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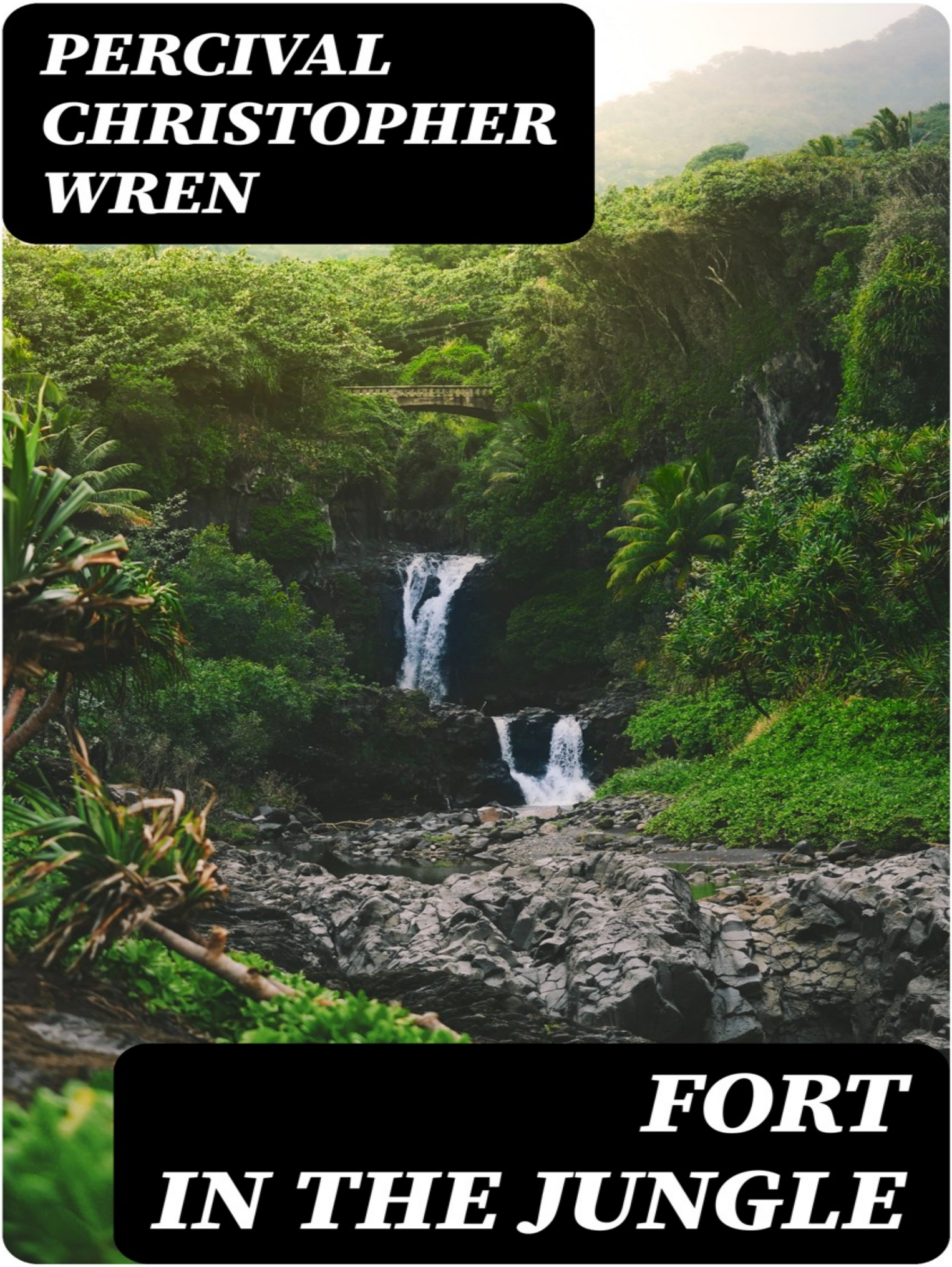

FORT IN THE JUNGLE

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Fort in the Jungle

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PART I

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The jungle fort of Houi-Ninh, its back to the swift and mighty river Meh Song, its front and flanks to the illimitable Annamese jungle, stood like a little rock, almost submerged beneath a deep green sea.

