

# ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 291                      CONTENTS FOR JUNE 24, 1939                      Number 3

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Cover by Rudolph Belarski

Illustrating *Seven Footprints to Satan*

*This magazine is on sale every Wednesday*

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.

WILLIAM T. DEWART, President

THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD  
3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE  
111 Rue Sébastien

Published weekly and copyright, 1939, by The Frank A. Munsey Company. Single copies 10 cents. By the year \$4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; Canada, \$5.00; Other countries, \$7.00. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Entered as second class matter November 25, 1894, at the post office, New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright and must not be reprinted without the publisher's permission. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Printed in U. S. A.

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From the darkness they sprang up,  
and the night was suddenly  
alive with Touaregs



## Corday and the Seven League Boots

Just try them for size, Monsieur le Legionnaire—they will not pinch or chafe, but if they carry you on fabulous flights into the realm of maniac adventure, you must not be surprised. For he who takes big steps will stumble. . . .

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "The Wonderful Lamp of Thibaut Corday", "Snake-Head", etc.

*Walk Softly, Go Far—*  
Old Oriental Proverb

THE young British consular agent said he had done a lot of walking that day and his shoes pinched him. Old Thibaut Corday said the Englishman did not know anything about walking, or shoes either.

"Regard!" the old Frenchman thrust out a foot. "Observe that for a shoe! There is what one wears in the accursed Foreign Legion—what Legionnaires call a *brodequin*. Is that a dancing pump or oxford? You behold it is not. That is an engine, a ten-pound galley to enslave the toes!"

The Englishman remarked he had worn a similar boot playing Rugby.

"You did not!" Old Thibaut Corday declared. "A Legion *brodequin* would make your British football shoe look like a lady's slipper alongside. Today this boot is old, decayed, thin, the sole a mere tissue and the hobnails worn down like the stubs of an old lion's teeth. Years ago when that boot was new, it was a rock-crusher! That leather is hippopotamus hide; that union-bulged toe could have kicked to bits a brick wall; the sole was thicker than a carpenter's plank, and if in a fight I stamped down on a ruffian's hand the iron studs would have flattened it to a pancake.

"As for walking—?" The old Frenchman eyed his shoe with the veneration of the master praising an old hunting dog.

"*Non*, but in the Legion we did not walk. We marched! On hard earth. In mud. Tough gravel. Hot sand. A Legionnaire must teach his boots to drill, slog, parade, charge. They must trot him quick-step, *pas gymnastique*, or pace endless routines of sentry duty, or stand still on guard when there is a noise in the dark and his feet want to go.

"Sometimes, with the bullets nipping their heels, they must run like the wind, those boots. They are to a Legionnaire what a horse is to a cavalry man. It is not for nothing they call the Legion the Cavalry-on-Foot, and I would like a centime for every mile these clods have carried me. Twenty miles a day was nothing—thirty!—even forty these hellions have marched. That expression, 'die with your boots on'—that is from the French Foreign Legion, too. I would like a centime for every mile these boots have run to save me from dying in them. I would be a millionaire!"

The young consular agent asked Corday to tell him in seriousness the longest distance he had ever run in his boots without stopping. "I mean how far in one stretch, say, in a day?"

Old Thibaut Corday studied his shoe thoughtfully. "I will tell you," he agreed, pulling up an extra chair, propping up both feet and grimacing at his boots as if he had suddenly contracted the gout. "There is a story about a pair of boots—not these, but some others I wore—and I will tell it to you if you listen through to the end without blurting out that I am a liar. You agree?"

"Fair enough." The young Englishman grinned across the café table. "Forward march."

The veteran raked his cinnamon whiskers clear of his lips and stared at his foot-wear gravely. "I will strain your credulity at once," he advised. "The longest day's run I ever made in a pair of boots was from Tunis to India. That was only the halfway mark.

"From there I ran to China, Persia and Japan, pausing for breath in Cambodia

and taking the long way around by Madagascar. In the end I landed in Hell.

"There were bullets nipping my heels all the way, and I could not have done it if each stride in those boots I wore had not carried me one hundred and eleven thousand and eighty feet!"

The young British consular agent looked worried. The Algerian sun blazed hot outside the café awning, and Old Thibaut Corday had walked in without his hat. He murmured, "I say, old boy. Now really!"

The old Frenchman gave him a glare. "Zut! Already you think I lie, although you are bound by contract not to say so. But I am not lying, and my scalp is too thick for the sun. I promise this is a true story—"

## CHAPTER I

### NEW BOOTS SWEEP CLEAN

NOW Napoleon was the world's greatest general, perhaps, and who am I to criticize his military tactics? But he made one error in his record, *monsieur*; he said an army marches on its stomach. Every soldier knows an army marches by its boots. A regiment can dispense with food for a week, but where could it march to barefoot, I would like to inquire? If I remember my schoolbook history, the American patriots who had the chilblains at Valley Forge could answer that. So could the men of MacMahon who died at Sedan, ill-shod in the patent leather boots and spats invented by some dancing master in the War Department of 1870. So could the grenadiers who killed their feet on that stroll back from Moscow.

An army is no better than its shoes.

Boots are as important to a soldier as hoofs to a horse. Give him a good dry pair. Roomy enough for a circulation of air between the toes, but snug, so that one's heel does not slide and blister. Staunch as a ferryboat for fording swamps, yet light as a canoe for speed. Armor-leathered to turn a ricocheted bullet, yet cool for marching in the desert. Hob-nailed for cobblestones. Gum-soled for

stealthy corners. Tough, but easy on the instep. Blunt-nosed, but not liable to stumble. Serviceable, yet smart. Where in the world is such a pair? Nowhere!

What do you get in the army? In the French Foreign Legion you get these *brodequins*. And a kick from the rat-faced supply sergeant who gives them to you.

"Here, Blue!" he calls when you enter the barracks at Sidi as a recruit. "Break these in on your pumbers!" Flinging a pair of those bull-killers at you.

You tell him your feet are size nine. "Nine, be blowed!" he roars. "Do you think this is a shoe shop on the Rue de la Paix? I am all out of nines and you are lucky to get eights. Do not worry, you will learn to march in them! Your toes are too long? You will see how those boots can cut them off!"

Or suppose that your feet are small; then you are swamped in those boots, size eleven. "Too big for you, Blue? Your tootsies slide around? Never fear, little man; your feet will swell into them!"

You are not issued socks in the Legion, either, and breaking in a pair of those hobnailed, hippopotamus-hide boots is like trying to tame a couple of rhinoceri lashed on your feet. If you are not dead after five years service, you may re-enlist and get another pair. A batch of Legionnaires marching off in new boots resembles a parade of cripples hobbling to a hospital. Believe it, there will be plenty of growling and limping. Everyone tries to exchange with the next man, and everyone prays for a battle. Stealing the boots from a dead man is a little game long played in the Legion. You mark him off, if his feet are anywhere near your size; and there is a common understanding—first come, first served.

**T**HAT company stationed at El Hamma in Tunis was a typical example. I think when I go to Hades I will see a close resemblance to El Hamma. It was not the place where you could repair your corns or cool your heels. Not that town of dirty Arab houses, twisty alleys and

evil bazaars roasting under the North African sun on the edge of that fiery desert called the Grand Erg Orientale.

That was a villainous village! Hot? Merely to lift an arm caused you to break out in perspiration. The alleys were choked with blowing sand and dirty smells and a scum of Arabs and Negroes good for nothing but wickedness.

The thermometer was permanent at a hundred and ten in the shade, only there was no shade. No tree-cooled boulevards and pretty promenades in that town. You could not baby your feet in that place. It did not go in for footwear. There was one old blind cobbler in El Hamma.

I am all for giving Tunis to Mussolini after seeing that part of it. France ought to let him have it. He would probably make a lot of friends there; El Hamma would be a congenial spot for him to live. Besides heat and heathenism, the place was a hellhole full of drugs. Hashish and opium was the local diet. The Government would not have cared, but these narcotics were being sneaked to the tribal chieftains out in the desert, along with advice to fight the French.

Those Arabs who infested the Grand Erg Orientale were ugly customers at best; give them a whiff of the poppy, and they were dangerous as dynamite. Inspired with hashish and rebellion, the desert tribes were becoming unruly. Trouble was brewing in Tunis even in those days—El Hamma was the cookpot of the sedition. *Voilà!* The French Legion was sent down to police the place. We marched there, you comprehend. All the way from the railhead at Kairouan. In new boots.

You never saw a detachment of men as footsore. Groaning and cursing, he hobbled into the outpost at El Hamma.

"By the grave-slippers of my dead grandmother!" I remember Yankee Bill the Elephant swearing. "My dogs are killing me! Why does the supply department torture us this way? We spend five years breaking in a pair of brogans in Algeria, then the outfit is ordered into new shoes and told to make a forced march across

half of Africa! I am crippled for life!"

"You think *you* are crippled!" That from Christianity Jensen the Dane. "I am walking on boiled lobsters. Last night I had to cut the laces open with a knife. My toes refused to enter prison again this morning. I had to stuff them in with a spoon!"

"That is nothing pigeon-toes!" cried another man. "Look at my heel! Achilles, himself, never had such a blister!"

"It is something new in the Legion! We are to bind our feet like Chinese women. Mine grow smaller every year. In this pair of sabots they will be reduced to stumps!"

"I am marking you, my friend," came the laugh. "Those eights of yours will be a relief after this boy's size I am limping in."

"Dirty German! You would like to kill me, yourself, just to get my shoes!"

"No danger of that," was the warning from our corporal, himself sitting on his cot with a foot in a tender hand. "The colonel will kill you fatheads before you know it. You think your hoofs are hurting you now, but wait! You do not know Papa Rolant!"

Ha ha, but we did know Papa Rolant. His reputation in the Legion was of the best—or of the worst—depending on how you looked at it. His personality was a blend of Tiger Clemenceau, Madame Dufarge, two bottles of cognac and a novel by De Maupassant. He was as French as the Three Musketeers. And he resembled Santa Claus, as plump as a chuckle, with merry red cheeks and a white-winged moustache and twinkling blue eyes.

But do not be mistaken about that little package. It could be explosive. All of us pretend we are someone else, and Papa Rolant had a secret yearning to be Napoleon. Emperor and Soldier—he fancied the role; genius of the battlefield, and dashing boulevardier! About anything military he had Napoleonic ideas. Honor! Valor! Discipline! He rubbed it in.

Twinkling and merry, he was nevertheless the very devil for military rules. In a battle he was as cunning as a fox,

following orders from above to the letter, but in such a way that he never wasted the lives of his men. In the outpost he was murderous. He had a passion for pomp and circumstance. For bugles and drums. For military display. He loved dress parades!

Full-dress parades! At any time of the day he was liable to order one. Every Legionnaire must turn out completely equipped, down to the last trenching tool, the last sacred button. Uniforms must be perfect to the uttermost detail. Collars hooked. Buckles shining. Knapsacks ready for the field.

