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BEAU GESTE

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CHAPTER I
OF THE STRANGE EVENTS AT ZINDERNEUF

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TOLD BY MAJOR HENRI DE BEAUJOLAIS OF THE SPAHIS
TO
GEORGE LAWRENCE, ESQ., C.M.G., OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL SERVICE

"*Tout ce que je raconte, je l'ai vu, et si j'ai pu me tromper en le voyant, bien certainement je ne vous trompe pas en vous le disant.*"

"The place was silent and *aware*."

Mr. George Lawrence, C.M.G., First Class District Officer of His Majesty's Civil Service, sat at the door of his tent and viewed the African desert scene with the eye of extreme disfavour. There was beauty neither in the landscape nor in the eye of the beholder.

The landscape consisted of sand, stone, *kerengia* burr-grass, *tafasa* underbrush, yellow, long-stalked with long thin bean-pods; the whole varied by clumps of the coarse and hideous *tumpafia* plant.

The eye was jaundiced, thanks to the heat and foul dust of Bornu, to malaria, dysentery, inferior food, poisonous water, and rapid continuous marching in appalling heat.

Weak and ill in body, Lawrence was worried and anxious in mind, the one reacting on the other.

In the first place, there was the old standing trouble about the Shuwa Patrol; in the second, the truculent Chiboks were waxing insolent again, and their young men were regarding not the words of their elders concerning Sir Garnet Wolseley, and what happened, long, long ago, after the battle of Chibok Hill. Thirdly, the price of grain had risen to six shillings a *saa*, and famine threatened; fourthly, the Shehu and Shuwa sheiks were quarrelling again; and, fifthly, there was a very bad smallpox ju-ju abroad in the land (a secret society whose "secret" was to offer His Majesty's liege subjects the choice between being infected with smallpox, or paying heavy blackmail to the society). Lastly, there was acrimonious correspondence with the All-Wise Ones (of the Secretariat in "Aiki Square" at Zungeru), who, as usual, knew better than the man on the spot, and bade him do either the impossible or the disastrous.

And across all the *Harmattan* was blowing hard, that terrible wind that carries the Saharan dust a hundred miles to sea, not so much as a sand-storm, but as a mist or fog of dust as fine as flour, filling the eyes, the lungs, the pores of the skin, the nose and throat; getting into the locks of rifles, the works of watches and cameras, defiling water, food and everything else; rendering life a burden and a curse.

The fact, moreover, that thirty days' weary travel over burning desert, across oceans of loose wind-blown sand and prairies of burnt grass, through breast-high swamps, and across unbridged boatless rivers, lay between him and Kano, added nothing to his satisfaction. For, in spite of all,

satisfaction there was, inasmuch as Kano was rail-head, and the beginning of the first stage of the journey Home. That but another month lay between him and “leave out of Africa,” kept George Lawrence on his feet.

From that wonderful and romantic Red City, Kano, sister of Timbuktu, the train would take him, after a three days’ dusty journey, to the rubbish-heap called Lagos, on the Bight of Benin of the wicked West African Coast. There he would embark on the good ship *Appam*, greet her commander, Captain Harrison, and sink into a deck chair with that glorious sigh of relief, known in its perfection only to those weary ones who turn their backs upon the Outposts and set their faces towards Home.

Meantime, for George Lawrence—disappointment, worry, frustration, anxiety, heat, sand-flies, mosquitoes, dust, fatigue, fever, dysentery, malarial ulcers, and that great depression which comes of monotony indescribable, weariness unutterable, and loneliness unspeakable.

And the greatest of these is loneliness.

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But, in due course, George Lawrence reached Kano and the Nassarawa Gate in the East Wall, which leads to the European segregation, there to wait for a couple of days for the bi-weekly train to Lagos. These days he whiled away in strolling about the wonderful Haussa city, visiting the market-place, exploring its seven square miles of streets of mud houses, with their ant-proof *dôm*-palm beams; watching the ebb and flow of varied black and brown

humanity at the thirteen great gates in its mighty earthen ramparts; politely returning the cheery and respectful "*Sanu! Sanu!*" greetings of the Haussas who passed this specimen of the great Bature race, the wonderful white men.