Behind it, a theoretically pacified land of peaceful if resentful villages, set in rice-field, forest, plain and swamp; before it, the unconquerable jungle, its dank and gloomy depths the home and defence of fierce swift jungle-men, predatory, savage, and devilishly cruel.

And beyond that vast uncharted sea of densest forest and impenetrable swamp, a further *terra incognita*; and then China, inimical, enigmatic and sinister.

The little jungle fort was strong, the foundations of its walls great boulders of stone, the walls themselves dried mud and great baulks of mahogany, its vast and heavy iron-wood gate secured by huge steel bars which were lengths of railway-line.

Within the square of walls was the low oblong white-washed *caserne* containing the *chambrée* in which the men slept, the store-room, the cook-house, the non-commissioned officers' quarters, and the office-bedroom of the Commandant.

The fort was besieged. Hordes of flat-faced, slant-eyed warriors, half brigand, pirate and dacoit, half mandarin's irregular soldier, swarmed about it in the gloom of the jungle just beyond the tiny clearing that surrounded its walls. From lofty iron-wood trees, a galling and decimating

fire had been kept up for days, by the Möi, Tho, Muong and Chinese sharp-shooters armed with Sniders, Chassepot and Gras guns, as well as excellent Spencer carbines and Remington repeating rifles, reducing the garrison to half its original inadequate numbers, and inflicting upon it the loss not only of its Commandant, Lieutenant Jacot, but of its half-dozen non-commissioned officers as well.

It was now commanded by an ordinary *soldat première classe*, the *Légionnaire* Paladino, senior man present, and readily-accepted leader.

The last official communication from the outside world had been a suddenly-ended heliograph message, the concluding sentence of which had been ominous.

“Those about to die, salute ...”

It had come from another fort set upon a hill some twenty-five *li*[1] distant.

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[1] *Li* = about 600 yards.

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A handful of assorted soldiers gathered from the ends of the earth, of very widely varying nationality, creed and breed, of greatly differing education, birth, and social experience, stood in the dark shadow of imminent death; Death ineluctable, inevitable, inexorable; Death now as certain as—death.

These men knew that no power on earth could save them; that no power from Heaven would save them; that this was as certainly the last night of their lives as it would have been had they each been seated alone in the condemned cell, doomed by law to meet, at dawn, the hangman, *Madame la Guillotine*, or the firing-party.

They knew that to-morrow's dawn was the last that they would ever see.

The victorious and triumphant army of the *Pavillons Noirs*, the Black Flags, jungle savages, Möis, river pirates, Tonkinese dacoits and bandits, and Chinese Regulars in disguise, now bearing down upon them to join their besiegers, out-numbered them by a hundred to one. It could, and would, by sheer weight of numbers alone, overwhelm them, obliterate them. Against it, they had precisely as much chance as has a snail against a steam-roller. Should this great force of irregular but magnificent, well-armed fighting men, instead of sweeping over the little jungle fort, trouble to ring it about with fire, the score of defenders' rifles would answer a thousand.

And for how long?

Almost with their guns alone could the Tonkinese and Chinese jungle-warriors blast, into its original dust, the mud wall of the wretched little post, already more than half-submerged by the slowly rising tide of the ever-encroaching jungle.

But this they probably would not do. They were very fierce, impetuous and primitive in their swift savagery. Almost certainly they would rush it, destroy it, stamp it flat, and let the jungle in. In a few weeks there would be no sign of where it had stood. It would be sunk full fathom five beneath an emerald sea of leaf and stalk; strangled, choked, drowned beneath the green ocean of leaves.

These men were doomed, for they were abandoned. Not abandoned callously, carelessly or neglectfully, but by necessity, the harsh cruelty of military fate and the adverse fortune of war. To have saved them would have cost ten times their number. To have saved the fort would have cost ten times what it was worth.

And loss of prestige? That would be regained a hundredfold when the General was ready, and reinforcements for his disease-decimated sun-smitten jungle-worn army should reach his headquarters from France.

The only doubt about their certain death lay in the question of the manner of it.

A furious headlong charge of strong swift swordsmen, brown, black-turbaned, Gurkha-like; rush upon rush, and an overwhelming flood which would surge across the stockade as waves break over a child’s castle of sand, and then swift sudden death by bullet and blade?