Woe to the soldier whose rifle wasn't clean. Let his *képi* be askew, and he would not soon forget it. A grease-spot on a tunic meant a week in the guardhouse. To be late for lineup or slouchy on the march meant such punishments as were ordinarily meted to criminals. Funny, was it not? A man could be a coward on the battlefield, and Papa Rolant would forgive him. But he would not forgive anything at parade.

"It is the high point of soldiering," he would say. "It keeps the men on their toes. It impresses the Arabs. It is excellent for morale. It keeps the Legionnaires from going *cajard*."

*Cajard*—that is when men go a little crazy from the sunshine and monotony of a desert outpost. The Legionnaires would have risked it a thousand times in preference to those parades. How they hated them. To line up at full regimentals in the blazing North African heat! To drill and wheel in the dust like West Pointers, like Prussians on Unter den Linden, like cadets at Saint Cyr! To march through those dirty alleys of El Hamma, colors flying, in a fanfare of bugles and drums, precise as tin soldiers! With Papa Rolant reviewing us from his horse, pretending to himself he was Napoleon! Even the under-officers loathed those daily parades, but that was nothing to the men. And do you know what that colonel was most stern and particular about? That the parade keep exactly in

step! And that every man keep a shine on his shoes!

NOW that was a nice situation—our boots being what they were, and Papa Rolant being what he was! Figure to yourself those Legion cripples keeping in step to begin with, much less putting a polish on their clogs. And then parading every day because the colonel liked military pageants. It was enough to have the whole garrison wild as a zoo.

Our happy colonel was patient at first. "I realize this company is in need of drilling," he announced during one review. "It is my intention to make this El Hamma garrison the finest company in the Legion. I will tolerate no clumsy-footed marching, no slovenly uniform. I understand there has been much grumbling about the order for cleaning boots. Boots are as much a part of the uniform as cummerbund or tunic. You will learn that I ask no more of my soldiers than I demand of myself. *Allons!*"

He referred to his own uniform which, for all his pudgy pod, was as smart as starch. He delighted in fine uniforms. I know. I had to brush them. I was his orderly.

After about a month of dressing up and parading, the garrison was savage. It began to seem as if something worse than drug-running and native insurrection might blow the roof off El Hamma. Those daily parades were brutal. The season got hotter. The colonel more strict. The Legionnaires madder.

"The garrison will mutiny," Yankee Bill the Elephant raged one night. "That dumpling colonel will drive us to revolt with these infernal parades. He thinks we are tin soldiers."

"It is not enough we must patrol this sink of iniquity for dope-runners," Jensen snarled.

"He expects us to look as trig as the King's Household Guard in these rags. Marches us quick-step through the sun for three hours, then yells because our boots are not like his, all polished up."

"As if he did not have a batman to dust him off twice a day. That pompous comedian! Do you ever see him marching? No, he is glued to the saddle like the statue of a general that he thinks he is!"

Well, we stumped and marched and paraded around that cursed Arab town until the colonel, himself, without lifting a foot, went a little lame. Corns did not dampen his passion for military reviews, but only put him in a temper. And that is where that old blind cobbler of El Hamma came in.

Imagine my lack of sympathy when I reported at headquarters one night and found Colonel Rolant sitting with his feet in a pan of water.

"They are blistered!" He glared at his swollen toes. "It is the perspiration! I am stout and I suffer from the heat! Do you know, orderly, I believe my shoes are too tight. Is there a cobbler in this mishap of a town who could stretch them for me?"

"There is a blind Arab cobbler in the Lane of the Three Thirsty Camels."

Presently we were on our way, the colonel puffing behind me as I led him through the evil bazaar, taking the long route around in the hopes that his touchy feet might teach him a lesson. Do you think it did? *Non*, we saw no connection between his own toes and those of common men. He was an officer. *His* feet were special. Corns were an indulgence not permitted to lowly Legionnaires.

As we entered the shop of this miserable cobbler the colonel's eye fell on a pair of remarkable riding boots that gleamed with fresh polish. Shinier, even, than the colonel's own. Unusual for a dingy Arab shop, they stood out in a litter of shabby sandals, scuffed clipper-cloppers and old native slippers as surprisingly as though they had just walked in from an expensive bootmaker's in London.

Papa Rolant was on them at once, admiring them, testing the leather, turning them in his hands. The soles were at least an inch thick, yet the boots seemed light. The workmanship was extraordinary. The calf was soft and pliable as buckskin.

They were not as short as Arab riding boots, nor as tall as British riding boots, nor as thick as cavalry or field boots. A beautiful pair!

NEXT to wine and women, your average man has a weakness for good leather—there is something about its smell of leather, its feeling. Those beautiful boots had them both. I would have given my soul to own them. I could see a hungry twinkle come to Papa Rolant's eye. Those boots were just made for him. Such boots any general might wear. They were magnificently military.

"Corday, I want to buy these boots. Strike a bargain."

That was funny. As the colonel spoke, the old blind cobbler who had been sitting cross-legged at the back of the shop jumped up as if he had been kicked. Dropping awl and thread and a piece of leather, he somehow glared at us with alarm in the vacant sockets of his eyes. He was an ancient and withered scarecrow, more a skeleton in rags and turban than a man; and his voice came out like the yell of a ghost.

"What boots do you mean, Sidi? Which pair would you buy?"

"I want to buy this fine black pair," the colonel puffed. "I am the *commandant* of the garrison here. How much for these black boots?"

Sacred pipe! the ancient blind man tottered forward and snatched the boots out of the colonel's hand. "No, no! Do not touch them! These boots are not for sale!"

Papa Rolant looked astounded. He was not used to having a native snatch anything out of his hand. "How much are they, old rascal? Quick, I have no time for your Arab bargaining. I offer one hundred francs!"

"A hundred francs?" the blind cobbler wheezed. "No, no, Sidi. I could not sell them to you for five hundred francs. For five thousand!"

"What is the matter with this crack-potted scamp?" the colonel yelled at me. "Does he not know who I am? Speak to

him in Arabic, Corday. Tell him I want to buy those boots, and mean to have them! Nor will I pay him any such fantastic price. Does he think they are made of gold?"

"But I cannot sell them," the old scarecrow wailed, hugging them to his chest. "They are not for sale, Sidi! They were only brought here to be polished. I do not own them."

Disappointment sulked across the colonel's face. His corns gave a twinge, and he snapped, "Who owns them, then? Who in this dirty desert town could afford such a pair?"

"Ah, Sidi," the old cobbler bowed, "I do not think the owner would sell them to you, either. He is so fond of them that every evening he brings them in for me to polish. It is the Italian, Sidi. The Italian who rides every day from El Hamma to dig in the sands of the desert, seeking the Past."

A jealous gleam came to Papa Rolant's eye. He knew who was referred to. The archaeologist living in El Hamma, a pale scholar from Rome who was digging excavations a few miles from our outpost in search of Carthaginian ruins. Papa Rolant had been annoyed by him, for it was the duty of the French Government to afford such people protection. The Italian had refused any military escort, saying he would risk any trouble with the desert tribes and preferred to work alone.

"So he owns these fine boots? *Zut!* Where did he get them?"

"He bought them from an Arab trader," the old cobbler whined. "At a tremendous price from a caravan sheik out across the sands."

Well, the colonel could not have that. He wanted those boots, and he pouted like a woman who had missed a bargain. He was the *commandant* of El Hamma, and it would not do for someone to wear a better pair of boots than he. Particularly some fool scholar, some Italian.

"Attend!" Papa Rolant ordered the cobbler. "If I cannot buy this particular pair, I will have a pair as good. I want the same

quality of leather and workmanship. You can make me a pair exactly like those?"

The blind cobbler bowed. "With my eyes shut I can copy them, Sidi. You wear the same size? That is well. By Saturday you may have a pair of such likeness that you could not tell the difference. The price at only five hundred francs."

Who could have guessed what astonishing things were in shoe-leather? And that is when the real trouble began. That Saturday when the colonel ordered a dress parade and turned out to review us in his fine new boots.

## CHAPTER II

### BOOTMARKS IN THE SAND

**I** WISH you could have seen the faces of the men when the colonel stalked out that morning in those boots. Even the captain and the two lieutenants looked as if they would like to cut his throat. *Sapristi!* it was the hottest day of the year. That, or any year.

Since sunrise the garrison had been on patrol, and that was warm and nasty work. Divided into squads, the company scouted along the edge of the desert looking for suspicious guerilla bands, or combed the town, examining and searching suspicious characters for drugs. Since every tribesman in that desert was suspicious and every native in town was equally suspect, you can figure the job.

Looking for narcotics in an Arab town is like hunting a wisp of straw in a haystack. We found plenty of hashish and opium. Those natives were full of it. But it was inside them when we found it, and where it came from and how it reached them was something else again. It was dangerous work, too, searching those wolves. Your Arab drug-fiend will go berserk with a knife as soon as not, and those dope-maddened desert chiefs were just waiting for a signal to start a revolution.

Very good! After you spend a few hours searching a batch of African drug addicts in a place where such dope is dynamite, you are hardly in the mood for a parade.

*Tiens!* There was the bugle tootling the assembly. The sun almost at noon. Orders for full regimentals and all equipment. Parade call!

The men were ugly that noon, I can tell you. Lined up on the drill field in full marching equipment, they were weighted down like camels. Who wanted to carry extra cartridge belts, water canteens and kits of food just for the exercise? Already they were footsore from patrol; sweating like horses in the heat. But you had to scour the dirt of the bazaar off your *brodequins* and play tin soldier for Papa Rolant. And then to have him stalk out for parade inspection in that pair of beautiful boots—!

On my word, there was not a sound on that field when the colonel stomped into view. A hundred pairs of eyes were on his feet. Angry eyes. Envious eyes. Bitter eyes. You could see them following his steps as he advanced down the line to front and center. Those men were like tigers fascinated by a pair of taunting black cats.

Have you ever seen a small boy showing off a new pair of shoes? The colonel was like that. He was brisk and jovial. He pretended he did not care about his new boots, but he could not help looking down once a minute and admiring them. He would stoop and flick off a speck of dust. He could see his apple-cheeked reflection in the toes. The toes were like black mirrors; the night before, I had spent three hours polishing them.

The blind Arab cobbler had promised delivery Saturday morning, but the colonel had not been able to wait. Friday midnight he had been there at the blind cobbler's shop to try them on. Ah! What comfort! He had wanted to break them in so they would not squeak, but those boots were wonderfully pliable from the first. All night he had kept them on, as a child sleeps with a delightful toy. He had scarcely been able to wait for the parade. Now he strutted out like a gamecock. He was playing Napoleon to the hilt. All he lacked was the paper hat and the wooden sword.



Silently the men writhed and snarled. Their own boots were torturing them. He enjoyed them so much that he wanted to walk in them. Instead of riding at the head of the column as was his custom on parade, he walked at the head of the column. I followed at his heels, leading his horse.