Idly he compared the value of the caravans of salt or of ground-nuts with that of the old slave-caravans which the white man thinks he has recently suppressed; and casually passed the time of day with Touareg camel-drivers, who invited him to hire or buy their piebald, brindled, or white camels, and, occasionally, a rare and valuable beast of the tawny reddish buff variety, so prized for speed and endurance....

On the platform of Kano Station (imagine a platform and station at Kano, ancient, mysterious, gigantic, emporium of Central Africa, with its great eleven-mile wall, and its hundred thousand native inhabitants and its twenty white men; Kano, eight hundred miles from the sea, near the border of Northern Nigeria which marches with the French *Territoire Militaire* of Silent Sahara; Kano, whence start the caravan routes to Lake Tchad on the north-east, and Timbuktu on the north-west)—on this incredible platform, George Lawrence was stirred from his weary apathy by a pleasant surprise in the form of his old friend, Major Henri de Beaujolais of the Spahis, now some kind of special staff-officer in the French Soudan.

With de Beaujolais, Lawrence had been at Ainger's House at Eton; and the two occasionally met, as thus, on the Northern Nigerian Railway; on the ships of Messrs. Elder, Dempster; at Lord's; at Longchamps; at Auteuil; and, once

or twice, at the house of their mutual admired friend, Lady Brandon, at Brandon Abbas in Devonshire.

For de Beaujolais, Lawrence had a great respect and liking, as a French soldier of the finest type, keen as mustard, hard as nails, a thorough sportsman, and a gentleman according to the exacting English standard. Frequently he paid him the remarkable English compliment, “One would hardly take you for a Frenchman, Jolly, you might almost be English,” a bouquet which de Beaujolais received with less concern by reason of the fact that his mother had been a Devonshire Cary.

Although the Spahi officer was heavily bearded, arrayed in what Lawrence considered hopelessly ill-fitting khaki, and partially extinguished by a villainous high-domed white helmet (and looked as truly French as his friend looked truly English), he, however, did not throw himself with a howl of joy upon the bosom of his *cher Georges*, fling his arms about his neck, kiss him upon both cheeks, nor address him as his little cabbage. Rather as his old bean, in fact.

A strong hand-grip, “Well, George!” and, “Hallo! Jolly, old son,” sufficed; but de Beaujolais’ charming smile and Lawrence’s beaming grin showed their mutual delight.

And when the two men were stretched opposite to each other on the long couches of their roomy compartment, and had exchanged plans for spending their leave—yachting, golf, and the Moors, on the one hand; and Paris boulevards, race-courses, and Monte Carlo, on the other—Lawrence found that he need talk no more, for his friend was bursting and bubbling over with a story, an unfathomable intriguing mystery, which he must tell or die.

As the train steamed on from Kano Station and its marvellous medley of Arabs, Haussas, Yorubas, Kroos, Egbas, Beri-Beris, Fulanis, and assorted Nigerians from *sarkin*, *sheikh*, *shehu*, and *matlaki*, to peasant, camel-man, agriculturist, herdsman, shopkeeper, clerk, soldier, tin-mine worker, and nomad, with their women and *piccins*, the Frenchman began his tale.

Through Zaria, Minna Junction, and Zungeru, across the Jebba Bridge over the Niger, through Ilorin, Oshogbo, and mighty Ibadan to vast Abeokuta, with brief intervals during which Lawrence frankly snored, de Beaujolais told his tale. But at Abeokuta, George Lawrence received the surprise of his life and the tale suddenly became of the most vital interest to him, and from there to Lagos he was all ears.

And as the *Appam* steamed through the sparkling Atlantic, the Frenchman still told his tale—threshed at its mystery, dissected and discussed it, speculated upon it, and returned to it at the end of every digression. Nor ever could George Lawrence have enough—since it indirectly concerned the woman whom he had always loved.

When the two parted in London, Lawrence took it up and continued it himself, until he, in his turn, brought it back to his friend and told him its beginning and end.

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And the story, which Major Henri de Beaujolais found so intriguing, he told to George Lawrence as follows:—

“I tell you, my dear George, that it is the most extraordinary and inexplicable thing that ever happened. I

shall think of nothing else until I have solved the mystery, and you must help me. You, with your trained official mind, detached and calm; your *phlegme Britannique*.

Yes—you shall be my Sherlock Holmes, and I will be your wonder-stricken little Watson. Figure me then as the little Watson; address me as 'My dear Watson.'