Or, perchance, a long slow day of torture by thirst and heat and wounds as, beneath a hail of bullets from high surrounding trees, they died slowly, man by man, their fire growing slacker and slower until the last wounded man with his last remaining strength and failing sight, reached the last cartridge and fired the last shot of the defence?

According to their Annamese informants, “friendlies” fleeing before the advancing host—this had been the fate of the first of the two forts that the rebel horde had attacked, the only other outposts on that side of the mighty river, deep and swift. It had been enveloped, surrounded during the night, and at dawn had been subjected to so heavy a fire at so short range that by noon the little post had been silenced, the fortunate among its defenders those who had been killed during the battle. The wounded had been crucified, slowly roasted alive, or indescribably tortured with the knife.

On the other hand, the second outpost had been carried by an overwhelming rush, and its defenders had died on their feet, whirling clubbed rifles, stabbing with fixed bayonets in a wild pandemoniac *mêlée*.

But few of the men of this latter fort had lived to suffer torture—fortunately—for these Black Flag pirates, the jungle dacoits of the Far East, are the most ingenious, the most inhuman, the most devilishly cruel and callous torturers on the face of the earth.

And this was the third outpost.

Their last night. How should it be spent?

Had these men been of a homogeneous regiment, whether English, Scottish, Irish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Dutch, Swiss, Greek or Spanish, their general reaction to such a situation might be to some extent predictable.

Condemned to death without the possibility or faintest hope of reprieve, doomed to die at dawn without the slightest chance of escape, the men of one of these nations would have spent the night in grim uneasy jest; of a second in dour resigned solemnity; of a third in hectic nervous gaiety; of another in futile wrath and bitter recriminations against those by whom they had been “betrayed”; of another in a drunken orgy and a brave effort at the consumption of all stores of food and drink; of another in the singing of hymns and of national sentimental songs; and of yet another—in carrying on precisely as usual.

But of these particular men, not more than two were of the same nationality, and they represented most of the countries of Europe.

They were, nevertheless, soldiers of the French Foreign Legion, and as General Négrier had once informed the Legion, they were there to die, they were hired to die.

It was simply their business.

That was what they were for.

And so they sat—a wasteful plethora of tins of “monkey meat” and black issue bread, *bidons* of wine and packets of cigarettes beside them, talked and played *mini-dini*—and ate and drank, and were not merry, in spite of this unwonted luxury.

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It was their leader, the suave, cynical Paladino, a baffling enigmatical man, who made the suggestion, as they sat in a circle about the glowing embers of the fire, waiting for death, matter-of-fact, business-like and unperturbed, each man *bon camarade* and *bon légionnaire*.

Although literally a case of eat and drink, for to-morrow we die, they maintained, from force of habit, all correct military procedure, and a sentry paced the cat-walk, the long narrow firing-platform that ran round the inside of the fort four feet below the top of the wall.

“Hell!” yawned Paladino lazily, and stretched himself. “Soon be there, too.”

“Wonder whether *le bon Dieu* tries us one by one, or in a bunch,” he added, as he lay back against a box of ammunition, settled himself comfortably and lit a cigarette.

“What, us? Us old *légionnaires*? Oh, one by one, of course,” asserted Lemoine, “and in camera, too.”

“In camera, behind closed doors? Oh, too bad,” grinned Borodoff. “We would have liked to hear the worst about one another.”

“True,” agreed Paladino.

“Well, why not have it now?” he added.

“Afraid we haven’t—er—quite enough time,” smiled old Bethune. “My own sins alone would take …”

“Of course they would, *mon vieux*,” agreed Paladino. “Take a month at least. I wasn’t so optimistic as to imagine that we were going to have time to hear it all. Not even just

yours. What I suggested was ‘the worst’. Let’s each confess our worst, blackest, beastliest deed, fully and faithfully, truly and honestly.”

“Yes,” agreed Lemoine. “And no boasting. Let’s form a Dirty Dogs’ Club and see who, on his own confession, is the dirtiest dog. He shall be proclaimed President. First and last President of the most short-lived club on earth.”

Paladino rose to his feet.