OUT of the barrack-ground we marched, and down through the twisting bazaar of the town. Flags flying. Drums rolling. Bugles blaring out *La Casquette de Père Bugeaud*. The colonel was putting it on, I can tell you. You would have thought he was leading a crack Chasseur regiment down the Champs Elysée to the Arc de Triomphe. He wore all his medals, and his braid gleamed in the sun. He held his sword at half salute off his pouting chest, and he lifted his new boots high. He would show this stupid Arab village a thing or two, and he went through the whole parade routine—company, right oblique!—left oblique!—column right!—column at fours!—company at quick-step!—halt!—squads left!—company march! If only French marching regulations included the goose-step, his happiness would have been complete.

Behind him came the sweating color-bearers, and behind the sweating color-bearers came the sweating buglers. Then came the sweating drummers with water flying off their wrists; and behind the drummers, the sweat-soaked column of marching men, with sweat-soaked officers up and down the line and bringing up the rear.

Through the stifling alleys of El Hamma the parade wheeled and pivoted and executed pretty maneuvers, for the benefit of sneering Arab merchants, sullen riff-raff and barking dogs.

Drums and bugle tunes drowned out the cursing and complaining, but I had only to look behind me to see every dripping face enraged. Yankee Bill told me he heard one of the lieutenants snarling, "The vain little popinjay would march us to Hell just to show off his new boots!"

So it seemed.

At the south end of El Hamma there was an Arab gate—a Moslem arch that gave view to the miles of emptiness and sand, that burnt-copper wilderness of the Grand Erg Orientale that stretches down to the Nowhere of the Sahara. Ordinarily our good colonel would end our daily parade at this gate-arch, lining us up for inspection before the arch and dismissing us with lectures and punishments.

Not so this Saturday!

Straight on out through the arch strutted the little rooster, dragging the whole parade after him. Out we marched into the blazing desert—the flags, the bugles, the drums, the sweating column, parading across the sand as if the town was too confined and the colonel needed all that vast emptiness to maneuver us in. The column lagged a little and one of the buglers slid off-key. The colonel bawled an order to smarten us up.

"Close up, men!" the tired officers relayed the order. "Close up!"

I could feel the line jolting down its length behind me like a string of bunted freight cars. On we marched through thick dust and blinding sunshine. The town began to dwindle out behind.

Company right oblique! Column at fours! Left shoulder arms! Forward march!

Name of a name! we were heading straight into the desert.

THEN it came to me what the colonel was up to. Of course. He had to march us out to that archaeologist's excavation to show him that a French *commandant* had boots as splendid as those of an Italian ditch digger. But that sand-grubber did not seem impressed.

About two miles from the town there he was at his hole in the dunes, a thin and scholarly-looking bird with a sun helmet and near sighted spectacles, standing in the door of a tent with a book under his arm and a couple of lazy Arabs shoveling around.

I recognized him by his fine black boots

which were exactly matched by those on Papa Rolant. He merely waved at us as we marched by. Passing the excavation, Papa Rolant strutted like a drum-major, looking neither right nor left. On went the parade. No order steered us back toward the town. The colonel was enjoying his new boots so much he was going to parade them all afternoon on the sand.

Now the thing grew ridiculous.

What good is a parade where there is no one to watch it? Deeper and deeper we marched into that ocean of sand—right oblique!—left oblique!—double file!—*pas gymnastique* and dead march!—executing all manner of intricate parade-drills and getting farther into the desert at every mile.

Was the colonel trying to punish us with this grueling drill? Forced marches were one thing, but parade maneuvers in full dress and regimentals in the desert were something else again. The buglers were winded. The drummers were panting. The Legionnaires, loaded with baggage and full equipment, sweaty, gasping from the heat, looked ready to drop in their aching boots.

By mid-afternoon the colonel himself looked exhausted. El Hamma had long since disappeared in the dust behind us. The sun was murder. Sweat trickled down the colonel's apple cheeks and soaked his tunic across his fat shoulder blades. But although his lungs were puffing his spirit was spry. As I, leading his horse, humped along at Papa Rolant's heels, I had an idea he was trying to show us how a French officer could outmarch his men. The contest was unfair. In the lead he was not eating any dust. He carried only his sword and his medals. We Legionnaires were clumping in nail-studded hoppers, not in natty and princely boots.

The colonel would not let up. When he wheeled around to flourish his sword and bark an order, the column had to step along. His eye was sharp for any flaw. After a halt he would step off again, lifting his plump knees with unexpected vigor.

To my surprise I saw the afternoon was waning and we were still marching south. Were we going to parade all day? What of garrison duty, the evening patrol, mess? Just before sundown he barked the order that lined us up for review inspection. Away out there in the desert he inspected us. Then, break ranks! Time out for a swig of wine, some hardtack and chocolate. Then to our consternation, parade call again! Bugles, drums and all the rest of it. In the twilight we continued to march south.

Well, we did not get back to El Hamma that night. Not with Puss-in-Boots for parade-master! We maneuvered on south in the desert until darkness; just when the column was ready to go down like a line of tenpins, came the order to pitch camp. Orders from the colonel were orders, but that black and unknown desert seemed hardly the place to bivouac like that, alive as it was with roving bands of nomads.

I saw officers were uneasy as they gathered around the colonel's tent, but no one dared to question the colonel's judgment. Papa Rolant was a famous tactician, an expert on military strategy. That night he was also jovial. He chuckled a lot to himself as if he had some secret joke, and his eyes were merry and sly. He sat at his campfire beaming down at his boots. No staff officer would have dared interrupt his good humor.

THAT march had just about finished the men. They and their feet were tired and sore as boils. "The devil!" Jensen groaned to me in passing. "Never have I made such a march. My left foot is dead. My right foot is dying. All because that poodle wants to promenade a pair of new pumps!" Yankee Bill the Elephant growled, "I have just enough strength left to kick out his brains with these clogs, and for a cigarette I would do it."

A Belgian snarled, "You would think he was a *cocotte* in high heels, the way he swanks. What I would not give to be in his shoes."

And the American laughed, "Not I, Dog-Face. If this keeps up, I don't think Papa will be wearing them long."

There was a mutinous atmosphere in camp that night, but the colonel was as gay as Old King Cole. He called me into his tent to shine his boots, and I found him waiting with his feet propped up on a camp chair. "Ha, orderly!" He astonished me by a comradely nudge. "Shine them up for me, my boy. Are they not beauties? Ah, you do not know the satisfaction of a fine pair of boots, so easy and luxuriant. I tell you, Corday, I never have known such pleasure. I feel as if I had been walking on air."

I wondered if he was drunk. There was wine at his elbow, and before I left he was asleep. His boots were on and his expression was blissful. Conceive a colonel addressing an orderly like that.

Then conceive this! An hour before day-break, and the bugles were squawking again. Again the men were on their feet. Again parade call! *Oui*, camp was broken at the double quick, and again the column was tramping across the sand—colors flying—bugles and drums—full dress parade!

We Legionnaires were not walking on air. Do you think the colonel cared? He did not. He was out there once more at the head of the column, swanking like a Julius Caesar and striking still farther into the desert.

We were in more than dangerous territory that morning. There were Touaregs reported in that part of the wilderness—the most deadly fighters in Africa. It was no place to announce our arrival with blaring bugles and bright flags. On we went, marching and counter-marching, wheeling and pivoting and parading all over the sand, and working deeper into Nowhere under the murderous sun.

That noon the officers began to look at each other. I had glimpses of them frowning at Papa Rolant's back. During a halt they grouped around the colonel, their expressions reflecting anxiety. I heard Papa Rolant's voice explode in temper, "If I am not tired, why should the men

be tired? What I can do, my soldiers can do. March on!"

That second day's march was an ugly business, take my word for it; I know my comrades would have revolted that night if the colonel had not reached the end of his parading. Listen! Tents pitched and bivouac-fires lit, the colonel ordered assembly. He strutted out of his tent and confronted the wilting line-up of Legionnaires. His eyes, in the firelight, twinkled.

"Soldiers of the Legion! I wish to congratulate you for the heroic way with which you have thus far carried out this campaign!"

What was that? We were on a campaign? What campaign?

"I have just received orders from the Paris War Office that the campaign is to continue!"

Just received orders! But our detachment had no wireless!

"We are to march at dawn to the relief of the garrison at Timbuctoo!"

The whole line staggered. Timbuctoo! Across the whole Sahara!

"There is to be no more dallying with these dancing girls we have encountered along the line of march. Naturally," the colonel laid his finger at the side of his nose and grinned at his startled officers, "men will be men."

"Dancing girls?" That was Captain LaSalle, his mouth gaping. "Did you say dancing girls, *mon commandant*?"

"Do not pretend you did not see them, Captain. Lovely little vixens they were too. The three blondes who beckoned to me last night as we went through China were the nicest. Too bad we are on this campaign with such pretty ladies about. That Japanese geisha girl was most charming!"

NAME of Jehovah! what was the colonel talking about? Certainly this was most irregular. You can see those Legion dogs drawn up in line, their lips ajar, their ears sticking out in amazement. You can see the under-officers staring in stark bewilderment at the colonel,

then eyeing each other. Picture us there in the middle of that desert, the tents, the shadows, the firelight, our colonel standing there in a rosy glow with the night behind him. *Non*, but I wish you could have seen his smile.

His eyes were bright as nails, but his smile had become dreamy. He regarded his officers with the cheery amusement of a father pleased with stalwart sons.

"Ah, yes. Where was I? Japan. And midnight in India—!"

One of the officers said huskily, "Do not you think you should go into your tent now, Colonel Rolant?"

"What? Are you suggesting orders to your colonel? I am in command here!"

In quick anger the little man's face purpled and swelled. Beads of sweat glittered suddenly on his forehead. He brushed them away with his sleeve, frowning down at his boots. "Perhaps you are right, Lieutenant. The dancing girls last night, they tired me out. I must preserve my strength for this campaign. Tomorrow we march to Timbuctoo. Please post a guard before my tent. I expect to go to Bagdad tonight; there are some lovely dancers awaiting me there."

The captain also had sweat-beads on his forehead. "But you cannot go to Bagdad tonight, *mon commandant*. You are here in Tunis."

The colonel smiled softly. "Obey orders, Captain. Do not argue with a superior. Bagdad is not far when I can go twenty-one kilometers with every step I take in these boots."

Bones of the Little Corsican! You could have heard your hair grow after the colonel said that and strutted back into his tent, forgetting to dismiss the company. It was scary at night out there in that desert. More than scary. The captain's eyes were like candles as he ordered the assembly dismissed. The lieutenants looked sick and pale. A sergeant shrugged and tapped his forehead. It was the *cafard*! The terrible *cafard*!

"Can you equal that?" Jensen snarled to me. "This marching in the sun has

driven the little fathead mad. The heat has sent him looney!"

"Off his conk!" Yankee Bill echoed angrily. "Went crazy over those new boots of his. Plain nuts! Did you hear him? Thinks he's been waltzing with dancing girls. Taking steps twenty-one kilometers long!"

If there was an ironic justice in it, it was not amusing. No joke at all to be there in the middle of the desert with a colonel gone stark out of his head. What could the under-officers do? There is nothing in the Legion rule book that tells a captain what to do when the colonel apparently goes crazy. Timbuctoo! Dancing girls! Boots that went twenty-one kilometers a step! I could see the worry on the captain's face when he told me to stand guard that night at the door of Papa Rolant's tent.