Having heard my tale—and I warn you, you will hear little else for the next two or three weeks—you must unhesitatingly make a pronouncement. Something prompt and precise, my dear friend, *hein*?"

"Quite," replied Lawrence. "But suppose you give me the facts first?"

"It was like this, my dear Holmes.... As you are aware, I am literally buried alive in my present job at Tokotu. But yes, with a burial-alive such as you of the Nigerian Civil Service have no faintest possible conception, in the uttermost Back of Beyond. (You, with your Maiduguri Polo Club! Pouf!) Yes, interred living, in the southernmost outpost of the *Territoire Militaire* of the Sahara, a spot compared with which the very loneliest and vilest Algerian border-hole would seem like Sidi-bel-Abbès itself, Sidi-bel-Abbès like Algiers, Algiers like Paris in Africa, and Paris like God's Own Paradise in Heaven.

Seconded from my beloved regiment, far from a boulevard, a café, a club, far, indeed, from everything that makes life supportable to an intelligent man, am I entombed..."

"I've had some," interrupted Lawrence unsympathetically. "Get on with the Dark Mystery."

"I see the sun rise and set; I see the sky above, and the desert below; I see my handful of *cafard*-stricken men in my

mud fort, black Senegalese, and white mule-mounted infantry whom I train, poor devils; and what else do I see? What else from year's end to year's end? ..."

"I shall weep in a minute," murmured Lawrence. "What about the Dark Mystery?"

"What do I see?" continued the Major, ignoring the unworthy remark. "A vulture. A jackal. A lizard. If I am lucky and God is good, a slave-caravan from Lake Tchad. A band of veiled Touaregs led by a Targui bandit-chief, thirsting for the blood of the hated white *Roumi*—and I bless them even as I open fire or lead the attack of my mule-cavalry-playing-at-Spahis ..."

"The Dark Mystery must have been a perfect godsend, my dear Jolly," smiled Lawrence, as he extracted his cheroot-case and extended it to his eloquent friend, lying facing him on the opposite couch-seat of the uncomfortable carriage of the Nigerian Railway. "What *was* it?"

"A godsend, indeed," replied the Frenchman. "Sent of God, surely to save my reason and my life. But I doubt if the price were not a little high, even for that! The deaths of so many brave men.... And one of those deaths a dastardly cold-blooded murder! The vile assassination of a gallant *sous-officier*.... And by one of his own men. In the very hour of glorious victory.... *One of his own men*—I am certain of it. But why? *Why?* I ask myself night and day. And now I ask you, my friend.... The motive, I ask? ... But you shall hear all—and instantly solve the problem, my dear Holmes, eh? ...

Have you heard of our little post of Zinderneuf (far, far north of Zinder which is in the Aïr country), north of your

Nigeria? No? Well you hear of it now, and it is where this incomprehensible tragedy took place.

Behold me then, one devilish hot morning, yawning in my pyjamas over a *gamelle* of coffee, in my quarters, while from the *caserne* of my *légionnaires* come the cries of '*Au jus*,' '*Au jus*,' as one carries round the jug of coffee from bed to bed, and arouses the sleepers to another day in Hell. And then as I wearily light a wretched cigarette of our beastly *caporal*, there comes running my orderly, babbling I know not what of a dying Arab *goum*—they are always dying of fatigue these fellows, if they have hurried a few miles—on a dying camel, who cries at the gate that he is from Zinderneuf, and that there is siege and massacre, battle, murder, and sudden death. All slain and expecting to be killed. All dead and the buglers blowing the Regimental Call, the rally, the charge; making the devil of a row, and so forth....

'*And is it the dying camel that cries all this?*' I ask, even as I leap into my belts and boots, and rush to the door and shout, '*Aux arms! Aux armes!*' to my splendid fellows and wish to God they were my Spahis. '*But no, Monsieur le Majeur*,' declares the orderly, '*it is the dying goum, dying of fatigue on the dying camel.*'

'*Then bid him not die, on pain of death, till I have questioned him*,' I reply as I load my revolver. '*And tell the Sergeant-Major that an advance-party of the Foreign Legion on camels marches en tenue de campagne d'Afrique in nine minutes from when I shouted "Aux armes." The rest of them on mules.*' You know the sort of thing, my friend. You have turned out your guard of Haussas of the West African

Frontier Force nearly as quickly and smartly at times, no doubt."

