!*" came the pitying cry from Knecht. "They are ashamed, the *méchants!* Ressot has talked to them, and now they would fight, if it is with their bare hands! Can we not signal Di Piatti to give them back their arms, Sergeant?" Knecht asked in a burst of chivalrous forgiveness.

"Mought, sir. We kin send C'lamity, here, with the orders. 'Taint more'n a mile."

They could not really spare Calamity, whose sharpshooting talents would be needed right here to take care of any snipers on their machine-gun nest. But those repentant troopers were too much for this group at the P. C. Calamity was detailed immediately to go bring them Knecht's gesture of forgiveness.

But he was destined never to get there, for at that moment events began to move with a swiftness that put all thoughts of the Chaamba platoon out of mind. Two Aït Khebbash riders came shambling into the valley out of the western gorge, their camels dipping and swaying in the fast lope of the mehari. They waved arms and long guns, and immediately the whole camp of the Aït Khebbash was in a turmoil of activity, tiny figures below leaping into saddles and whacking their beasts to the pitch and toss of the upheaval of getting onto their feet. It was all a pantomime down there, not a sound or a cry, though they were only a few hundred feet above it, and not half a mile away in an air line.

"FUNNY, we don't hear nothin'!" Ike fretted, the first to notice it. "Them birds is shore raisin' hell below, an' them camels a-singin' like they allus does. This aint no theaytre; it's a battle—thar comes Hortet!"

There was no doubt about its being a battle when that old war-horse flung his column into anything! The west end

of the *sebkra* now glinted with bayonets and was being stabbed with red spurts of rifle-fire in the half light of dawn. Hortet's people had dismounted and were deploying to right and left around the rocky base of the flats at that end. But no sound of that action was coming up here, either, no sharp spang of the Lébel's, no rolling thunder of the echoes, no crash of any volley as a whole squad happened to let off together. The Aït Khebbash had recoiled, but not for long. Brave as the Berber has been all down the centuries, canny, war-wise, they were sizing up this attack, keeping well apart, returning Hortet's fire with judgment and without panic. It would not take those experienced raiders long to realize that they far outnumbered this Légion force attacking them. One determined charge and they would have Hortet treed like a cat on a roof.

"Why don't Di Piatti move!"

IKE heard that burst of anguished astonishment escape from between the Commandant's clenched teeth. He turned to look up the valley himself—and saw that long line of Légion troopers still there, just as they had halted. Behind them the *méharistes*, also immovable, waiting. It was unbelievable! The impetuous Di Piatti, the fiery Ressot, eager to retrieve the disgrace to his Camel Corps troopers—both not moving a yard, when anyone could hear that Hortet was in full career at this end of the valley! Moreover he was being hard pressed now. The Aït Khebbash outnumbered him three to one. They had already driven most of his people to cover in the rocks with a destructive fire that left them no choice.

Knecht exploded. "*Mordieu!* Is it that they too cannot hear?" he demanded. "*Incroyable!* It staggers the intelligence! *Ah, bah!* Who ever heard of a silent battle? We must do something, Sergeant Ike! Can you not reach them with the machine-guns? Where is that messenger?"

Futile, his excitement! Calamity was already on his way. The range from their position was far too great to be of any help to Hortet with machine-gun sprays. Knecht pranced impotently; then began waving wig-wag with his kepi at those motionless lines of battle. In vain! At a mile distance his tiny and agitated figure among these rocks was just nothing at all to the eyes of Di Piatti and Ressot! They were waiting



for Hortet's guns, and not hearing them. Also because of the rise of that rock saddle they could see nothing of the action, so far. It was uncanny!

And it was Mora of Hell's Angels who nearly loosed panic in the P. C., including Knecht himself. He had been crossing himself fervidly over all this mysterious pantomime of a battle. The ghost of the tomb—the jinn talking in the desert—and now this sorcery that destroyed all sound—they were all too much for *his* peasant soul! "We are bewitched!" he croaked. "It is the land of Satan! Haunted mountains! *Madre de Dios*, save us!"