Much good that precaution turned out!

I could hear the colonel within snoring gently as a babe, but along after midnight a sandstorm blew up, and I could not hear anything. It was a thick, blinding night. Yankee Bill relieved the watch, and I took over again at dawn. I looked into the colonel's tent to see if he was still sleeping. The tent was empty. The back flaps were open to the rising sun.

We found one track, the track of his right boot there in the sand beyond the opened tent-flaps. It was headed northeast in the direction of Bagdad. Maybe the sandstorm had obliterated the other tracks. Maybe not. At any rate, we came up with the colonel at noon. Papa Rolant was lying dead in the sand. His face was jolly, but black. His left boot was twisted under him, the ankle broken as if he had landed on that foot after a tremendous leap. He was about twenty-one kilometers from the place where we had camped.

## CHAPTER III

### NIGHT WIND

THE captain had the boots. He was a tough officer this Captain LaSalle. A gaunt, black-haired Gascon. Not in the

least sentimental. He had buried the colonel there in the sand with full military honors, but, after all, why bury a pair of beautiful new boots that had cost their owner five hundred francs? Especially when they were a fairly comfortable fit on the march-blistered feet of Captain La-Salle. They were his by right of being second in command. A proper symbolism that he should now step into the colonel's boots.

There was none of your Napoleonic complex about Captain La-Salle. He wanted to get out of that dangerous area of desert and back to El Hamra as quickly as possible. Our machine guns, food stores and water supply were in El Hamma. Heaven knew what might have happened during our absence while the colonel paraded us around the desert in crazy maneuvers. Accordingly, all pomp was dispensed with. Flags were furled and lowered. Bugles and drums were packed up. Scouts were deployed. Having stepped into the colonel's boots, both literally and figuratively, the captain ordered us home on the *pas gymnastique*.

Once more the Legionnaires found themselves tortured in their hobnailed rock-crushers. Strung out under the broiling sun, the column puffed and panted along like a weary freight-train. At the Legion quick-step one canters fifty minutes and rests ten. It is a punishing pace, not intended for dress uniforms with full marching equipment. Sweat poured down the jaws of the gasping men, soaking their garments, blistering their ill-shod feet.

At first the men did not care.

They were anxious to get back to base. They wanted to get out of the desert, and more particularly they wanted to get away from the grave where they had buried Papa Rolant. The colonel's death had sobered their tempers a trifle. There is something weird about madness, something a little unnerving to sane men. It makes one aware that the mind is a delicate instrument, somewhat beyond one's control. Your own little flywheel may slip without your knowing it. It had not been

nice to hear the colonel prattling about dancing girls and Timbuctoo—an old officer of supposed military genius. Our trust in authority was shaken a little; and if a learned colonel can go batty, what of one's self?

"You know what I feel like?" Yankee Bill the Elephant whispered to me during a ten-minute halt. "I feel like I been on a train run by a loony engineer. Here we were full speed ahead off the main line out here, switching around and running through red lights, half the time off the track with the colonel gone nuts in the cab and none of us knowing there was a madman at the throttle. God knows what we might have run into."

"It is not the first time I have seen a soldier go *cajard*," I said. "It is this cursed infernal heat, this African sun. That black look on Papa Rolant's dead face—as if a blood vessel had burst."

"That was something more than apoplexy," Jensen panted in. "Myself, I do not like it."

"What do you not like, Monkey-face?"

The little Dane rolled his eyes. "I do not like the way Papa Rolant said he could walk twenty-one kilometers at a step. Well? He was on his way to Bagdad, was he not? One boot-print behind his tent. And when we found him, twenty-one kilos exactly. I myself counted the paces from camp."

**H**A! WE did not like that either. We did not like the little Dane reminding us of it. It was one of those peculiar coincidences that had better not be examined too closely away out in a lonely ocean of sand. The sun that afternoon was too hot for heavy thinking, and the sooner we got away from the colonel's lonely grave the better for our peace of mind.

So we did not object to marching for El Hamma at the *pas gymnastique*. Only as the afternoon wore on, our hobnailed clogs began to pinch. Quick-step in that dust and heat was cruel. We were going straight north; El Hamma ought to presently be in sight.

Captain LaSalle could ease the pace, one would think. This was harder on your hoofs than parade drill. Of course, it was not hard on the captain's bunions. He was wearing those magnificently comfortable boots he had snaffled from the dead colonel. The dirty corpse-robber, little he cared if the men were suffering. Besides, he was riding the colonel's horse. All these Legion officers were brutes!

Little by little the feeling against the captain changed that afternoon. We began to hate him almost as much as we had hated the colonel. This forced march was cooking us, and we hated him because our feet were exhausted and his were not, because our legs were breaking and his were on a horse, because of all of us he had the only comfortable pair of boots.

With night coming on and El Hamma nowhere in sight, the men were looking tigerish again.

The captain, himself, had begun to look peculiar. He must have misjudged his pocket map and gone off his bearings a little, and he started to take it out on the column, cursing us for lagging, lashing at us as if we were slaves.

At nightfall he ordered a "Column right!" and sent us at a tangent to the east. A little while later he did an about-face, and we were trotting west again. Just as the moon came up he called in the scouts, and we knew that we were lost.

That night he tramped up and down among the campfires, swearing and fuming and kicking at the men with those expensive boots as if he thought he was the King of the Beasts ruling a jungle. Ah, he was working himself into a fine rage.

Nothing in camp suited him. The tents were unmilitary. The rifles incorrectly stacked. This was wrong. That was wrong. "It is the colonel's fault!" we heard him squalling at his lieutenants. "When he started off for Bagdad he took his compass with him and left me in the soup. His compass was gone when we found him. The only one we had!"

That was something for the outfit to

hear. And this was something else! Suddenly Captain LaSalle called for his horse. Out of camp he rode at a gallop, disappearing in the night. The poor lieutenants eyed each other. They waited a while, then ordered taps because there seemed like nothing else to do. An hour later the sleeping men were awakened by a shot. Then another! Rustling out over a dune, we found Captain LaSalle with a bullet in his back, his horse dead beside him. Captain LaSalle was dying.

"I saw them!" he panted, loud enough for all to hear. "I dismounted and was walking. Suddenly I was there. I saw them."

"Who?" Lieutenant Blanc cried. "Who did you see, *mon capitaine?*"

"The dancing girls. Doing the Dance of the Seven Veils." Great globes of sweat stood on the captain's forehead. His eyes were black and shiny, like dots of enamel. "I was in India. They were beautiful—!"

With that, the captain closed his eyes and died. A night wind was scurrying the sand in ghostly whirls through the moonlight, and we found no footprints. We could not tell if it was a soldier with a grudge or some roaring Arab marksman who had crept up in the night and shot him. That did not bother us half so much as the fact that the captain, too, had gone mad!

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CHINESE BLADE

**L**IEUTENANT BLANC had the boots. He was a greedy little man whose mentality went no farther than the rule-book and keeping a full stomach. He was dull, mean and piggish, the typical product of years in a military routine of colonial outposts and border garrisons. He would do his job stubbornly, driving the men; and he had the body of Captain LaSalle underground before you could say an Ave Maria.

Scouts were sent out, and the guard was doubled around the camp. Then he walked to his tent with those boots he

had taken from the dead man, and set them upright in the tent door to air them out, saying, "Whew!" Lieutenant Blanc had no imagination.

But we Legionnaires had imaginations.

There was little slumbering in camp the rest of that night, for all our tired feet; we were bivouacked too close to the captain's grave—the colonel's madness and death was still fresh in memory, and the captain dying a lunatic was too much of a bad thing.

Scouts came in to report no trace of Arab or any other tracks. But it was not the unsolved murder which unsettled our thoughts; tough officers had been shot before.

"Can you beat it?" Yankee Bill rolled over in his blankets to whisper to me. "Two officers go nuts within twenty-four hours. This *cajard* stuff gets on my nerves. It's like the sun is a hot cigar and your head pops like a toy balloon." He glared nervously at the night face uneasy.

"There was an officer once went mad in Oran—" I began.

"But did you ever see two men go mad the same way?" Jensen, on my other side, interrupted. "Both with the same crazy illusions? What? Well, the dear captain, too, went traveling. India! Dancing girls!"

"Doubtless it was the colonel's death which affected LaSalle's mind. That and the heat. You might say the colonel had given him ideas. Those puffs of whirling sand made him think he was seeing dancing girls."

"But, Corday, have you thought about the twenty-one kilometers? The colonel said he had been in China. LaSalle said India."

"Shut that off, Jensen!" the American Legionnaire snarled. "The colonel went off his trolley—a man off his trolley is liable to think anything. The captain went goofy, too, and someone shot him for it. Try to make anything more of it than that and you'll have us all seeing dancing girls!"

Lieutenant Blanc was not worrying about any dancing girls; he was worrying about Touaregs and Arabs. Up at the

crack of dawn, he had the column under way, determined to get the men to El Hamma that day. He was not making the same mistake as Colonel Rolant and Captain LaSalle.

He hung his coat over the top of his blunt head as a sunshade, and he stomped along in those big black boots, careful to keep on the shady side of the dunes. He did not march us quick-step, and he carried his revolver in his hand, on the lookout for trouble. Unfortunately he did not look for it in the right place.

We did not come to El Hamma. Two crazy-headed officers had led us on a fox-and-goose off the map, and, at best, trying to locate a town in the desert is like trying to locate a lost ship in mid Atlantic.

We did not know where the town was, and we did not know where we were.

Along about midday Lieutenant Blanc was calling frequent halts, taking a position off by himself on some dune, and staring around like Columbus looking for land. With that coat draped over his head he was sweating like a work-horse, and he called for and drank a lot of water. Then he would scowl at the horizon in a queer way. You could see he was boxing the compass.

Well, I do not know at exactly what time the belt slipped off Lieutenant Blanc's fly-wheel; as Yankee Bill said afterward, he didn't look as if he had enough brains to go crazy.

He drank too much water certainly—especially when our canteens were running low—but he seemed all right that evening when he ordered us to pitch camp. Nobody thought it queer when he retired into his tent without eating; all of us were too worn out to chew our hardtack.

Then all at once, he rushed out at us, his eyes like black flames, cheeks livid, lips dripping foam.

Straight at his junior officer he rushed, catching Lieutenant Delacroix unawares and by the throat. He was choking the junior to death before we realized what was happening. Raving like an animal.

"Keep away from my women, you

scoundrel! Try to doublecross me while I am just now in Madagascar, will you? Those dancing girls are mine! Mine! I will share them with no snooty cadet from Saint Cyr!"

Delacroix was down and Blanc was kicking him to pieces with those fine black boots when Sergeant Gonse drew a pistol and shot the mad lieutenant through the head.

