

# FORGOTTEN OF GOD

By HOUSTON DAY

Author of "The Arab's Beard," "Mutiny in the Desert," etc.



*Corporal or corpse  
—in the Foreign  
Legion.*

**M**ONSIEUR, I agree with you. Tonquin is a miserable place. Opportunities by which you might prove your worth to your employers must indeed be few in this city. Yes, I understand your disgust perfectly, for once I too was young and ambitious.

An anisette? *Qui, monsieur, merci.* I drink to your success. But you must be patient. Some time, and in some way, the chance you desire so greatly will come, perhaps at the moment when you least expect it.

I recall the first time I was awarded a corporal's chevrons. For months I had been longing for the moment, but when it came I was so astounded I could not find

words with which to thank the lieutenant.

Our section was stationed at the *Kasbah* of Ain Sinna at the time, and of all the Saharan *postes* the Foreign Legion has ever defended that, monsieur, was the most desolate. Two scrawny palms, the oasis boasted, no more. The well yielded barely enough brackish water for our most urgent needs. Our blockhouse stood alone, bare, and stark, surrounded by breast-high walls. There were no native tents at the watering place, for we were in the line of *dissidence*, and it was only rarely that a heavily guarded caravan passed our way.

But the life was not monotonous, monsieur. Far from it. For two days, three days, some times a week or more, all would be quiet. We would go about our

work, quarrel among ourselves, and spend our idle moments cursing the officer who had ordered our section to Ain Sinna. Then the ocean of sand about us would spew up a band of fierce, blue-veiled Touaregs, and we would forget our complaints in the excitement of battle.

We had been there four months when I was ordered out on a working party to get fuel. I went willingly, monsieur, with a minimum of grumbling, for I was ambitious, and who knows but what Lieutenant Thibaud might some day observe the alacrity with which I obeyed orders and see in me something better than a gatherer of camel chips.

Corporal Snetoff, a lazy Russian, was in charge of our detail, and as soon as we reached the old caravan trail a hundred metres from the fort he sat himself down, lighted a cigarette, and ordered Hartmann and myself to fill our sacks and be quick about it. That, monsieur, is the way executives work, and perhaps it explains the reason why I was ambitious to advance myself. I have never loved labor.

But the trail had been picked over, monsieur, and the chips were scarce. For half an hour Hartmann and I combed that part of the path that was in plain view of the fort, while the corporal loafed.

I threw my sack on the ground in disgust. It was still less than half full. "At this rate we shall be here all night," I told Hartmann. "Come, let's push down the trail. Snetoff is not looking."

"But it is against orders to go out of sight of the fort," he objected. "The lieutenant will be angry."

Hartmann was a *bleu*, a recruit, who had been left with the last group of replacements from Sidi bel Abbes, and he had a wholesome respect for officers.

But I was not to be put off. I cursed. Fort? Bah! Our *poste* was virtually a jail. It made us the prisoners of the savages we

were attempting to subdue. "The lieutenant will not know about it," I argued. "That *cochon* of a corporal will be wandering back to the walls in a few minutes for fear of missing supper. Come, the Touaregs have not been seen in the vicinity for a week.

Hartmann grumbled a little, but he was as anxious to get his sack full as I, so he followed me down the trail.

IT WAS a decision I regretted, very quickly, monsieur, for even as we had been arguing, the villainous natives had been creeping up on us. The sand was whispering a warning as the wind sighed among the dunes, but I had heeded it not. The sun beat down fiercely, and I was eager to finish and get back.

We were behind a great dune, scarcely two hundred metres from the *Kasbah*, when they closed in. I was bending over gathering chips, my Lebel swung over my shoulder, when a verminous savage leaped upon my back and bore me to the ground.

I wrestled free, and was up in an instant. There was no time to unslung my rifle. Touaregs were closing in on all sides. There must have been two hundred in the band that had gathered behind the dune.

But the number that had leaped on us got in each other's way. I whipped out my bayonet and lunged at the tribesman who had knocked me down. The point pierced his neck, but before I could draw it free a rifle butt struck me a stunning blow on the head.

