

The Red Mirage

A Story of the French Legion
in Algiers

By I. A. R. WYLIE

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SYNOPSIS.

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When Sylvia Omney, a beautiful English girl, returns from a search in Algiers for her missing brother, her lover, Richard Farquhar, finds she has fallen in love with Captain Arnaud of the Foreign Legion. In Captain Sower's room Farquhar gets deliberately drunk, but when young Preston loses all his money to Lowe, a shady character, Farquhar offers Sower to have Preston's "O. U." returned to him. Farquhar is helped to his rooms by Gabrielle Smith. Sower demands an apology. Refused, he forces Farquhar to resign his commission in return for possession of Farquhar's father's written confession that he had murdered Sower's father. Gabrielle saves Farquhar from suicide. Farquhar tells his mother that he is going to find his father if the latter is alive. To shield Arnaud, Sylvia's fiance, he professes to have stolen war plans and tells the real culprit why he did so. As Richard Nameless joins the Foreign Legion and sees Sylvia, now Mme. Arnaud, meet Colonel Destinn.

A military officer commits a serious offense in his own country and flees to Africa, where he joins the French Foreign Legion. His ability eventually puts him in high position. There he distinguishes himself by cruelty to his men. How will the lives of Colonel Destinn and Richard Nameless cross one another?

CHAPTER V.

Colonel Destinn of the Legion. A thin-voiced chime from some tower in Sidi-bel-Abbes announced the hour—four o'clock.

Colonel Destinn looked up. From where he sat he could see the barracks-yard, and, beyond, the great stretch of ochre plain rolling to the horizon. A little to the right an Arab mosque lifted its white minarets against the sky, which hung oppressively over the panting, lifeless country.

In the narrow, meanly furnished room the atmosphere was stifling. Colonel Destinn's guest drew back into the thin patch of shadow. Colonel Destinn himself smiled, and the thin lips under the iron-gray mustache became indescribably ruthless.

"Yes, you are quite right, Mr. Lowe," he was saying in his suave French. "I have something to sell—something quite valuable, in fact. But I do not choose to sell it to you, that is all."

Stephen Lowe glanced up. His deformity was very obvious at that moment. He looked old, and physical exhaustion had stamped out the last trace of beauty from his thin features.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Is not that my affair?"

Colonel Destinn brushed a speck of dust from his dolman. His slate-gray eyes flashed. He rose, and Lowe had no choice but to rise also.

"I have made you an indefinite offer, Colonel Destinn," he said. "One day



"I Have Something to Sell, but Not to You."

I may come with something different and perhaps then you will reconsider what you have said. No life can be bound up definitely anywhere, not even in a desert, Colonel Destinn."

The officer did not answer, appeared even to have forgotten his guest's existence. Stephen Lowe went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Someone tapped at Colonel Destinn's door.

"If you please, my colonel, yesterday's batch from Oran."

Colonel Destinn lifted his head.

"It is well. You will accompany me, corporal. How many?"

"Fifty."

"We shall need them."

He picked up his kepi and led the way down the passage, the corporal following close beside him, his features composed in military indifference.

In the center of the yard a line of men had been drawn up. Neither the violent abuse of the sergeant nor the comments of a pale-faced lieutenant, much less the uniforms, had been able to transform them into soldiers. Only one thing was common to them all—misfortune. It was written in every haggard face in every language of despair, from reckless defiance to sullen resentment and stale resignation. Colonel Destinn read the language with the rapidity of custom. Before each recruit he stopped an instant, his hard eyes picking out the broken refinement of the prodigal from the brutality of fugitive crime. And at each he jerked out an imperative question.

"Your name?"

"Johann Harding, my colonel."

"Profession?"

"Doctor."

"Sergeant, keep an eye on him. He will sham like the devil, or poison you. And this man?" There was a slight, scarcely perceptible change in the inflection of his voice, a note of something that might have been surprise or even more than that—uneasiness. The man whom he confronted held himself with a cool, undisturbed dignity.

"Richard."

"Have you no surname?"

"No."

Destinn glanced at the Lieutenant, who, after a hurried glance to his notebook, shrugged his shoulders.

"No. 4005—calls himself Richard Nameless, my colonel."

"A nom de guerre, I presume. Your last profession?"

"Traitor."

"You are English?"

"I am nothing."

There was a troubled pause. The man had answered fluently in French, without hesitation and without insolence. And yet his easy self-confidence jarred in that atmosphere of cowed and broken humanity, and was by contrast almost a challenge. The momentary interest died out of Colonel Destinn's eyes, leaving a cold anger.

"That fellow is dangerous," he jerked back over his shoulder, and passed on.

Colonel Goetz hesitated an instant before the man thus summarized. He measured him, and the recruit answered the keen, deliberate gaze with the same steadfastness. A mutual recognition had been acknowledged; steel had rung against steel. Then suddenly the recruit's fiery blue eyes focused themselves on something beyond, and their expression—that of a man started into an instant's self-betrayal—caused the corporal to turn sharply.

A rare vision had appeared in the dull, colorless square. The iron gates had been opened, and against the background of the green avenue beyond there stood a woman—a slender, beautiful woman, such as but few of the lost, degraded inhabitants of those white walls had ever seen. She came slowly toward them, the lace sunshade framing the lovely golden head, her soft muslin dress revealing each movement as something exquisitely balanced, absolutely free and confident in its youthful grace and health.

"Colonel Destinn," she said, "I hope you are not angry with me. I have come to find my husband."

He lifted his hand reluctantly but instinctively to his kepi.

"I heard that Captain Arnaud's wife had arrived," he said roughly. "Permit me to inform you that Captain Arnaud left the barracks half an hour ago, also that you have no business here and are interfering with my business. The sentry should not have let you pass."

"He did not want to," she explained, "but I told him that I knew you and that you would be furious if he refused."

"Whereby, madame, you overstepped the limits of truth."

"Pardon me, I do know you. But since I intrude, I will make good my retreat. Good evening, my colonel."

She turned her back on him and began to walk with untroubled dignity toward the gate. For an instant he hesitated, then overtook her.

"I have a word to say to the sen-

try," he said significantly. "I will accompany you. You say you know me. I have not seen you before."

"That is quite possible; but I have seen you." They had reached the gate and she stopped and looked up at him.

"Do you want to know when?"

"I am interested, I confess."

"It was about a year ago at night-time. I was sitting under the trees in the Cercle des Officiers, listening to the band. I remember it was rather dark, except for the lanterns, and the faces of the natives had made me nervous. Then came a bugle call and I was really frightened. I thought it was an Arab uprising or something; instead you rode past—at the head of your regiment."

"I remember," he said, his face full of hard triumph. "It was the night I won my wager—one hundred and fifty kilometers in three days."

He was silent a moment, driving his spurred heel into the sandy gravel. Then he looked up at her.

"Why did you come to Algiers?" he said abruptly. "Why, above all, did you come to Sidi-bel-Abbes? What is there for a tourist to see here? Sand and vineyards, and then sand again."

"I was a tourist. I came on a mission—to find my brother."

"Your brother?"

"He was lost," she said almost in a whisper. "He had done wrong—and my father is a stern man—he ran away—and we were afraid. We followed him to Algiers, and then we lost trace. We never found him." The tears had gathered in her dark eyes. "Colonel Destinn—I do not know why

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