"Oh, nearly, nearly, perhaps. *Toujours la politesse*," murmured Lawrence.

"As we rode out of the gate of my fort, I gathered from the still-dying *goum*, on the still-dying camel, that a couple of days before, a large force of Touaregs had been sighted from the look-out platform of Zinderneuf fort. Promptly the wise *sous-officier*, in charge and command since the lamented death of Captain Renouf, had turned the *goum* loose on his fast *mehari* camel, with strict orders not to be caught by the Touaregs if they invested the fort, but to clear out and trek with all speed for help—as it appeared to be a case of too heavy odds. If the Touaregs were only playful, and passed the fort by, after a little sporting pot-shotting, he was to follow them, I suppose, see them safe off the premises for a day or two, and discover what they were out for.

Well, away went the *goum*, stood afar off on a sand-hill, saw the Touaregs skirmish up to the oasis, park their camels among the palms, and seriously set about investing the place. He thought it was time for him to go when they had surrounded the fort, were lining the sand-hills, making nice little trenches in the sand, climbing the palm trees, and pouring in a very heavy fire. He estimated them at ten thousand rifles, so I feared that there must be at least five hundred of the cruel fiends. Anyhow, round wheeled Monsieur Goum and rode hell-for-leather, night and day, for help....

Like *How we brought the good news from Aix to Ghent*, and *Paul Revere's Ride* and all. I christened the *goum*, Paul Revere, straight away, when I heard his tale, and promised him all sorts of good things, including a good hiding if I found he had not exceeded the speed limit all the way from Aix to Ghent. Certainly his 'Roland' looked as if its radiator had boiled all right. And, *Nom d'un nom d'nom de bon Dieu de sort!* but I made a forced march of it, my friend—and when we of the Nineteenth African Division do *that*, even on mules and camels, you can hardly see us go."

"Oh, come now! I am sure your progress is perceptible," said Lawrence politely. "Specially on camels, and all that.... You're too modest," he added.

"I mean you can hardly see us go for dust and small stones, by reason of our swiftness.... Any more than you can see a bullet, witty one," rebuked de Beaujolais.

"Oh, quite, quite," murmured the Englishman.

"Anyhow, I was away with the advance-party on swift *mehari* camels, a mule-squadron was following, and a company of Senegalese would do fifty kilometres a day on foot till they reached Zinderneuf. Yes, and, in what I flatter myself is the unbreakable record time between Tokotu and Zinderneuf, we arrived—and, riding far on in advance of my men, I listened for the sound of firing or of bugle-calls.

I heard no sound whatever, and suddenly topping a ridge I came in sight of the fort—there below me on the desert plain, near the tiny oasis.

There was no fighting, no sign of Touaregs, no trace of battle or siege. No blackened ruins strewn with mutilated corpses here. The Tri-couleur flew merrily from the flagstaff,

and the fort looked absolutely normal—a square grey block of high, thick mud walls, flat castellated roof, flanking towers, and lofty look-out platform. All was well! The honour of the Flag of France had been well defended. I waved my *képi* above my head and shouted aloud in my glee.

Perhaps I began composing my Report then and there, doing modest justice to the readiness, promptitude, and dispatch of my little force, which had maintained the glorious traditions of the Nineteenth African Division; giving due praise to the *sous-officier* commanding Zinderneuf, and not forgetting Paul Revere and his Roland.... Meanwhile, they should know that relief was at hand, and that, be the Touaregs near or be they far, the danger was over and the Flag safe. I, Henri de Beaujolais of the Spahis, had brought relief. I fired my revolver half a dozen times in the air. And then I was aware of a small but remarkable fact. The high look-out platform at the top of its long ladder was empty.

Strange! Very strange! Incredibly strange, at the very moment when great marauding bands of Touaregs were known to be about—and one of them had only just been beaten off, and might attack again at any moment. I must offer the *sous-officier* my congratulations upon the excellence of his look-out, as soon as I had embraced and commended him! New as he might be to independent command, this should never have happened. One would have thought he could as soon have forgotten his boots as his sentry on the look-out platform.

A pretty state of affairs, *bon Dieu*, in time of actual war! Here was I approaching the fort in broad light of day, firing my revolver—and not the slightest notice taken! I might

have been the entire Touareg nation or the whole German army....

No, there must be something wrong, in spite of the peaceful look of things and the safety of the Flag—and I pulled out my field-glasses to see if they would reveal anything missed by the naked eye.