I was unconscious only for a second or two, and my first thought on opening my eyes was one of amazement that I should still be alive. Three of the blue-veiled ones held me pinned to the ground. I saw Hartmann swinging his rifle by the barrel. That recruit fought like a man. Yes, and died like one too, for the next instant a knife thrust all but disemboweled him.

Ah, but those Touaregs are inhumanly cruel. Hartmann's plight gave me a chance to view what was to be my own fate. He was still alive as he fell, and to prevent him from crying out the savages stuffed his mouth with sand. Quickly he was stripped of his uniform, and then they set to work upon his quivering flesh with their knives.

I struggled to free myself, fought fiercely to grasp a weapon with which I might shorten his dying throes, but another blow in the face with a rifle butt quickly dazed me. I closed my eyes. My stomach had sickened. I could not watch.

Hartmann was lucky. He died quickly, cheating the savages of their pleasure. Meanwhile, the men who had pinioned me to the ground had torn off my uniform, leaving me as naked as my comrade's corpse.

I shuddered, monsieur, and ground my teeth in impotent rage. I knew that they would be more patient with me, the torture would be prolonged, and for hours I would writhe and suffer. I closed my eyes again and steeled myself for the ordeal, vowing that I would not give those beasts the pleasure of hearing me scream.

**B**UT the blade that I momentarily expected to pierce my flinching flesh was slow in coming. My muscles relaxed. I opened my eyes.

The Touaregs were arguing among themselves, and I sensed that my fate was at stake. Some, I could see, were eager to put me to the knife at once. Their eyes glared over the blue *lithams* that covered the lower part of their faces. But why should the others wish to delay, for that obviously was the reason for the disagreement?

For a moment I was puzzled. Then, in a flash, everything became clear. Two of the "blue men" had donned our blood-

stained uniforms. In this disguise they could shoulder our sacks and walk within the walls of the fort. Once there, treacherous knife thrusts would silence the sentries. Meanwhile, the main group could circle to the opposite side. There the rolling dunes had crept nearer the *poste*, and from this concealment they could sweep down upon the handful of defenders. Of the outcome of such a surprise attack there could be no doubt. The *Kasbah* of Ain Sinna was doomed. And when the fort had been taken the attackers could put me to death at their leisure.

I felt sorry for my comrades, monsieur. I reviled myself, too, for having disobeyed orders. But I had little time for self-recrimination. The natives, I saw, had reached an agreement. At a signal from their leader, the trio that held me to the ground tightened their grips, and at the same time one of them clamped his hand over my mouth to muffle an outcry.

My heart sank. I had guessed wrong, I believed. I was to taste the knife at once. One of the Touaregs grasped my leg and lifted it from the ground. Another stepped up, clubbed his rifle, and brought it down viciously across my shin bone. My leg cracked like a reed.

For a moment I was faint. The guttural voices around me seemed far distant. I awaited the next blow with a prayer that unconsciousness might rob me of pain. But while I waited, the savage that had lifted my leg let it fall.

I looked up. Those who had desired to delay my death had won their point. The main group was moving off. They led their camels, so their heads would not show above the dunes. The two that had donned the Legion uniforms picked up the sacks and started walking at a snail's pace toward the fort, their heads bent, as if they were scanning the sand for chips.

IN FRONT of me sat the guard they had left. He was a filthy beast. From neck to ankles he was clad in his *gandoura* of faded and torn cotton cloth. His eyes glittered malevolently above his veil as he warned me by signs that should I attempt to cry out his heavy bladed knife would soon silence me. A moment later the desert had swallowed the others and we were alone.

Ah, monsieur, my plight was desperate. With my leg broken so that I could not walk, and with a guard ready to decapitate me if I should attempt to crawl, I knew that escape was impossible.

But I looked toward my captor, searching his eyes for a sign of drowsiness. I knew better than to look for mercy. In all Africa there is no more barbarous a tribe than these nomads of the Sahara. "Forgotten of God," the Arabs call them, but as I reflected on the four months that we had been left to bake in the fierce sun without relief my lips curled bitterly. It was we, the Legion, who were the forgotten. Even our own officers had forgotten the lonely outpost at Ain Sinna.