"Shet up, you!" Ike withered him with a raging glance of scorn. It was time to speak out, to tell the Commandant that old tale of another battle, long ago, that had no sound, either. For, nature had simply repeated these conditions here, he was sure. "Giner'l," he said, "my pappy fit at Seven Pines, an' it was jest like this, white layers of fog in the valley, an' our two wings was supposed to wham them Feder'ls together, but they didn't, 'cause Joe Johnston didn't hear no firin', though on'y a mile away at headquarters. My pappy was with Magruder's boys just acrost the river, and they could see Longstreet an' Hill chargin' ag'in and ag'in, an' all the batteries on both sides goin' it full blast—*an' they couldn't hear a thing!* Naw, sir! Not a sound, and fifty thousand men engaged! 'Twarn't a mile and a half from whar Magruder's boys stood lookin' on and wonderin' why ol' Joe didn't send 'em no order to git inter it. That's how Lee got command of the Army, sir. Pore ol' Joe didn't hear nothin' either, till it was nigh too late. Then he pitches in like a lion but gits took by a shell, an' it's Robert E. Lee to the front!" Ike concluded with a gleam of patriotic pride in his eyes.

**I**NTEENTLY Knecht regarded him. His spirits rose vastly with this information that he was not the only commander afflicted with a silent battle that had upset completely a perfectly good battle-plan. Like Johnston he leaped with vigor to the remedy, once the supernatural suggestiveness of the mystery was quashed. "*Ouff! Quelle théâtre!*" he exclaimed jovially. "It is simple. If they cannot hear us, they shall see us, Name of God! We charge down with our center, Sergeant Ike! We attack from the saddle! Downhill with the

guns! Bring down that mule, Anzac Beel—throw him down if you can't move him any quicker! *En avant!*"

**K**NECHT and Hell's Angels made probably the quickest time on record down seven hundred feet of hill. They arrived with the machine-guns scrambled up with arms and legs in a sort of fricassée of steel and bones, and turned them point blank into the backs of the Aït Khebbash. The mule came booted down, caroming from rock to rock after them, propelled by the ungentle Iron Dog, as Knecht called Anzac Bill. Its ammunition-belts were yanked off the pack just in time to follow the last of those being ground out by Criswell and Ike. And that eruption of Légion people falling off a hill and going into action with promptitude on a skyline crossing the valley to the west of him was hint enough for Di Piatti. The thunder of his charge sweeping down the valley came to their ears within five minutes of drum-fire from the two machine-guns. *Clatter-clack! Clatter-clack! Clatter-clack!* Like a tidal wave they burst over Ike and Hell's Angels, divided around the guns, swept on with the gangle-legged Count waving his rifle in the lead and yelling like a fiend. Sputtering pops of musketry broke from them. The valley floor was a moving pageant, a spectacle of hard-riding Legionnaires firing at full gallop, and fiery Berbers meeting them with steel, Mausers, the long gun, everything they had. As seen from his rise it was a bewildering *mêlée* of friend and foe in the dust clouds, and so Ike turned the automatics on the hill flanks, which were becoming populous with dismounted snipers.

*Scuff—scuff—scuff!* That second wave was white meharis pacing in their five-foot stride, with long necks outstretched with yelling demons standing up in the saddles, waving yataghans. The Légion horses had outdistanced them in the dash up the *sebkra*—but when that wave struck home, it would be with the energy of a thunderbolt! It rolled over Ike's position and down the saddle decline into the fight. Behind it came Ressayt on the only horse in their outfit. He flung himself out of the saddle and tendered the reins to Knecht.

"Reporting for duty, sir," he said, saluting. "Perhaps the Commandant will need my mount?"