**JUNIOR-LIEUTENANT DELACROIX** had the boots. Poor Delacroix. He was young and unseasoned—it was his first year in the Legion—and besides those boots he had an imagination. I will bet you he wished he had neither. His three superior officers had died in those boots—the Colonel of a brainstorm; the captain insane and murdered; Lieutenant Blanc shot like a mad dog. I will bet you young Delacroix never wanted to put them on.

But he had been limping from a hole worn through his own boot; these hand-me-downs of the colonel's were certainly of fine workmanship and quality; in a way, too, they were symbolic of authority. Discard them, and the men would think he was afraid to step into the boots of command. He must not let these Legion scoundrels think he was afraid. He called for me to shine them up, and he wore them that night as we marched out to that third lonely grave in the desert.

"Men!" he addressed the company, trying to look like a veteran commander—but the boots did not fit him very well, and he only looked like a frightened cadet—"as your *commandant* I warn you I intend to keep discipline. There will be no more forced marching; we will proceed at early morning and after midday; we will get to El Hamma. I am not forgetting Captain LaSalle was murdered, and when we reach our outpost I shall order a strict investigation."

He set his jaw in an attempt to look stern and confident. "Meantime, there will be no more risk of *cafard*, not if every man does his duty. I would put a stop to

the rumors whispered among you. There is a lot of nonsense going around, superstitious talk. Insanity is not contagious. Your officers were overworked, merely. Their hallucinations signify nothing, and there is nothing in this nonsense about their having been in India, China or Madagascar; all of us have such day-dreams. If I am not afraid, what have you to fear? I thank Sergeant Gonse for saving my life. Company dismissed!"

That was a brave speech from a nervous young shavetail out there in the middle of the African night.

"The little Blue is all right," Yankee Bill applauded as we huddled around our camp fire. "Trying to pretend he doesn't wish he was safely back home at training school instead of out here in this desert of Nowhere with a company on his hands."

"That is nothing to what he has on his feet," Jensen murmured.

"Now look here you piece of Danish pastry!" Yankee Bill caught and wrung his little comrade's wrist. "Quit rocking the boat! It's bad enough being camped out here with that grave out there in the dark and maybe an Arab attack any minute, without you pulling a face like a ghost story. The kid lieutenant was right. Put a stop to it."

The Dane smiled queerly. "Colonel Rolant. Captain LaSalle. That stupid Blanc. Does it not strike you, big Elephant, as funny?"

"Funny like a bughouse!" the American snarled. "Cut it off!"

Instead, the little Dane turned to me. "Corday," he murmured, "you were there at the blind cobbler's when the colonel was fitted for those boots. You have tended them, polished them. What are they like?"

My faith! his expression sent mice-creeps through my hair. The night was too black around us for this sort of talk. The moon had gone down, and out in the desert there was not a sound. I snarled, "They are like any pair of boots, you fool. I saw the cobbler making them, copying them from a pair that cursed Italian digger at El Hamma had bought from



some caravan sheik. The colonel wanted the same kind for his own sacred corns. They are excellent boots of fine leather, no more. I tell you, I would like to wear them myself."

The Dane gave me a look. "You have a sergeant's rating, Corday. The way things are going—you may get a chance to wear them."

**N**AME of Saint Francis! it gave my nerves a twinge. The other squads grouped around their camp fires were muttering the same speculations; I knew the nerves of every Legionnaire in camp that night were twinging like zithers.

Beyond the fringe of the firelights the sentries were tramping over-loudly, like boys whistling on their way past a cemetery; and the desert that night was one vast graveyard, what with the colonel and the captain and Lieutenant Blanc out there under the sand

Taps sounded like a funeral call. The men did not want to sleep in their dog-tents, yet nobody dared sleep outside by the dying fires. I felt sorry for the young lieutenant alone in his officer's tent. I shared a tent with Yankee Bill and little Jensen, and even so I kept waking up out of cold-sweat nightmares, fancying I heard prowlers.

I do not know what time it was when I heard the scream. It screeched through the night like the passing of your Lost Soul, and it flung the camp out of its blankets to a man.

In the dark there was wildest confusion. We piled from our tents in a terrified stampede, bumping into running guards, knocking each other down in a race for the gun-stacks. Non-coms squalled. Torches flared. Legionnaires milled in panic, waiting for a word of command. It became evident that Lieutenant Delacroix was not there.

Someone pointed to his tent, and we went for it in a rush. It was surrounded by a yelling swarm, afraid to enter. Tracks, if there had been any, would have been smudged out by that seething jam.

Then thirty men crushed into the tent, and we found Lieutenant Delacroix.

In the camp chair which he had inherited from Colonel Rolant, he was slumped down. His eyes stared sightlessly at the ridge-pole. His mouth was open and full of blood. He was half undressed, his tunic unbuttoned, belt open. One boot was half off, and both boots were dusty—as if, Jensen pointed out, he had just returned and was retiring after a long journey. So it seemed.

For when we turned him over we found a knife in his back. No Legion knife, or Arab blade. But an Oriental knife—a wavy-edged dagger—the hilt inscribed with Chinese writing!

## CHAPTER V

### THE COBBLER WAS BLIND

**S**ERGEANT GONSE had the boots. He did not wear them. He was a shrewd red-whiskered Picard, Sergeant Gonse, and the boots had come down to him, along with the command, from poor dead Lieutenant Delacroix; but as he rushed our column across the desert through the dawn, he carried his new foot-gear slung on his shoulder. Himself, he wore Legion clodhoppers, and he was hobbling on blisters as big as anybody's, but he refused to put on those fine black boots.

He declared he was keeping them only to pawn in the bazaar at El Hamma. He said they did not fit. Ha-ha.

That was a day we marched like fools.

We got into a stretch of wilderness nobody had ever seen before, a desert of red sandstone hills and burning rocks and sharp stones like flint on the feet. We trooped around in that for a number of miles, and we were not the smart parade which had marched out of El Hamma four days before.

Sack of paper! The color bearers dragged their flags in the dust. The bugles were full of sand. Some of the drummers had dropped their clumsy instruments by the wayside.

The men were slop-shouldered, drooping, uniforms disheveled, plastered with sweat and dirt, limping and stumbling and out of step, quarreling together like a pack of mangy wolves. Canteens were drying, lips were cracking, nerves tightening like fiddle-strings.

The company knew it was lost; if a colonel, a captain and two lieutenants had not been able to find the way back to El Hamma, how could a top-sergeant? Blood-rimmed eyes glared suspicion and hatred at Sergeant Gonsc—would he go crazy, too?—or had those other officers *been* crazy?—that Chinese dagger in Delacroix's spine—in the middle of an African desert—was the whole company going crazy, or what?

\* Now insanity can be infectious, not so? Look how one maniac has maddened Europe today, as one bad apple spoils the barrel. Well, our company of lost Legionnaires was not a very big barrel, and there had been four bad apples. Something had to happen pretty quick, or the entire outfit would resemble the glee club of an insane asylum. It happened. *Tiens!*

At dusk the column staggered out of that red patch of desert, topped a high, sun-baked ridge—there, miles to the north, for all the world a mirage in the twilight, huddled the walls of El Hamma. That was not all we saw. On a dune not far below the ridge there appeared with startling suddenness a band of wild Touareg tribesmen.

Guns cracked, and bullets purred over our caps. As if produced by magic, Arabs charged from a dune at the left. On all sides of that ridge the sands sprouted black and bronze fiends. That battle was as instantaneous as spontaneous combustion. Gunfire flashing. Horsemen charging in a flutter of robes through dust. The *spank-spank-spank!* of Lebel's. Oaths. Shrieks of the wounded. *Zip* and *plink* of flying lead.

We were ambushed, surprised, surrounded; El Hamma, an anthill on the horizon, was cut off.

But there is nothing like a battle to cure a stale army; the whistle of Arab

bullets can clear a Legionnaire's head of mopes as a slap from a doctor can cure a hysterical woman of tantrums. Unhappily, Arab bullets can also perforate a Legionnaire's head.

Five of our men were fatalities before Sergeant Gonsc could get us into a battle position. Defensively speaking, our position was good—we were on high ground where the enemy must charge upslope across open sand—but those desert fiends did not give us much chance for defensive speaking.

They had been waiting for the parade to come back, resting on their rifles, and if it was hard for them to take the ridge, it was as hard for us to get off it.

By Saint Anthony's fire! I never thought we could withstand that first charge. Formed in hollow triangle, we dug in behind a barricade of knapsacks, baggage, whatever we could flatten behind. Here they came! That was a hot scrap then, *mon ami*. Those Arab horsemen went over us—right over us like a wave!—and there were more of my comrades scattered dead around me afterward than I like to remember. We drove off that charge with God's help alone, bayoneting horses and riders as they jumped us, piling up the dead for a higher barricade.

A second wave charged, and we met it with a stunning fusillade. A third we drove back. A fourth. Those horsemen were not so reckless about attacking after that; our stacked cadavers made higher walls, not so easy to charge. But at the same time they made less men and there were plenty of those Arabs and Touareg; too many!

OUR Lebel rifles scorched our hands after we repelled that last assault; I tell you, the fight had been terrific. We had slaughtered a couple of dozen Arabs and wounded a couple of dozen more, but a couple of dozen Arabs were cheap in that part of the country. After the smoke and dust cleared away we counted our dead at twenty, and Legionnaires were expensive. That was pretty stiff medicine to keep our outfit in sharp mental condition.

*Parbleu!* I think it was an overdose.

Those desert fiends retreated. But not far. They sneaked off in the twilight and appeared to melt away, but we knew they were hiding behind the dunes, waiting for nightfall to blot out the scenery. Then they would attack from all sides and try to blot us out. They could wait. They had plenty of time.

Who was it said anticipation was worse than realization? If you want something nerve-racking, try sitting still in the desert with the night gathering around and the knowledge that out there in the darkness a horde of tigers are crouching to spring. We could not see them, but we could feel their presence.

A thin lemon-rind moon cruised in the sky, but its pale shine could not penetrate the blackness that lay like a sea of tar across the sands. That darkness was enemy camouflage. You could hear the zero hour approaching on tiptoe. Yet the only sound was the pounding of my own heart and the sobbing of a German Legionnaire who was dying with a bullet in his stomach—"*Mütterchen! Ach du lieber! Wasser, kleines Mütterchen!*" It did not help that the moon-lit walls of El Hamma gleamed white and tiny on the far edge of the night, distant and unattainable as the Gates of Pearl.

After a half hour crouching behind a dead horse with my Lebel aimed across its reeky flank, my eye looking through the gun-sights at nothing, I could stand it no longer.

Groping my way over bodies alive and dead, I sought Sergeant Gonse. Presently I found him in the middle of our hollow triangle, surrounded by a little group of mutterers who did not know what to do about him. The men stood like shades—I recognized the mammoth silhouette of Yankee Bill the Elephant—and the sergeant was a shadow on the ground. Yankee Bill held a match in cupped palms for me to see. All I could see of Sergeant Gonse was the grinning red head on one end, and the shine of black boots on the other. There was not much in between. From

knees to collar Sergeant Gonse had been riddled.