Hartmann's body was rigid. Gleaming in the sand by his side I saw the cartridge he had always carried in his sash, "the last bullet" that some day he had expected to use on himself. It was just such torture that he had experienced before he died that he had hoped to avoid. Poor devil.

I recalled my own precautions. Remembered the percussion cap I had purchased from an artilleryman at Colomb-Bechar. For a moment a deadly sort of ill hope stirred in my breast. If I but had the cap to grind between my teeth my death would be prompt and painless.

With an effort I sat up. Instantly my guard was on the alert. He tightened his grip on his knife, and moved nearer. His eyes gleamed with pleasure as he saw the pain the effort to move cost me.

I looked in the sand about me, and strained a few handfuls through my fingers. But unlike Hartmann's cartridge, my fulminate of mercury cap was nowhere to be seen. It was futile to look for it.

Disappointed? Yes, monsieur, I was, but not greatly. I had not expected to be so fortunate. But I learned, too, in sitting up that my leg was not as painful as I had expected. Already it was numbed to my knee. I glanced at my captor. Perhaps I could get him to do that which I lacked the means to do to myself.

Ah, monsieur, hope of life dies hard. Even as I hungered for the stabbing pain of a knife that would end my suffering for all time, I speculated on the possibility of overpowering my guard. A quick leap, a twist of the wrist, and his weapon would be mine. His camel was kneeling nearby. Even with my crippled leg I knew I could mount, and while the Touaregs were still moving toward the point where they intended to launch their attack I could race to the fort and give the alarm. The thought was no sooner born than I decided to put it into execution.

GATHERING my good leg under me I leaped for the Touareg's throat. My clumsy movements gave him warning, but in attempting to spring to his feet he slipped, and I succeeded in grasping the blade of his knife. The keen edge cut deeply into my hand. The pain of my broken leg swept my body in a convulsive wave. But with the ferocity of desperation I struggled to wrest the weapon from his hand.

We fought like beasts, rolling over and over in the sand. We clawed and gouged, and I even sought to fix my teeth in his wiry neck. But I fought a losing battle. I knew that I had lost when my fingers closed on his knife, instead of his throat. That Touareg was strong. He would have

been a match for me even if I had not been handicapped by my broken leg. In a moment he had torn himself free, and stood over me, his eyes glistening angrily.

I took a last look at life, closed my eyes, and bowed my head to offer him a target. I did not want him to bungle.

But I waited in vain. He did not strike. I looked up. His eyes had narrowed, and I saw that under his face cloth he was laughing at me.

I collapsed panting in the sand, too sick with pain and despair to move. My leg ached with great pulsing throbs. My lacerated hand smarted like fire. The sun beat down on my scorched skin, and I writhed in misery, clawing at the sand like a wounded beast. And it was while I was cursing the fate that would not let me die that my fingers closed over the percussion cap that I had sought before in vain.

My pain vanished. My twitching muscles became still. A great joy welled within me. Slowly I sat up. I was conscious for the first time of the dryness of my mouth. Thirst, hunger and pain. Soon all would be ended. But the thought brought a pang. My joy evaporated. I was young and did not want to die.

The two Touaregs who had donned the uniforms had not taken the trouble to carry the *bidons*. I reached for Hartmann's which was nearby preparing to drink before ending my life. The guard made no move to take it from me as I unstopped it and raised it to my lips. But as soon as I opened my mouth to the tepid stream, he lunged forward and knocked it from my hands.

I raved, monsieur, and cursed him in French, English and Spanish, cursed him and his ancestors before him. My anger seemed to give him pleasure. His eyes sparkled, and his shoulders shook. Reaching out he picked up the *bidon* and

lifting his veil, he held it over his mouth as he had seen me do.

I watched him, licking my parched lips with a tongue like sandpaper. When his mouth was full he spat the water upon the sand.

I was angered beyond all reason. In a soberer moment I would have known that he would welcome any excuse to anger me or cause me pain. But I was mad, monsieur, mad with rage. I attempted to throw myself upon him, but now the pain in my leg was too great. I sank back on the sand, my face contorted with pain.