“*Bon!* I declare the Club to be about to be. We are the original and only candidates for membership. I am the founder. Our friends the Black Flags will be the un-founders. Let none of your confessions be unfounded though.... You begin, Nul de Nullepart.”

Le Légionnaire Nul de Nullepart began, and others followed his excellent and stimulating lead ...

Suddenly a Snider boomed, and Schenko, looking out through a *creneau*, staggered back and fell from the cat-walk down into the *enceinte*.

“*Aux armes!*” bawled Paladino, as every man, grabbing his rifle, sprang to meet the rush of savages that surged over all four walls, like a wave.

The struggle that followed was long and desperate, ending in a wild *mêlée* in which single *légionnaires* with whirling rifle-butts or darting bayonets fought desperately, each against a dozen; dying, man by man, until but one of them was left alive. He, clubbed from behind, had been knocked from the cat-walk down into the *enceinte*, and lay partly buried, and almost concealed, beneath the half-naked

corpses of fallen dacoits, brown bodies partly clad in bright *panaungs*.

PART II

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CHAPTER I

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As I have already told,[1] I was bred to the sea, my father being an Admiral, and my forbears having held rank in the British Navy for centuries.

But my mother, abetted, if not instigated, by my step-father, Lord Fordingstane, decided that she could not afford to send me to the *Britannia* and into the Navy; I was apprenticed to the shipping-firm of Messrs. Dobson, Robson, and Wright, of Glasgow, and made my first voyage, as an Apprentice, in one of their ships, the *Valkyrie* of ill omen.

Sickened, for the time being, of the sea—for this voyage was one of the most tragic and disastrous made by any ship that ever came to port—I decided to be a soldier; and, with my fellow-Apprentice, Dacre Blount, enlisted in the Life Guards, a regiment in which my step-father had been a Cornet.

Having served for a couple of years in the Life Guards, Dacre Blount and I accepted a friend’s offer of a chance to go to sea once more, this time on a gun-running expedition to Morocco. Here I was captured by nomad Arabs, sold as a slave, and, later, taken by my master to Mecca.[2]

The pilgrim ship in which we were returning from Jiddah was burnt; and I, escaping from it, was picked up by an Arab *dhow* which, proceeding to Djibouti in French Somaliland, was there seized by the French Naval authorities for the slaver, pearl-poacher, gun-runner and *hashish*-smuggler that she was, and handed over to the civil power. My Arab captors, long wanted by the French, were tried for piracy

and murder, and were shot; I, proclaiming myself an Englishman, late in the employ of the Sultan of Bab-el-Djebel, was accused of being a Secret Service agent and spy, left for long in doubt as to my fate, and then, having been tried on an espionage charge, was found probably-guilty and given the choice between enlisting in the French Foreign Legion and suffering indefinite detention.

In point of fact, I was just in the humour to join the French Foreign Legion, being at the moment rebellious against Fate, at a loose end, and somewhat desperate.

Moreover, that way of life undoubtedly promised adventure, and of adventure I was avid.

It seemed to me, too, that I was remarkably well equipped for this new rôle, inasmuch as I was a soldier, spoke and understood Arabic perfectly, had a good ground-work of French, knew the desert and the Arab and the Arab's way of fighting, better than any veteran in the Corps; and, thanks to sea-training, Guards' training, and my extremely active life in the desert, was a remarkably tough, seasoned and active young man.

But Fate will have its little joke; and as I knew Arabic and was an experienced desert fighter, I was sent almost direct to where the only useful language was Annamese; the terrain was swamp and dense jungle; and the mode of fighting was as different as it could possibly be from that of Arab warfare.

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[1] *Action and Passion.*

[2] *Sinbad the Soldier.*

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Accounts of the routine of joining the Foreign Legion, proceeding to Sidi-bel-Abbès, and undergoing recruit-training are numerous, and their number need not be increased. Suffice it to say that my training as a Guardsman, my size and strength, and my African experience, stood me in very good stead, and enabled me to endure, if not enjoy, recruit days at the depot at Sidi-bel-Abbès, and to suffer nothing worse than boredom.

It was at just about the time when I was dismissed recruits' drill that a notice appeared in *rapport* that a draft would shortly be going as re-inforcement to the Legion battalion in Tonking on active service against the rebellious or, rather, unsubdued, followers of the Emperor of Annam, who had recently been defeated by the French and exiled from Indo-China.