As I halted and waited for my camel to steady himself, that I might bring the glasses to bear, I wondered if it were possible that this was an ambush.

Could the Arabs have captured the place, put the defenders to the sword, put on their uniforms, cleaned up the mess, closed the gates, left the Flag flying, and now be waiting for a relieving force to ride, in trustful innocence and close formation, up to the muzzles of their rifles? Possible—but quite unlike brother Touareg! You know what *his* way is, when he has rushed a post or broken a square. A dirty fighter, if ever there was one! And as I focussed my glasses on the walls, I rejected the idea.

Moreover, yes, there were the good European faces of the men at the embrasures, bronzed and bearded, but unmistakably not Arab....

And yet, that again was strange. At every embrasure of the breast-high parapet round the flat roof stood a soldier, staring out across the desert, and most of them staring along their levelled rifles too; some of them straight at me. Why? There was no enemy about. Why were they not sleeping the sleep of tired victors, below on their cots in the *caserne*, while double sentries watched from the high look-out platform? Why no man up there, and yet a man at every

embrasure that I could see from where I sat on my camel, a thousand metres distant?

And why did no man move; no man turn to call out to a sergeant that a French officer approached; no man walk to the door leading down from the roof, to inform the Commandant of the fort?

Anyhow, the little force had been extraordinarily lucky, or the shooting of the Arabs extraordinarily bad, that they should still be numerous enough to man the walls in that fashion—'all present and correct,' as you say in your army—and able to stand to arms thus, after two or three days of it, more or less.

As I lowered my glasses and urged my camel forward, I came to the conclusion that I was expected, and that the officer in charge was indulging in a little natural and excusable *fantaisie*, showing off—what you call 'putting on the dog,' eh?

He was going to let me find everything as the Arabs found it when they made their foolish attack—every man at his post and everything *klim-bim*. Yes, that must be it.... Ah, it was! Even as I watched, a couple of shots were fired from the wall. They had seen me.... The fellow, in his joy, was almost shooting at me, in fact!

And yet—nobody on the look-out platform! How I would prick that good fellow's little bubble of swank! And I smiled to myself as I rode under the trees of the oasis to approach the gates of the fort.

It was the last time I smiled for quite a little while.

Among the palm trees were little pools of dried and blackened blood where men had fallen, or wounded men

had been laid, showing that, however intact the garrison of the fort might be, their assailants had paid toll to the good Lebel rifles of my friends.

And then I rode out from the shade of the oasis and up to the gate.

Here half a dozen or so kept watch, looking out over the wall above, as they leant in the embrasures of the parapet. The nearest was a huge fellow, with a great bushy grey moustache, from beneath which protruded a short wooden pipe. His *képi* was cocked rakishly over one eye, as he stared hard at me with the other, half closed and leering, while he kept his rifle pointed straight at my head.

I was glad to feel certain that he at least was no Arab, but a tough old legionary, a typical *vieille moustache*, and rough soldier of fortune. But I thought his joke a poor one and over-personal, as I looked up into the muzzle of his unwavering rifle....

'*Congratulations, my children*,' I cried. '*France and I are proud to salute you*,' and raised my *képi* in homage to their courage and their victory.

Not one of them saluted. Not one of them answered. Not one of them stirred. Neither a finger nor an eyelid moved. I was annoyed. If this was 'making *fantaisie*' as they call it in the Legion, it was making it at the wrong moment and in the wrong manner.

'*Have you of the Foreign Legion no manners?*' I shouted. '*Go, one of you, at once, and call your officer.*' Not a finger nor an eyelid moved.

I then addressed myself particularly to old Grey-Moustache. '*You*,' I said, pointing up straight at his face, '*go*

at once and tell your Commandant that Major de Beaujolais of the Spahis has arrived from Tokotu with a relieving force—and take that pipe out of your face and step smartly, do you hear?"

And then, my friend, I grew a little uncomfortable, though the impossible truth did not dawn upon me. Why did the fellow remain like a graven image, silent, motionless, remote—like an Egyptian god on a temple wall, looking with stony and unseeing eye into my puny human face?

Why were they all like stone statues? Why was the fort so utterly and horribly silent? Why did nothing *move*, there in the fierce sunlight of the dawn? Why this tomb-like, charnel-house, inhuman silence and immobility?