My misery seemed to give him great pleasure, for immediately he turned the *bidon* upside down and let the water flow out on the sand.

**M**ONSIEUR, my spirit was broken. I was ready now to die. Of what use was there to wait? Each moment I lived but added to my pain. I fingered the percussion cap and my thoughts became somber. "Gaston Le Brix," I said to myself, "you wanted to be a corporal. Instead, in another moment you will be a corpse, and the world will be none the loser."

I thought of many things in that pregnant moment while I raised the percussion cap to my mouth. Some of the thoughts were bitter. Some were pleasant. But there were many things to think about, for I have lived.

It is hard to face death when one is young. But I had no choice. The pain I had already experienced during the fifteen minutes that had elapsed since I had persuaded Hartmann to follow me down the trail and the moment I had started raising the explosive to my mouth convinced me that I would not be able to cling to my stoicism when I was tortured. I would rave. I would scream. This would

delight the cursed natives and help me not at all. So I was content to die.

My hand had reached my lips when the tribesman saw the glint of metal. Instantly he sprang at me. I jammed the cap into my mouth. My captor was upon me like an animal downing its prey. With one hand he pinioned my throat to the ground. Before I could grind my teeth his filthy fingers were in my mouth, my jaws had been pried apart, and he had the explosive.

Ah, monsieur, I know your thoughts. You are thinking that I was slow in biting purposely. That I clung to life as a coward. That is not true. I have reasoned since that at the moment I did not realize my own weakness. That my hand, while it had seemed to obey the command quickly, had faltered in fatigue. That, perhaps, is what had happened.

I sat up with a groan, my last hope dashed. It was with an effort that I repressed tears of disappointment.

For a moment I was foolish enough to think that my guard would toss the fulminate of mercury away. My heart leaped hopefully. But I had not reckoned with the inborn greed of all savages. He sat back, squatting on his haunches like an ape, as he inspected his acquisition.

I could almost see his primitive mind at work. What was good for the hated foreigner, he was thinking; would be good for him, too. But his forehead was wrinkled in perplexity. He recognized the fact that it was metal that he held, and no metal he had ever seen had proved good to eat.

He glanced at me again. Quickly I contorted my face in a grimace of despair and rage, gnashed my teeth, and cursed him fluently with every vile word at my command. I even crawled a few inches nearer him, despite my leg, as if to fight to regain that precious prize. This move decided him. He was satisfied. His eyes

squinted derisively as he put it into his mouth.

Monsieur, for a moment my heart stood still. Would he swallow it? Or would he bite into the deadly explosive. The moment I was left in doubt was only as long as it would take a man to spit, but to me it seemed endless. The Touareg, triumph gleaming in his eyes, ground his teeth.

Ah, but that fulminate of mercury was even more powerful than I had believed. The artilleryman had not lied when he had said it was from primer of a .520 mm. howitzer, which you know, monsieur, fires a twenty-inch shell. There was a muffled blast. I felt the concussion strike my face, and found myself staring with joyous, unbelieving eyes at the headless torso squatting in front of me. Slowly the thing that had once been my captor crumbled into a heap of dirty rags.

I cried out in delight. Then swiftly I remembered the predicament of my comrades. The Touareg's camel had clambered to his feet in fright. For a moment I thought he was going to bolt. "*Adarya-yan!*" I shouted. Fortunately, he understood my Arabic and sank to his knees. I crawled to his side and pulled myself up.

Ah, monsieur, it was then that I treated the garrison at the *Kasbah* of Ain Sinna with the strangest spectacle that has been seen in Africa in many a day. Naked from head to foot, my body smeared with blood, I raced from behind the concealing dune and swept down upon the fort.

*"Aux armes! Aux armes!"*

I shouted the warning at the top of my voice. The two Touaregs clad in Legion uniforms heard me. They spun around. They had got within fifty meters of the walls. Their rifles came to their shoulders. They waited, aiming carefully. It was useless to seek to avoid them, so bending

low over the camel's neck I screamed my warning in his ear, spurring him to greater speed.

A rifle exploded almost in my face. I felt the searing flash of powder and heard a bullet whine past my ear.