These mountaineers, Annamese of the Dalat plateau and other highland parts of Tonking, aided by vast hordes of dacoits, brigands, and pirates, known as Black Flags, and secretly subsidized and supported by the Chinese Government, who reinforced them with bodies of irregulars and regiments of Chinese regular troops, were a powerful and dangerous enemy who had inflicted more than one definite defeat upon French Generals.

Promptly I put in my name for the draft and, presumably on the strength of my previous military training and

experience, my physique, and the white crime-sheet of a blameless life, I was accepted, our Commanding Officer, *Chef de Bataillon* Wattringue doing me the honour of speaking a few words to me as he inspected the special parade of applicants for foreign service.

"What's your name, *mon enfant*?"

"Dysart, *mon Colonel*."

"Previous service in the British Army, I'm told. Regiment?"

"Life Guards, *mon Colonel*."

"Your father an officer?"

"Admiral, *mon Colonel*."

"Why did you come to the Legion?"

"For adventure; active service, *mon Colonel*," I replied, telling him the truth and nothing but the truth—if not the whole truth.

"Is he a good shot, a good marcher and a good soldier?" he enquired, turning to Captain Dubosque, commanding my Depôt Company.

"Excellent," replied that worthy man.

"And you wish to proceed forthwith to Tonking, eh?" he asked, turning again to me.

I assured him that I did.

"Well, perhaps you will. And equally—perhaps you won't," he replied, and passed on.

A fortnight later my name was published in Orders among those, my seniors and betters, who, having had six months' service and not having suffered imprisonment during that time, were to be formed into a separate section,

receive flannel uniforms and a white helmet, and parade with the troops under orders for Tonking.

Of the men who entrained at Sidi-bel-Abbès for Oran to embark in the troop-ship *Général Boulanger* from Marseilles, already full to capacity with troops of the *Infanterie de la Marine*, few returned, most of them leaving their bones in the swamps, jungles, and military cemeteries of Indo-China.

Not a few died of heat-stroke, disease, and wounds before the troopship reached Pingeh, the port of Saigon in Cambodia.

Of those who died of wounds, two were shot attempting to desert in the Suez Canal where the ship tied up for the night; three at Singapore where we stopped to coal; while one man, who had succeeded in swimming from the ship at that port, was taken by a shark.

These deaths led to others, as, the deserting *légionnaires* having been shot by sentries of the Marine Infantry, there was, for the rest of the voyage, a very strong Legion feeling against the men of that Corps, a reciprocated bitterness of spirit that was expressed in more than one desperate and murderous conflict.

After calling at Saigon in Cochin China, the troopship proceeded to the mouth of the Red River, where the Legion draft was transferred to a couple of river gun-boats, the *Lily* and the *Lotus*, and taken some six hours' journey up the river and disembarked at the town of Haiphong.

From the wharf, our draft marched by way of a fine *boulevard*, the *Avenue Paul Bert*, to the Négrier Barracks, whence, a day or two later, we were taken on gun-boats

another day’s journey up the Red River to the base camp at a place called Hai Duong.

Thence, after rest, re-organization and re-fitting, we marched to a spot we called Seven Pagodas, and thence to the camp of the Second Battalion of the First Regiment at Houi-Bap—the seat of war.

I was on regular active service at last.

CHAPTER II

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We soon learned that the Annamese army, known as the Black Flags, and by profession river-pirates and jungle dacoits—together with their allies, a large force of Chinese irregulars, also bandits in time of peace, reinforced, according to our scouts, by regiments of regular soldiers of the Chinese army who were led by white officers—held a strongly fortified position at a place called Quang-Ton. Already one considerable battle had been fought near this place, and, whoever claimed the victory, the enemy undeniably held the ground.

Our camp at Houi-Bap was the nearest French base to this strong enemy position; and with us, besides details, lay a battalion of *Tirailleurs Tonkinois*, native Annamese troops of the Delta, led by French officers and drilled by French non-commissioned officers.

Our battalion of the Legion had been divided into three companies, one of which occupied the base with its stores of food and munitions, while the other two marched out and operated, for several weeks at a stretch, as flying columns in the enemy country.