Knecht threw his arms around him



and embraced him French-fashion. "*Ah! —mon pauvre Capitaine!* It has been trying, no? The ghosts, the jinn this battle that makes no sound! Name of the devil! But it goes well now, *hein?*"

"We saw you. I yelled to Di Piatti, and we charged. My herrings—*they'll* show you they should have back their rifles today!" Ressot said with a trace of bitterness in his tone. His eyes were pleading to remount his horse and join his camel troopers.

"Take him!" said Knecht, handing back the reins. "I can see everything from here. Turn their left flank, Captain! It is the one gap left to close!"

RESSOT was off like a shot. The fight was growing stubborn with the Ait Khebbash now being surrounded on all sides. There was no difficulty, either, in hearing all the spiteful crackle of it, for the sun was up, the plain clear to vision, a blue sky overhead. Some scientist has demonstrated that the "silent battle" of Seven Pines was caused by layers of still vapors in a valley bottom obstructing the sound waves. Knecht knew nothing of that, but what Ike told him; he was occupied now entirely with the progress of his battle.

"*Tchk!*" he said regretfully. "They are escaping, Sergeant—but, *ma foi*, we cannot have everything! Had we been able to keep our position on the ridge—"

The battle was dwindling mysteriously, in that way Arab battles are prone to do. The Ait Khebbash were slipping away among the rocks. Criswell and Anzac Bill were peppering judiciously the hill flanks, but it was like trying to slap down a colony of fleas; there were too many of them. The booty, however, was enormous—some two hundred mehari camels with all their trappings and accouterments—when the Légion and the Camel Corps came up the valley again driving the lot, and bringing a few prisoners.

Knecht, by way of congratulations, had a duty to perform. And his chivalrous soul demanded that it be done with military ceremony. He ordered the command in parade formation, Di Piatti's platoon in a long line in front, then the Camel Corps, behind them Hortet's two platoons, all save the booty guard.

"First platoon, dismount!" he barked. "Stack arms! *Houp!*" Di Piatti's men did not need to be told which arms! A line of *faisceaux* grew quickly. The service cavalry carbines with the crook-

ed bolt that would not catch in clothing, they were, not the straight bolt of the infantry. The Camel Corps looked at them hungrily.

"Mount! By the right flank, march! *Houp!*" The platoon filed off, halted and dressed to one side.

"Camel Corps advance! Dismount!" shouted Knecht. Then, "*Pigs!*" he addressed them collectively, "ye that fear foolish noises made by the heat of the sun! Have ye no trust in Allah, who loves not fear? There are no jinn only Allah, who made the sun, the rocks, the wind and all that is. They do as He commands—and ye think it is of Shaitan! *Pah!*"

This was something new in Arabic theology, but it went. Eyes gleamed with glimmerings of conviction where riveted on the coveted rifles. There were nods of turbaned heads.

"Ye fear no men—that ye have proved this day!" Knecht went on. "Lo, the reward for valor!" A finger leveled at their rifle stands. "When next ye tremble before the unknown, think of Allah, for verily He knows about it all—He knows! Advance and take, my children!"

There was a rush on the weapons, then a sharp order from Ressot: "Present arms! —*Houp!*"

The Camel Corps stood each man before his slobbering beast, once more a military unit. Knecht gave the brief order, "Dismissed!" and that was that. Remained only the march back to Erfoud, for that *harka* of Ait Khebbash had been resolved into fugitive tribesmen on foot who would be a long while in organizing another raid on anywhere.

AS for the ghost of the Garamantian tomb, they laid him during the stop that night back at their old camp. A crack in a rock it was, that led clear down to the crypt below. An industrious jerboa had also tunneled a long burrow into the crypt from the hillside. He acted like a small piston as he came, and went, pushing a column of air ahead of him like a subway train. It soughed up through the crack.

"*Ouff!*" Knecht chortled. "I too was scared for a brief moment, messieurs!" he confessed. "And I was about to courtmartial *both* Di Piatti and Ressot for not moving at sound of Hortet's guns in our silent battle of yesterday. *Bah!* One can never trust the impressions of one's senses in this country!"