*"Aux armes! Aux armes!"*

My narrow escape only made me shout the louder. I could see the sentries level their rifles. The dolts, they aimed at me, ignoring the two savages I had passed. *Zut!* I was furious. Was my suffering to go for nothing. Was I to be killed by my stupid comrades?

There were more shots from behind. A bullet struck my mount, and his stride broke. He staggered. Ah, now I was an easy target. I saw Lieutenant Thibaud raise his binoculars. I took new hope, and heedless of the consequences I straightened up so he could see me, offering a point blank target to friend and foe alike. At the same time I shouted his name.

The lieutenant recognized me. Recognized, too, the Touaregs masquerading in the Legions' uniform. I saw him whirl and give an order. Rifles spat from a dozen spots on the crenellated walls. I was saved. I had succeeded. And although I did not look over my shoulder I knew that I would get my uniform back and that when I did I would find more than one bullet hole in it.

The grinding bones in my leg made me dizzy. My camel wobbled, threatening to collapse at any moment. But I kept my jolting, swaying seat, and camel and I, both nearer dead than alive, reached the outer walls. There I slipped to the sand and fainted like a school girl, after panting out my story.

**W**HEN next I opened my eyes I was feeling much better. The pain in my leg had lessened. My slashed hand no

longer smarted. Outside the blockhouse I heard the sharp bark of Lebel's. My comrades were holding their own. The attack had not taken them by surprise. Protected by walls, and with unlimited ammunition, they could withstand a siege of any duration.

The machine guns' explosive chatter sounded good to me, I can assure you, monsieur. Our *trente-sept*, the little sister of the .75 as the men called it, was sending shell after shell into the horde of treacherous Touaregs. Ah, the cannon is a great civilizer. Thirty-five shells a minute our little field gun fired.

I closed my eyes again and was dozing when I heard footsteps. I looked up. In front of me stood Lieutenant Thibaud. He was a young officer, scarcely a year out of St. Cyr. His face, it seemed, would never become toughened to the scorching wind and sun for his nose was always peeling. He looked at me sternly for a moment, and then said: "Gaston Le Brix, you disobeyed orders!"

"Yes, monsieur lieutenant, but—"

"There are no buts. You were ordered to remain in sight of the *poste*."

"But there were no chips."

"Do not argue with me, dumb one. You disobeyed orders so you must be punished."

Ah, discipline. It is always with the Legion. I actually believe Lieutenant Thibaud would have ordered his own brother shot by a firing squad, if the discipline of his section demanded.

He turned to the orderly who had accompanied him and asked how long I would be laid up. Four weeks he was told. Monsieur, I groaned inwardly. I knew he was debating the severity of my punishment. There would be another black mark on my record, too. My chances of becoming a corporal were slighter than ever before. I had expected no reward for

my timely return. After all, I had only saved my own life. But neither had I expected to be punished.

The lieutenant turned to me again. "Le Brix," he said, "for four weeks you will be confined to your quarters. You not only ignored orders, but you lost government property. I have reason to believe, though, that your uniform and rifle will be recovered, so I will not add an additional penalty for that offense."

He paused and glared at me for a moment with his sharp, piercing eyes, then turned and walked toward the door, leaving me the most disconsolate of men. At a sign from him the orderly left us.

**T**HERE was a lull in the firing. We could hear the shouts of the men inviting the Touaregs to attack again and meet their *illah Allah*.

The grim lines in the lieutenant's young face faded. He smiled faintly, and then winked at me. "We are giving them a warm reception, *mon enfant, n'est-ce-pas!*"

"Oui, mon lieutenant," I stammered, not knowing what was coming next.

The firing had died away, and I knew the Touaregs had been repulsed. I observed that there was a quizzical light in the lieutenant's eyes. Then he said, "your return was most timely, Le Brix, even though your appearance on that camel was most unmilitary. But I am not an unreasonable man. I will not hold that against you. So when you are able to walk again, stroll over to that lazy Russian, Snetoff, and ask him for his chevrons. He will sell them to you cheaply, I am sure, for I have already demoted him for coming back to the *poste* without his detail."