In my time at Houi-Bap I played many parts, having been, on different occasions and for varying periods, a cook, for the first and last time in my life; an exterior decorator, with whitewash only; a wood-cutter; a water-carrier; a stone-dresser; a carpenter; a road-navvy and a brick-maker.

A kilometre or so from our fortified barracks, within the stockade of which was quite a strong *réduit*, a claypit and

brick-yard had been constructed, and here, under the guidance of a Sergeant who knew nothing about it, a dozen of us were employed in modelling bricks in clay, and stacking them in the kilns in which they were to be baked.

Nor did we make bricks without straw. While we worked, a section of native soldiers, *Tirailleurs Tonkinois*, chopped rice-straw for our use, while others carried buckets of water from the brick-yard well, and another section fed the kiln fires with wood.

These Annamese were under the command of a *Doi* or native Sergeant, who struck me as a remarkably intelligent man, very active, forceful and competent, as well as a good disciplinarian.

Later, I encountered *Doi* Linh Nghi in a different capacity, came to know him better, to like him very much, and to rank him among my real friends.

I cannot say that I found this aspect of life in the Foreign Legion thrilling or even attractive, for the work was extremely hard and dirty, the climate exceedingly hot and humid. So it was without regret that I learned, one day, that, enough bricks having been made, my Section was to join the Company that was going out on patrol, and was to be left by it at a distant outpost beyond the River Meh-Song at a place called Houi-Ninh.

We fell in, that morning, in full marching order, khaki uniform of cotton drill; rifles and bayonets; a hundred and twenty rounds of ammunition; filled water-bottles; ground-sheets rolled up, tied in a loop like a horse-collar, and worn over the left shoulder; laden knapsacks and haversacks; and a very heavy *mâchète* in a wooden sheath. The *mâchète*

was both tool and weapon, like a broad thick straight-bladed sword, very sharp, and extremely useful for hacking one's way through the jungle where there was no path, or the track was so overgrown with creepers, bamboo, bushes, high grass and undergrowth that it was invisible. Incidentally, I once saw a powerful Yunnanese take a man's head right off with a *mâchète*, severing the neck as cleanly and neatly as though it had been a cucumber.

On our flank fell in a company of *Tirailleurs Tonkinois*, their uniform, of the same material as ours, consisting of a kind of vest, shorts, and their own native Muong puttees. They were bare-footed, and they wore round flat bamboo hats like plates, held in place by red cotton bonnet-strings.

These men were armed with carbines which took the same cartridges and bayonets as our own rifles, but were lighter and shorter weapons.

Out, through the great gates of the palisade—which ran right round our barracks, fort, store-sheds and various quarters and buildings, quite a village in itself—out, along the river bank between the rice-fields, and away into the jungle, we marched; far away out into the open country.

And through that open country of the Delta we continued to march, generally over a well-cultivated plain, with here and there villages nestling in clumps of fine trees and surrounded by growths of graceful bamboos. Between the villages, the country was covered with thick and luxuriant vegetation of brightest green, with very tall grass, and with patches of dense jungle and forest. Here and there, small hills broke the usual flatness of the terrain.

In this country, within a few days' march of Houi-Bap, the villages that were occupied were also, in theory, pacified, and the headman and elders would usually come out, kow-tow, and produce fruit, betel-nut, sugar-cane, milk or tea as peace-offerings to the soldiery.

Those that failed to come out were promptly brought out. For had they not accepted the protection of *Madame la République*, and had they not now the privilege of paying their taxes into her treasury at Phulang-Thuong?

Occasionally we came upon a village which was merely a charred heap of smoking ruins, this being the work of the exiled Emperor of Annam's Viceroy, the Annamese General De-Nam, and showed that they had refused to pay taxes to him likewise.

As my friend *Doi* Linh Nghi pointed out to me, when we talked in camp at night or on the march, it really was a little hard on the unfortunate villagers of this "pacified" zone, that, if they wished to keep the roof over their heads and the crops on their fields, they had to pay taxes twice, a toll of rice and money to their late Emperor in the person of General De-Nam, and also the taxes levied by the French authorities.