The American seemed surprised by my appearance. "We were wondering who would take command. Jensen and me couldn't find you. We thought you had been killed."

That gave me a shock. You bet it did. I had forgotten that as Papa Rolant's orderly I rated a top-sergeant's stripes. Holy Sebastopol! with Gonse dead, I was next in line for the company; and what a fine moment to win advancement.

"I was out there sniping behind a dead horse. I didn't know Gonse—"

"It was that last attack. He'd sprained his ankle that first charge in a hand-to-hand fight. He thought those boots would be a support. He changed into them, and stood up. Right in the face of a fusillade."

NOW that did not sound exactly propitious. Not a bit, in fact. I should say it did not do a thing toward giving those boots a good reputation. But it was no time for any kind of nonsense.

"Give me those boots," I said.

Yankee Bill showed me the whites of his eyes. "A lot of good men have died with those boots on, Corday."

"Then at least they have died with their feet in comfort," I snarled. "I would rather walk to Hell in those than in these hobnailed clogs which are murdering me. You will die with your own on, if you do not give me those boots. This whole sacred company will be wiped out."

They looked at me, those Legionnaires. Three days ago every mother's son of them would have marked the corpse jealously, battled each other tooth and nail over the right to scavenge such footwear. Now they did not want to touch those boots; they thought me crazy for wanting them.

"Do not take them, Corday! Those pumpers are unlucky!"

"Not so unlucky as our being trapped on this ridge," I snarled. "Listen, you jackals. Our only chance is for a man to get through to El Hamma and bring help.

There are two machine-gun squads left on garrison duty there; doubtless they believe by now that we have all been slaughtered. The Arabs cannot have taken the outpost or the town would be in flames. A runner must get through to them. I am going to be the runner."

"Alone?" Yankee Bill gasped. "I will go with you."

"Every man will be needed here," I snapped. "One runner is necessary. As I am now in command, I pick myself."

"It's suicide, Corday. At least twenty miles. You'll never make it."

"Not in these clogs," I thrust out my heavy hobnailed rock-crusher. "Non, they are crippling me. But in those fine boots I will try—!"

SO I had the boots. That is how I got them. How I, a penny-a-day Legionnaire, came to own a pair of hand-made pumpers as fine a grade of leather and workmanship as any in a millionaire sportsman's club—light boots—staunch boots—snug, yet comfortable—stout, yet easy on the instep—serviceable, yet smart—truly a perfect pair.

Ah, that leather had the texture of the best Morocco. The soles, an inch thick, weighed light as birch wood. I carried them over to my dead horse and secretly examined them.

Their history may have been evil, but their last was well-shaped and the insole of felt as inviting as a carpet slipper. My feet ached in relief as I let them out of their hobnailed prisons.

Cautiously I tried on the boots. They were a little damp and sticky, but they might have been made for me to order. I experimented a step or two. Of course that colonel had been mad. Never had a soldier's feet enjoyed such luxurious comfort. By my oath! I would give these chic hoofers a run for their money.

"Corday—!"

The whisper came at me from behind, and I spun around.

Jensen's eyes, peering at me, were spectral. "Corday! Name of God! Yankee Bill

told me, but I did not believe. You really mean to wear them?"

"Have I not got them on? Get back to your post, comedian!"

His anxiety for me was unsettling. He caught my sleeve. "Think, my friend! Think what happened to those officers! Rolant — LaSalle — Blanc — Delacroix — now Gonse. Always it happened when they wore those boots."

"Do you see any connection between men going *cajard* from the sun, a man's brains, and shoeleather?" The Dane's popping eyes and jittering infuriated me. "Keep on guard for the Arabs. Be off!"

"Wait," he begged. "Delacroix—! That Chinese dagger—!"

"What of it? A curio some veteran of us brought from Tonkin."

"Papa Rolant said he had been to China!"

"So! And LaSalle to India? But he was killed with a European bullet."

"Blanc spoke of Madagascar. Doubtless if Gonse could have told us he would have said he was starting for—"

"For the moon!" I choked the Dane off, catching him by the throat and shaking him till his teeth clacked. "Idiot, are you trying to tell me you believed those madmen—they actually went to those places—?"

"Are there any dancing girls in this Tunisian desert? Did you see any out there in that waste?" Jensen rolled his eyes. "No, but those officers—those who lived to tell it!—saw them. Oriental dancing girls! And you heard what Papa Rolant said about those boots. And he was on his way to Bagdad—!"

"On his way to a madhouse, you mean."

"But he was twenty-one kilometers from that place where we camped. A single footprint outside his tent. Then we found him exactly—"

"How do you know it was exactly? Did you measure it with a tape? That sandstorm had swept away his other tracks. He had brain fever, and ran off in the night. His heart must have collapsed."

"Or did it burst, Corday? Burst from the speed he was traveling. And that tough

Captain LaSalle, did he look the type to go insane? A man the most hard-headed! But he, too, wanders off in the night and tells us he has seen Ind a. Then Lieutenant Blanc with a skull of solid ivory, raving of Madagascar. Well, any numbskull might go berserk from the shock of suddenly finding himself at the other end of a continent.

"Young Delacroix, however, was no numbskull; but look at what happened to him. We saw him retire in his tent—even as Blanc had retired—then what? Five hours later we find him. He has not been to bed; he is just undressing. His boots are thick with dust—they had been shiny when we saw him turn in, remember—and there is a Chinese dagger in his back. Who among us would have wanted to stab that helpless cadet? No, Corday. It is those boots."

I DID not like that up there on that ridge in the darkness with Death in ambush all around us, the night like a loaded rifle waiting to go off and kill us all. I could have knocked that Dane over the head with my pistol-butt. "You jack-ass," I snarled, "are you trying to tell me there is some sort of sorcery in these kickers? Some magic that whisks the wearer to far-off places at lightning speed?"

He grasped my arm, and his voice came low through the tight-strung dark. "Listen, Corday. When I was a little boy my grandfather used to take me on his knee and tell me a story. He was a sea captain and had sailed to distant shores. This story, it concerned a wonderful pair of boots that had been made in Denmark for an ancient king. That king was lame, you comprehend; for years he had been confined to his castle. Always he had wanted to travel.

"One day there came to his door an old white-bearded cobbler, a man from the East who had crossed the world, mending boots. The castle guards arrested him and were going to behead him as a spy, but hearing the old wanderer's cries, the Danish king took pity.

"'Hear this!' he told the cobbler. 'You, a miserable shoemaker, have walked around the world, while I, a king, am unable to take a step, for the very touch of the earth causes my feet to cry out in pain. Always I am stepping on sharp stones or pebbles. But if this earth were covered over I could walk anywhere. If you can cover the whole earth with leather I will grant you your life!'"

Jensen paused for breath. Me, I was in a sweat to get away. Vibrations of emergency were tightening in the blackness; around me dead men were stiffening while the living crouched tense for the shock of assault; there was a smell of burnt powder and blood and doom, and it hardly seemed the time to be listening to a Danish bed-time tale.

But the Dane's clutch held me. Something in his low voice fastened me by the ears.

He went on fiercely, "That cobbler took a look at the Danish king's feet, and smiled. The king was wearing rope sandals. The man went into his cell, and in a week appeared before the king with a pair of magnificent boots which he had fashioned. The king tried them on. Ah, they were wonderful.

"'But have you covered the earth?' he asked the cobbler.

"'Sire,' answered the cobbler, 'in those fine boots you can walk anywhere. To him who wears boots, it is as if the whole world is covered with leather.'"

"Jensen," I snarled, "you are seven kinds of a fool!"

"Wait!" he gasped. "That is not all of the story. The king was so pleased that he let the shoemaker go. But that shoemaker was no ordinary shoemaker. He was from the East. Old men from the East can do marvelous things, and in return for the king's kindness, that cobbler put a sorcery in those boots.

"'You have not many years left to travel,' he told the king. 'To see all the world you must walk fast and far. I have made you a pair of boots that go seven leagues at a stride. But only at night, for

the pace would be too swift in the heat of day.' Well, that king took a step, and to his astonishment found himself in Germany. And that is where the Seven League Boots came from, Corday. You have heard of the Seven League Boots—?"

"Again I had the Dane by the throat. "You waste my time with this fairy tale—this Danish version of Mother Goose—?"

"My grandfather told it to me," he panted. "He said it was true. In a week that king had circumnavigated the globe, and he died from the excitement—!"

"I will circumnavigate you!" I gritted at him. "You dunce—!"

"The boots were captured by Chinese bandits," he gurgled on, ignoring the pinch on his windpipe, "who wanted them for their marvelous power. Then the Russians had them. They fell in the hands of the Britons where Mother Goose heard the story. It is said Magellan wore them—gave them to Marco Polo! Finally the Arabs got them, Corday. The Arabs—!"

"What a fairy tale! What a fable!" I was remembering how I had once fallen for a woman's recital of *Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp*, and I shook him as you would shake an old coat full of lice. "We are about to die, and you spin me a yarn. Magic boots, indeed! Fool! What has this fairy story to do with boots I saw hand-made last week in a blind cobbler's shop?"

Jensen gave a last gasp. "They are not the same boots!"

I dropped my hands, staring.

"That cobbler in El Hamma is blind!"

"Well, what in the devil has that—?"

"You saw him copying a pair. The pair owned by that Italian professor who digs for ancient history in the sand. The pair which that Italian claimed to have purchased from an Arab caravan sheik in the desert. Or did he dig them up, Corday? Look at them. Do they look like Arab boots?"

*Mère de Dieu!* he was pointing at my feet. I whispered. "Are you trying to tell me—?"

"That cobbler is blind. He made those

boots for the colonel to match the Italian's. I am trying to tell you, the blind cobbler got them mixed and gave the colonel the wrong pair of boots, the Italian's boots. I am trying to tell you, when the colonel took a step in those boots at night he found they went twenty-one kilometers. So with the others who wore them afterward. To the Orient. India. Madagascar. China. It would not be impossible—a fast trip—running—when every step carried one seven leagues. Corday! Twenty-one kilometers is seven leagues. The pace is too fast, a speed that burns out one's brain. And you are standing in the Seven League Boots—!"

I wanted to kick him. Boot him seven leagues straight up in the air. There I was poised for a death-race across a desert infested with invisible murderers, and this little clown telling me I wore boots that went so fast they would blow out my lights.

I batted him off with an elbow. "To your post, *coquin!* Your grandfather and the Seven League Boots be damned! Pray to God I can travel seven paces in these pumps; and dig yourself under the sand, hoping you will be alive in the morning when I get back. Off with you, and warn the men not to shoot me by mistake. I am no officer for them to murder. I am going now. *Va-t-en!*"

He scrambled away, and I could hear him warning the sharpshooters. I called a low-voiced farewell, spat four times for luck, crawled over the dead horse, picked a hole in the darkness blacker than the night, and started out for El Hamma. I did not know it, but I was beginning the strangest journey I ever made in my life.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MAD JOURNEY

I WASN'T taking any seven-league strides when I started out, either. You know I wasn't. Belly to the ground, I went crawling down the ridge like a lizard, inching my way down the slope of sand and pausing every few minutes to rear my head and hold my breath and listen.