Where were the usual sounds and stir of an occupied post? Why had no sentry seen me from afar and cried the news aloud? Why had there been no clang and clatter at the gate? Why had the gate not been opened? Why no voice, no footstep in all the place? Why did these men ignore me as though I were a beetle on the sand? Where was their officer? ...

Was this a nightmare in which I seemed for ever doomed to ride voiceless and invisible, round endless walls, trying to attract the attention of those who could never be aware of me?

When, as in a dream, I rode right round the place, and beheld more and more of those motionless silent forms, with their fixed, unwinking eyes, I clearly saw that one of them, whose *képi* had fallen from his head, had a hole in the centre of his forehead and was dead—although at his post,

with chest and elbows leaning on the parapet, and looking as though about to fire his rifle!

I am rather near-sighted, as you know, but then the truth dawned upon me—they were *all* dead!

'*Why were they not sleeping the sleep of tired victors?*' I had asked myself a few minutes before. They *were*....

Yes, all of them. *Mort sur le champ d'honneur!* ...

My friend, I rode back to where Grey-Moustache kept his last watch, and, baring my head, I made my apologies to him, and the tears came into my eyes. Yes, and I, Henri de Beaujolais of the Spahis, admit it without shame.

I said, '*Forgive me, my friend.*' What would you, an Englishman, have said?"

"What about a spot of tea?" quoth Mr. George Lawrence, reaching beneath the seat for his tiffin-basket.

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After a dusty meal, impatiently swallowed by Major de Beaujolais, that gentleman resumed his story, with serious earnestness and some gesticulation, while, on the opposite side of the carriage, George Lawrence lay upon his back, his clasped hands beneath his head, idly watching the smoke that curled up from his cheroot. But he was paying closer attention to the Frenchman's tale.

"But, of course, it soon occurred to me," continued that gentleman, "that someone must be alive.... Shots had been fired to welcome me.... Those corpses had not of *themselves* taken up those incredibly life-like attitudes.

Whoever had propped them up and arranged them and their rifles in position, must be alive.

For, naturally, not all had been struck by Arab bullets and remained standing in the embrasures. Nine times out of ten, as you know, a man staggers back and falls, when shot standing.

Besides, what about the wounded? There is always a far bigger percentage of wounded than of killed in any engagement. Yes, there must be survivors, possibly all more or less wounded, below in the *caserne*.

But surely *one* of them might have kept a look-out. Probably the Commandant and all the non-commissioned officers were killed.

Even then, though, one would have expected the senior man—even if the survivors were all *soldats deuxième classe*—to have taken that much ordinary military precaution! ...

Well, I would soon solve the problem, for my troop was approaching, my trumpeter with them. I was glad to note that my Sergeant-Major had evidently had a similar idea to mine, for, on coming in sight of the fort, he had opened out and skirmished up in extended order—in spite of the bravely-flying Flag.

When my men arrived, I had the ‘rouse,’ the ‘alarm,’ the Regimental Call, sounded by the trumpeter—fully expecting, after each blast, that the gates would open, or at least that someone would come running up from below on to the roof.

Not a sound nor a movement! ... Again and again; call after call.... Not a sound nor a movement!

‘Perhaps the last one or two are badly wounded,’ thought I. ‘There may not be a man able to crawl from his bed. The

fellow who propped those corpses up may have been shot in the act, and be lying up there, or on his cot,' and I bade the trumpeter cease. Sending for the *Chef*, as we call the Sergeant-Major, I ordered him to knot camel-cords, sashes, girths, reins, anything, make a rope, and set an active fellow to climb from the back of a camel, into an embrasure, and give me a hoist up.

That Sergeant-Major is one of the bravest and coolest men I have ever known, and his collection of *ferblanterie* includes the Croix and the Medaille given on the field, for valour.

'It is a trap, *mon Commandant*,' said he. 'Do not walk into it. Let me go.' Brave words—but he looked queer, and I knew that though he feared nothing living, he was afraid.

'The dead keep good watch, *Chef*,' said I, and I think he shivered.

'They would warn us, *mon Commandant*,' said he. 'Let me go.'

'We will neither of us go,' said I. 'We will have the courage to remain in our proper place, with our men. It may be a trap, though I doubt it. We will send a man in, and if it is a trap, we shall know—and without losing an officer unnecessarily. If it is not a trap, the gates will be opened in two minutes.'