As we got further from our base, the spirit of the villagers changed, either their courage being greater or their wisdom less. The gates of the stockades with which the villages were invariably surrounded, would be barred and the place would show no signs of life. The Commander of the column would order the leading section to pull down the great iron-wood beams which, placed one above the other, their ends

resting in slots cut in the huge and heavy door-posts, secured the stout resistant iron-wood doors.

The first of such places that we visited caused us some annoyance, for, having entered with bayonets fixed, rifles at the ready, mouths grim, and eyes glaring watchfully, we found—nothing. The place was absolutely empty. The villagers had all departed through some postern in the stockade at the other side of the village and escaped into the dense jungle beyond, where their cattle and other worldly goods were already hidden.

Day after day, week after week, we marched; and now, when approaching villages, were frequently met with a shower of bullets. In such cases the Commander would practise the column in attack drill, skirmishing up to the place and finally carrying it with the bayonet—quite unopposed. The training was good and the assault bloodless, the villages invariably being found to be empty.

It must have been policy rather than cowardice or doubt of the issue that made the Annamese peasants behave so, for each one of these villages was a strong post in itself, quite a jungle fort, surrounded as it frequently was by a deep moat, an embankment, and either a double or triple stockade of very stout bamboo.

In addition to such obstacles, entry into these jungle villages must be made by way of a passage through the embankment and stockades, only sufficiently wide for the domestic buffalo to make his way when he went forth to graze in the morning and returned at eventide.

It seemed to me that when we did have to attack one of these villages, occupied by a well-armed and determined

garrison, we should only capture it at considerable cost, the narrow entrances being commanded by loop-holes through which a hot fire could be poured at close range upon the attacking force.

And, in due course, and not before we were extremely glad to see it, we reached the distant outpost of Houi-Ninh, beyond the Meh-Song River which we crossed, one at a time, by a swinging “bridge” of rattan and bamboo.

At Houi-Ninh my section, under Lieutenant Jacot, relieved the garrison; was left behind by the departing column; and remained in occupation until those who had not died of fever were ready to die of boredom.

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While I and my Section were forgotten here in Houi-Ninh, things went rather badly with the French. The enemy, reinforced it was supposed, from China, became extremely active, over-ran great areas of the Pacified Zone, re-conquering and occupying the whole country up to and beyond the River Meh-Song, on the banks of which our little outpost stood.

The three outposts, on the further side of this river, of which ours was one, were attacked. Two of them fell at once, and their garrisons were put to the sword.

Ours was then besieged, was assaulted, and, after a desperate fight, was overwhelmed. I, thanks to a blow on the head from a rifle-butt, was stunned and left for dead.

Coming to my senses, I found myself the sole survivor of the garrison, alone in the silent post, now tenanted but by the dead.

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It was a shocking situation, one calculated to unhinge the mind of any person not inured to horrors. Fortunately for me, I was not without experience of such. The fort was a grave, strewn—I had almost said filled—with the hacked and mutilated bodies of my comrades and the corpses of those whom they had slain in the fierce barter of lives.

All that was wrong with me, physically, was an appalling headache, and a wound which, although it had at first seemed to me to be a depressed fracture of the skull, was merely a scalp wound. My thick *képi* had saved me from the worst injury, and doubtless the confined space in which we had been struggling on the cat-walk had prevented my assailant from doing himself justice....

Never shall I forget the first awful minutes of recovering consciousness, when I found myself pinned down, half-crushed, almost smothered, by the bodies of the dead.

At first I thought I was myself dead; and then, when convinced that I was alive, was sure that I was dying, for I was in hideous pain, and could move neither hand nor foot.

When, however, I fully recovered consciousness, I found, after a few mighty heaves and struggles, that I could sit up ... stand up ... and walk about.

What amazed me was the fact that the fort should be deserted, almost intact; and I concluded that there must be some more attractive object to which the pirate and rebel force had passed on, as soon as our post of Houi-Ninh had fallen and its garrison been exterminated.

As I staggered round the *enceinte*, averting my eyes from the bodies of my comrades—some of which had been deliberately mutilated—and entered the barrack-room, store-room and other quarters, I saw that the place had been looted and wantonly damaged; but there had been no attempt to set the buildings on fire. Nor had all the tinned provisions been removed.

I wondered whether policy or haste was the reason for this only partial destruction; whether the *T'uh Muh*, the