I was not going to do any sprinting until I got through those Arab lines, which meant I was probably not going to do any sprinting.

I could not see the Arab lines; I did not know where they were. In the thick dark ahead of me I could see nothing—only a sea of blackness stretching miles to the limits of the night where the tiny moon-washed walls of the town were clustered like a pale mirage. The intervening desert was black, I tell you. So black I felt as if I had been absorbed. Five yards down the ridge I looked back, and my companion Legionnaires had been absorbed, too. And silent? That darkness was like cotton stuffed in the ears. The moans of that German boy with a lead pill in his stomach only emphasized the surrounding hush. The pressure of that silence made me sweat.

*Oui*, the perspiration ran on my forehead as I crawled through that deaf-and-blind darkness. It was just like crawling toward a jungle alive with savage beasts. Any minute they might catch my scent. I had responsibility on my shoulders too, heavier than any knapsack. I had to crawl carefully, very slowly and carefully, and that weight of responsibility and the strain of it made every pore in my body a leaky faucet.

Believe me, I was sweating like a Turkish bath when I crossed the valley under the ridge and started up the dune, knowing those Arab butchers were on the other side. Or maybe they were Touareg, black desert fiends drugged with hashish and hate of the French. The thought turned my Turkish bath into a cold shower.

I am not lying when I say I was soaked in a dew of fear as I crawled on hands and knees up over that dune.

I knew those devils were around me then. Their nearness sent electric currents through the little telegraph wires under my skin. Fear stalled me, and for at least ten minutes I lay flat in the sand, afraid to go on and shaking like a wet leaf. But time was sifting away, *mon ami*—sand running through the hourglass—the lives of fifty men were at stake, you compre-

hend—my comrades, Yankee Bill and Jensen—trapped up there on that ridge they might outlast a midnight attack, another, perhaps a third, but help had to reach them—they could not last long after sunrise.

I pulled my belt tighter and crawled on. Nearby an invisible horse whickered. Gripping my pistol, I flattened. Was that formless shade ahead of me a Touareg? I was sure I could hear breathing. Teeth clenched, I crawled at the shade and through it. My imagination!

But certainly that was a movement off at the left. Again I flattened, not daring to breathe. The strain and cold sweat was making me a little sick.

No, that movement, too, was my imagination. But then I ran into something that was not imaginary. Crawling over a hummock of sand, I put my hand down squarely on a nose, mouth and beard. Wow! that hummock of sand rose up like an earthquake and turned into a screeching black man. Everywhere around me the dark sprang to life with a violence.

Nerves snapped in my head, and I fired in panic, and the night exploded with a bang!

**I**T WAS foolish of me to let off my gun like that. Mighty foolish. It was just what I had planned not to do. I should have bashed that sentinel's head in before he could give another squawk; that pistol shot roused the entire ambush. Firing blindly, I rushed through a mob of grabbing hands, dodged a spurt of gun-flame and raced in headlong flight toward that far off mirage of the town.

A river of bullets whistled after me, but those desert demons could not see me any better than I could see them, and I guess my presence in their midst had taken them by surprise. I heard shouting, howls to Allah, horses rearing, rifle shots. I did not loiter. I did not do any careful crawling. Take my word, I set a bee-line for that town on the rim of the night, and I tore through the black as fast as my legs would carry me.

That was not very fast, considering that mob at my heels. By the sound, every fiend in North Africa was coming after me. *Mère de Dieu!* do you know what I was wishing then? My thoughts went to the story that fool Dane had told me, and I was wishing for a fact that I had on Seven League Boots.

What a laugh that was! Those pumpers I was wearing, they were better than hob-nailed clogs, but they were not a bit faster than my knees, and with twenty miles to go that would not be fast enough. Besides, they were sweating my feet.

Still, they were curiously light for such thick soles; after my first mad dash, when I had settled into a stride of running, I could not seem to feel them at all. I was keeping a lead on those fiends behind me, *oui*. Horsemen had scattered, and I could hear them off at my flanks, spreading out in an attempt to circle and head me off, but I was still alive, amazingly alive.

I do not know at what moment I began to sense in myself an odd vitality—I had run a couple of miles, I was sure—instead of tiring, I seemed to have found a second wind. My head felt dizzily clear, if you can understand me—light and a little balloonish—that sensation you have in a high altitude.

At the same time, I experienced a queerish nausea, a nausea that was not unpleasant, something like too much champagne. That taste in my stomach I could not identify, or the pleasant numbing in the top of my head. I was dripping wet, yet I had no feeling of fatigue. Strange, I had no sense, either, of passing time. Now I must have been legging it at top speed for a half an hour, but it seemed like only a few seconds.

I wanted to laugh as I ran. Really, this race to El Hama with that demon-pack at my heels was rather delightful. Some of my senses had blurred and others had quickened; I felt as charged with energy as an electric battery. For two cents I would have turned around and fought that whole desert mob. What were a few hundred Arabs to one good Frenchman!

I sprang along over the sand and it seemed to have turned to rubber. I sailed over a dune. My feet were not touching the ground at all. Name of Jehovah! what had come over me?

Turn me into a pepper mill! I had taken a stride and swooped right off into space. I tell you, I went like a gulf on wings.

The odd part of it was, the back of my consciousness knew I had never left the ground at all, I was running like hell across the sand; and my physical self had become elastic, beyond the laws of gravity, I could feel myself flying. That gave me a sensation. You can wager it did! I liked that flighty feeling, and I let go again.

That time I went farther. *Sacré!* that was great. How did I do it? I had never been able to fly before. With the knowledge of this race: accomplishment, a tremendous self-assurance came over me, a sense of superior cunning. I would show these Arabs a thing or two now. Ah, I was a fox. I started cutting crafty tangents, dodging at smart angles to throw them off, then zooming or the straightaway again. No Arab rats were going to catch me. I could outsmart any Touareg horsemen. I was Thibaut Corday, one of the greatest soldiers of France, fighter extraordinary, capable of any feat—look!—in these boots I could fly!

In these boots—! That was when I looked down, my friend, and saw the desert far below me. My knees were pumping like a runner's, but I was not down to earth; *non*, I was winging high in the air. I knew it then, when I found myself running in the clouds. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cheer in exultation.

"Holy Saint Christopher!" I could hear myself crying out to myself. "The little Dane was right! You are in them! The Seven League Boots!"

**A** REMARKABLE feeling of power coursed through me. Nothing could hold me down. What exhilaration! A mountain of sand rose in front of me and I went over it in three strides. No danger of Arabs now; single-handed I could



conquer the whole Arab world. "Why," I thought to myself, "I could jump over Arabia. A few leaps in these boots would take me to Asia—India—!"

Now I am coming to a part of this story difficult to describe.

Sensations are hard things to find words for, and my brain was in a whirl of sensations. As I thought of India, I seemed to be projected through space at rocket-speed. Wind whistled in my ears, dust and darkness streaked past me, the moon sailed off at an unexpected arc—*voilà!*—before my eyes was the Taj Mahal, exactly as I remembered the picture from my school-book geography; then palm trees, elephants, fantastic rajahs, snake-charmers—suddenly I was in a harm full of dancing girls, nautch dancers from Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay.

Scenery formed and faded like views flashed dimly on a screen, but the dancing girls were clear; they writhed and spun around me, laughing at me, singing strange songs, gesturing at me to catch them.

All this time I was running through the air in my magic boots, and all this time, far in the distance ahead of me, beyond that scene of India, was the mirage of El Hamma's white walls gleaming in the moon-wash.

Can you make anything of that? Then what can you make of this? "There is plenty of time," I said to myself. "I would like to see China!" Almost at once I was there.

Shanghai, exactly as I had last seen it from a troopship deck. Office buildings and pagodas. Alleys lit by paper lanterns. Screechy music. Mandarins in slippers eating rice with chopsticks. Again dancing girls—slant-eyed maidens in pantaloons weaving at me, beckoning, inviting. Ah, they were beautiful. I would have stopped. I would have made love to one under a saladang tree, but far in the distance there was that cursed view of El Hamma, and if I wanted to see those other wonderful places I must hurry on.

So I jumped Afghanistan for Persia to see the dancers of Tehran draped like

goddesses about the Peacock Throne. Ground fled away and I was in Nagasaki encircled by dark-eyed geishas in bright kimonas who held out their toy-like hands to me and begged me to stay. The little Japanese maids sent after me a tinkling laugh, but I was going too fast to see much of their country; I wanted to return to the strange leopard-skinned ladies I had glimpsed beating tom-toms on a dark Madagascar beach, and the lotus-perfumed beauties I had passed in crossing Cambodia.

*Enfin*, you can see I made quite a tour of the world in those Seven League boots. Talk about that Danish king or Magellan! There were girls in every port, charmers of every race and hue and of marvelous beauty, who tried to wrap me in their arms, pleading with me to linger. Somehow I had to go on, although I would have given my soul to dally. But always ahead I saw those moon-washed walls of El Hamma, drawing me on past those alluring ports of call, hurrying me up like Conscience.

I took those few last miles into El Hamma planing from dune to dune like a flying fish hitting the crests of waves. Believe me, in my Seven League Boots I was covering ground. What enraged me was that the town kept drifting ahead of me, so that no matter how fast I ran it remained beyond reach on the skyline.

But I got there.

## CHAPTER VII

### WHAT BOOTS A MAN . . . ?

THE soldiers who saw me from the outpost wall said I came out of the night at a bounding zigzag, like a jackrabbit with five hundred wolfhounds after me. They said Touareg horsemen were riding me down on either flank, and those horsemen would have cut me to pieces if a batch of Arabs had not piled over me and blocked the sword-swipes of the riders. They said I came out from under that pile-up of men, knives and horses as a diver rising out of surf; that I was laugh-

ing and shooting and throwing those Arabs around as if they were straw dummies. Then, they said, I came into that town like a one-man cyclone.

Me, I felt like a complete hurricane.

Those Legionnaires who saw me said I raced in through the gate-arch; came up the bazaar on a slow spin like a dervish, howling unearthly yells and firing at everything in sight. Arabs dropped on me from balconies. Black men charged me from dark doors.

All those wild men from the desert came rioting after me; dust and gun-smoke fogged the moonlight; the shrieks, screams, explosions, hoof-clatter and clang of hurled blades was like the din of Hell.

They saw me climb up walls and jump down from roofs. Ten times I disappeared in the heat of bedlam. Racing from barracks to rescue me, they saw me standing in an alley-mouth, calmly loading my pistol and hooting with laughter while bullets tore through my hair and every hellion in town whirled around me. They said my tunic was in ribbons, my britches in shreds, I was dirt and blood from head to foot, my face was a scarlet mask. But my eyes were like opals, and I leaped and dodged and charged at my attackers as if my life were charmed. They said it was a miracle I was alive.

But they did not see what I saw.

I saw I was in Hell, all right, but in my Hell there were more than Arabs. All those dancing girls from far places, they had come there with me. Around me they danced, leaping and twisting, clinging to my arms, running cool fingers through my hair, twining soft arms about my neck, imploring me with kisses to save them.