'The Dead are watching and listening,' said the *Chef*, glancing up, and he crossed himself, averting his eyes.

'Send me that drunken *mauvais sujet*, Rastignac,' said I, and the Sergeant-Major rode away.

'May I go, *mon Commandant*?' said the trumpeter, saluting.

‘Silence,’ said I. My nerves were getting a little on edge, under that silent, mocking scrutiny of the watching Dead. When the Sergeant-Major returned with a rope, and the rascal Rastignac—whose proper place was in the *Joyeux*, the terrible Penal Battalions of convicted criminals—I ordered him to climb from his camel on to the roof.

‘Not I, *mon Officier*,’ replied he promptly. ‘Let me go to Hell dead, not living. I don’t mind joining corpses *as* a corpse. You can shoot me.’

‘That can I, of a surety,’ I agreed, and drew my revolver. ‘Ride your camel under that projecting water-spout,’ said I. ‘Stand on its back, and spring to the spout. Climb into the embrasure, and then go down and open the gates.’

‘Not I, *mon Officier*,’ said Rastignac again. I raised my revolver, and the Sergeant-Major snatched the man’s rifle.

‘Have you *le cafard*?’ I asked, referring to the desert-madness that, bred of monotony, boredom, misery, and hardship, attacks European soldiers in these outposts—especially absinthe-drinkers—and makes them do strange things, varying from mutiny, murder, and suicide to dancing about naked, or thinking they are lizards or emperors or clock-pendulums.

‘I have a dislike for intruding upon a dead Company that stands to arms and keeps watch,’ replied the fellow.

‘For the last time—*go*,’ said I, aiming between his eyes.

‘Go yourself, *Monsieur le Majeur*,’ replied Rastignac, and I pulled the trigger…. Was I right, my friend?”

“Dunno,” replied Lawrence, yawning.

“There was a click, and Rastignac smiled. I had emptied my revolver when approaching the fort, as I have told you.

‘You can live—to be court-martialled and join the *Batt d’Af*,’ said I. ‘You will be well placed among the *Joyeux*.’

‘Better among those than the Watchers above, *mon Officier*,’ said my beauty, and I bade the Sergeant-Major take his bayonet and put him under arrest.

‘You may show this coward the way,’ said I to the trumpeter, and, in a minute, that one had sprung at the spout, clutched it, and was scrambling on to the wall. He was *un brave*.

‘We will proceed as though the place were held by an enemy—until the gates are opened,’ said I to the Sergeant-Major, and we rode back to the troop and handed Rastignac over to the Corporal, who clearly welcomed him in the rôle of prisoner.

‘*Vous—pour la boîte*,’ smiled the Corporal, licking his lips. And then we watched and waited. I could see that the men were immensely puzzled and intrigued. Not an eye wandered. I would have given something to have known what each man thought concerning this unique experience. A perfectly silent fort, the walls fully manned, the Flag flying—and the gates shut. No vestige of a sign from that motionless garrison staring out into the desert, aiming their rifles at nothing—and at *us*....

We watched and waited. Two minutes passed; five; six; *seven*. What could it mean? *Was* it a trap after all?

‘*That* one won’t return!’ said Rastignac loudly, and gave an eerie jarring laugh. The Corporal smote him on the mouth, and I heard him growl, ‘What about a little *crapaudine*[1] and a mouthful of sand, my friend? ... You speak again!’ ...

At the end of ten minutes, a very *mauvais quart d'heure*, I beckoned the Sergeant-Major. I could stand the strain no longer.

'I am going in,' said I. 'I cannot send another man, although I ought to do so. Take command.... If you do not see me within ten minutes, and nothing happens, assault the place. Burn down the gates and let a party climb the walls, while another charges in. Keep a half-troop, under the Corporal, in reserve.'

'Let me go, *mon Commandant*,' begged the *Chef*, 'if you will not send another soldier. Or call for a volunteer to go. Suppose you ...'

'Silence, *Chef*,' I replied, 'I am going,' and I rode back to the fort. Was I right, George?"

"Dunno," replied George Lawrence.

"I remember thinking, as I rode back, what a pernicious fool I should look if, under the eyes of all—the living and the dead—I failed to accomplish that, by no means easy, scramble, and had ignominiously to admit my inability to climb up where the trumpeter had gone. It is sad when one's vile body falls below the standard set by the aspiring soul, when the strength of the muscles is inadequate to the courage of the heart....