Like rainbows they flashed, girls in veils and girls without veils, anklets twinkling, bells shining on their feet—geisha girls, nautch dancers, the leopard women of Madagascar, the lovely maids from Persia, China, Tonkin. Bracelets jangled. Tom-toms roared. Cymbals crashed.

Savage hordes of natives charged at me to take my girls away, villainous devils

who grabbed out and rushed, trying to catch my women. Do you think I was afraid of those curs when the most beautiful ladies I had ever seen were clinging to me for protection? Do you think I was afraid in my Seven League Boots?

I did not climb the walls in that town; I walked over them. I did not jump down from roofs; I stepped down. What were a hundred Arabs to me—what were a thousand?

Those Legionnaires rushing to my rescue, they saw no mere man in rags and dirt battling a native mob. They saw a giant, a knight in invincible armor, a great conqueror surrounded by the world's loveliest harem, beating off with ease and supreme confidence all the devils in Hell. What a fight you can put up when every step you take covers seven leagues.

The Devil, himself, came at me. I saw his face. On a black horse he came through the sulphur smoke, leaping from saddle on top of me. My side-jump had carried me to Italy. Satan was swearing in Italian. He had a thin, ascetic face and a bald head, and he was lashing criss-cross strokes at me with a whistling sabre. "*Corpo da Bacco!*" Veiled women clung to me, screaming in a thousand plaintive tongues. I hurled myself at this enemy. I never felt the slash that cut me to the shoulder-bone. He went down, and I was stamping on his face—

Tom-toms sounded like the thudding of machine-guns. Cymbals were rifles smashing. Dancers and veils dissolved in bronze, swirling fog. Red lights banged on all sides; there was a smell of burnt powder, hot metal, salty sweat; suddenly in the smoke before me appeared Yankee Bill, Jensen, a squad of Legionnaires. Those fools, their shouts and bayonets had scared my dancers. A delightful creature in gauzy raiment beckoned from a rooftop, turned and sped like a rainbow for the moon.

Soaring in my boots, I went after her; together we fled across the sky. But my boots were heavy with caked, bloody mud—I was slowing down—the moon went

out—her veils tore through my clutch, and I lost her.

Then I was falling—falling through endless night.

**B**ARE feet. I could see them, toes upturned, sticking up beyond the horizon of the blanket. That bunion looked familiar. So did a corn. Could those miserable appendages be mine? I wiggled the toes. They were mine.

"The boots!" I whispered. "Where are my Seven League Boots?"

The face wearing a doctor's Van Dyke looked down and grinned. "Boots, indeed! From the way you have been talking I would have expected dancing slippers. For three days now you have been waltzing. What a dance! And with such women! Tut, tut! You have shocked the good nuns of this hospital, I can tell you; they have been saying hurry-call prayers for your soul. They are not used to the confessions of such a *roué*, such an adventurer, such a lady-killer."

I gasped out, "The dancing girls—!"

"You brought them to the hospital with you. What a subconscious! Was it imagination or memory? You have been in our Asian colonies? I envy you. I knew that stuff inspired a man. But you, *mon brave!* I have heard of nothing like it since I read the impressions of De Quincy."

"My Seven League Boots!" I panted.

He chuckled, shaping his beard with pointed fingers. "So that is what they were? Seven Leaguers! Well, I can believe it from what they tell me of the race you ran. Eighteen miles across the desert in five hours: dodging all over the map under cover of night, and outstripping a hundred Arabs and Touareg. How you outsmarted them, deceiving them after you like that, so your comrades could escape that ambush trap. Do you know you saved your company? Your comrades reached El Hamma only a half hour behind you. It was wonderful strategy. The general will be here soon. All the way from Kairouan to give you the *Croix de Guerre.*"

I struggled to rise. "I do not want a medal! I want my Seven League Boots!"

"No, no!" the doctor lowered me back. "Your shoulder, *mon gars!* The stitches! But wait!" He tinkled a bell near my cot and a nun came in. After whispered words the good sister went out, to presently return with a parcel wrapped in paper. A very spruce lieutenant, one I had never seen before, was with her. He saluted the doctor and unwrapped the parcel.

"My boots!" I wailed. "Torn to pieces! Some villain has slashed them like that! The Seven League Boots that belonged to a Danish king and—"

Overwhelmed by the tragedy, I could not go on. As the lieutenant held up those ruined wonders, I could only weep. Ah, those marvelous boots. The calves had been cut to strips. The heels were split open. The magic soles had been ripped loose from the welt and hung down with nails showing like jagged teeth. The felt insole flapped out like a tongue, and the vandal who had worked this infamy had gouged out the bottoms and arches.

"Show him," the doctor said to the lieutenant.

Fumbling in a tunic pocket, the lieutenant produced a small packet of tissue papers. I could see scrawled lines and fine writing.

"Show him the rest."

The lieutenant held up a brown, flat gum-like slab of something about a half inch thick and six inches long—it was shaped as a bootsole, but it looked like an unwholesome, moist plug of chewing tobacco.

"Corday," the doctor shook his head, "those weren't any Seven League Boots belonging to any Danish king. They belonged to that Italian who was around here passing himself off as an archaeologist."

"I know," I cried. "And he bought them from a sheik in the desert—or he dug them up in the sand—!"

"Too bad for him he didn't," the lieutenant said grimly. "No, *mon brave*, he had them made to order—to very special order by that cur of a blind cobbler in

the Lane of the Three Thirsty Camels. Then every night when he returned from his diggings he gave them to the cobbler to polish up; what choice boots that they must be shiny for his morning ride into the desert!"

"That cobbler made a pair to match for Colonel Rolant!" I moaned. "He got them mixed up! Switched! He gave the colonel the Italian's pair."

"**O**UI, and he gave the Italian the new ones he had made for the colonel. But attend! The match is close but not exact. The boots made for the colonel, they have solid leather soles and heels. These of the Italian? Well, every day when he rode into the desert he carried imbedded under that insole these nice brown slabs to pass out to nomad chiefs. Only he was more than a dope-runner, this *agent provocateur*.

"Here are maps of our whole Tunisian border, the deposition of our troops, a plan of our El Hamma outpost and the instructions for a secret uprising—on tissue paper concealed in the hollow heels. You can see how badly he wanted those boots of his; why he trailed your detachment and finally ordered a bold attack. Those spy-maps meant his life, if discovered. The drugs to bribe the desert tribes—that blind cobbler had bushels hidden under his shop."

I pulled my bare feet under cover in horror. "You mean there were drugs hidden in the soles of those boots?"

"Under the felt insole," the doctor pointed at the brown, gum-like slab that resembled chewing tobacco. "Concentrated opium and hashish with some native hell-oil mixed in. Just the fumes are enough to knock you silly. Believe me, those boots were ripe, Corday. I do not wonder the colonel felt it when his feet began to perspire. That felt insole soaked up the stuff. That spy never walked far in them. *Sacré!* Imagine marching!"

Eyes raised, the doctor called upon heaven to imagine it. "Out in Tonkin," he told the lieutenant, "I have seen native

soldiers smuggle a pill of opium under an armpit and go sky high. Conceive of absorbing a drug through the bottoms of your blistered fæet! Especially hashish! No wonder those officers saw strange countries and dancing girls. Hashish is the most violent of narcotics; always it conjures up visions; the user loses all sense of time and space, temporarily goes mad, and is liable to run amuck. It is the drug of the assassins; only a little will drive one wild. And here was Corday steeping his toes in it; taking a foot-bath in the stuff. *Ventre bleu!*" he shuddered at me. "Never in my life have I seen such a colossal, world-beating jag!"

I did not want to hear any more, and I turned over on my pillow. I am afraid I did not appreciate the humor when the general walked in to give me a decoration and a speech in which he called me a hero and applauded the way I had brought to a victorious termination Colonel Rolant's brilliant campaign.

**O**LD Thibaut Corday swung his feet off the chair and tenderly lowered them to the floor as his story came to a halt.

The young British consular agent, who had dropped into the café for tea, decided to cancel the jam muffins.

Algiers hurried by in the afternoon sunshine on Boulevard Sadi Carnot, and the old Legion veteran's eyes were fixed bleakly on the procession of sandals, slippers and boots which made a passing show on the pavement beyond the *brasserie* entrance.

"And that," he snorted finally, "is what our French generals considered a brilliant campaign. A colonel loses himself, his mind and his men in a desert—every officer of the company and twenty soldiers are killed—it was the dope that went to Rolant's head to begin with—but it is brilliant!" His shoulders made that shrug only possible to Frenchmen.

"But what would you, of the military? The Arabs, you comprehend, they could not make head or tail of our parading out

into the desert like that. They thought we must have been an entire army. Those crazy maneuvers scared them. Where a logical campaign would have failed, that insane parade for Timtuctoo frightened an overwhelming enemy force and broke up a cunningly planned rebellion."

Old Thibaut Corday sat back and made a wide gesture. Then he was silent, staring off into a great distance, as if his eyes were seeking the past which he had just recounted.

The young British agent exclaimed, "But those officers that were murdered, Corday! Captain LaSalle, and that chap killed by a Chinese knife?"

"The Italian snake! He had to have those boots of his, *non?* Think of his surprise when he saw the colonel strut by in a similar pair, only to discover he was wearing the colonel's and the Legion *commandant* had his. So he set out after us.

"By the time he caught up with the column, Papa Rolant was in his grave, the boots were on Captain LaSalle. When LaSalle wandered off that night, the spy shot him, but we got there before he could retrieve his footwear. The next night he waited his chance, sneaked into camp and caught Delacroix in his tent.

"Doubtless the youngster, uneasy, had been walking around, sleepless, and was just retiring when he got that knife in the back. Again we were there double quick, and the Italian had to run for it without the boots. In the dark we never

saw him. The knife was probably his—a gift from Chinese dope-smugglers. I do not know.

"There in El Hamma I killed him. He was out there in that ambush with those devils, understand, and the whole pack chased me when they saw I was in those boots."

"What of the old blind cobbler?"

Corday shrugged.

"Murdered for his mistake. But since, I have often wondered. Could the pattern of those boots have reached Europe? What are these dictators wearing? Did you ever see one in shoes? Regard their gestures, delusions of grandeur, narcotic eyes! Listen to them talk of how they are going to go across the world. They are steeping their blisters in hashish? All of them think they are strutting in Seven League Boots!"

Old Thibaut Corday spat fiercely. "Give me the *brodequins* of common men. I was glad to get back into my clodhoppers, I can tell you. In these I am squarely down to earth. No more of your fine boots for me; they make me sick. Which reminds me," he glared off, "I was sent home from El Hamma on sick leave. What do you think? My little niece in school had learned to speak English. What a prodigious accomplishment! Proudly my sister produced the tiny scholar. Recite for Uncle Thibaut. Me, I could not stand it. I had to get up and leave. Can you hear that child reciting Kipling? That poem! '*Boots! Boots! Boots—!*'"

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