However, all went well, and, after an undignified dangling from the spout, and wild groping with the raised foot, I got a leg over the ledge, scrambled up and crawled into an embrasure.

And there I stood astounded and dumbfounded, *tout bouleversé*, unable to believe my eyes.

There, as in life, stood the garrison, their backs to me, their faces to the foe whom they had driven off, their feet in dried pools of their own blood—watching, watching…. And soon I forgot what might be awaiting me below, I forgot my vanished trumpeter, I forgot my troop waiting without—*for there was something else*.

Lying on his back, his sightless eyes out-staring the sun—lay the Commandant, and through his heart, *a bayonet*, one of our long, thin French sword-bayonets with its single-curved hilt! No—he had not been shot, he was absolutely untouched elsewhere, and there he lay with a French bayonet through his heart. What do you say to that, my friend?"

"Suicide," replied Lawrence.

"And so did I, until I realised that he had a loaded revolver in one hand, one chamber fired, and a crushed letter in the other! *Does* a man drive a bayonet through his heart, and then take a revolver in one hand and a sheet of paper in the other? I think not.

Have you ever seen a man drive a bayonet through his heart, my friend? Believe me, he does not fumble for letters, nor draw a revolver and fire it, after he has done *that*. No. He gasps, stares, staggers. He grips the handle and the *forte* of the blade with both hands, totters, stretches convulsively, and collapses, crashing to the ground…. In any case, does a man commit suicide with a bayonet when he has a loaded revolver? … Suicide? *Pouf.*

Was it any wonder that my jaw dropped and I forgot all else, as I stared and stared…. *Voyez donc!* A French fort in the Sahara, besieged by Arabs. Every man killed at his post.

The Arabs beaten off. The fort inviolate, untrodden by Arab foot. The gates closed. Within—the dead, and one of them slain by a French bayonet while he held a loaded revolver in his hand! ...

But *was* the fort inviolate and untrodden by Arab foot? If so, what had become of my trumpeter? Might not the Arabs be hiding below, waiting their opportunity to catch the relieving force unawares? Might not there be an Arab eye at every rifle-slit? Might not the *caserne*, rooms, offices, sheds, be packed with them?

Absurdly improbable—and why should they have slain the Commandant with a French bayonet? Would they not have hacked him to pieces with sword and spear, and have mutilated and decapitated every corpse in the place? Was it like the wild Touareg to lay so clever a trap with the propped-up bodies, that a relieving force might fall into their hands as well? Never. *Peaudezébie!* Had the Arabs entered here, the place would have been a looted, blackened ruin, defiled, disgusting, strewn with pieces of what had been men. No, this was not Arab work.

These Watchers, I felt certain, had been compelled by this dead man, who lay before me, to continue as defenders of the fort after their deaths.... He was evidently a *man*. A bold, resourceful, undaunted hero, sardonic, of a macabre humour, as the Legion always is.

As each man fell, throughout that long and awful day, he had propped him up, wounded or dead, set the rifle in its place, fired it, and bluffed the Arabs that every wall and every embrasure and loophole of every wall was fully manned. He must, at the last, have run from point to point,

firing a rifle from behind its dead defender. Every now and then he must have blown the alarm that the bugler would never blow again, in the hope that it would guide and hasten the relieving force and impress the Arabs with the fear that the avengers must be near.

No wonder the Arabs never charged that fort, from each of whose walls a rifle cracked continuously, and from whose every embrasure watched a fearless man whom they could not kill—or whose place seemed to be taken, at once, by another, if they did kill him....

All this passed through my mind in a few seconds—and as I realised what he had done and how he had died in the hour of victory, *murdered*, my throat swelled though my blood boiled—and I ventured to give myself the proud privilege of kneeling beside him and pinning my own Croix upon his breast—though I could scarcely see to do so. I thought of how France should ring with the news of his heroism, resource, and last glorious fight, and how every Frenchman should clamour for the blood of his murderer.

Only a poor *sous-officier* of the Legion. But a hero for France to honour.... And I would avenge him!

Such were my thoughts, my friend, as I realised the truth —what are yours?"

"Time for a spot of dinner," said George Lawrence, starting up.

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[1] Torture. The hands and feet tied together in a bunch in the middle of the back.