

# The End of the Game

By William Ashley Anderson

Eight tedious hours after the signal was flown from the Peak, the sweating carrier came shuffling up the long dark flight of stone stairs, and dumped our English mail upon a table. With thumping hearts and sparkling eyes we sorted it carefully, in a pathetic attempt at casualness. Then, stretching out in our long chairs, with the warm breeze sweeping over us, fresh from the blue Gulf of Aden, we were completely lost to each other, wrapped in dreams of home.

Two hours later, our letters having been read and re-read and carefully laid aside for another reading, we were still at the mail, wallowing in the newspapers, and gradually emerging from our earlier abstraction.

“Hello,” grunted Eric from the depths of the London *Times*, “that’s rotten.”

I glanced over my paper at him. He read aloud:

“ ‘The Last Battle of the Foreign Legion.’ This ought to interest you.”

My mind was wandering; I merely blinked at him.

“The Foreign Legion,” he repeated impatiently. “The Foreign Legion. Surely you’ve heard of the Foreign Legion? Well, it’s done for . . . wiped out on the western front. I’ll let you have the article when I’m finished. It’s jolly interesting.” And he buried himself once more between the sheets.

Aroused from my previous abstraction, but still half dreaming, I gazed languidly over the white-hot, ugly, roofs of Aden across the Bay to the Arabian shore, where the Turkish lines could be plainly seen; and tried vaguely to recall some elusive memory that associated me with the Foreign Legion. It was not in Europe, nor in Algiers, nor . . . All of a sudden it flashed upon me. In an instant I was swept clear across Asia, all the way to Kwangsu, back to the day— that really could not have been so very long ago— when I stepped outside my compound gate just as Stanley was stepping down from a palanquin.

Pensive and surly with enforced loneliness, I was elbowing my way through the reeking crowd, when the palanquin halted, a panel slid back, and an Englishman stood before me. By his well-cut tweeds and light raincoat, flung carelessly on his arm, he was plainly English; but his skin was tan and weather-beaten; his eyes a sombre brown with that furtive, quizzical expression that comes from living under an over-bright sky; and his moustache was marred by a nervous habit of biting his upper lip.

After a moment’s hesitation he offered me his hand, with an embarrassed smile.

“How do you do? You received my message? I’m Stanley.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to restrain my surprise, “you’re Stanley.” And I shook hands rather gravely, for he was supposed to be two hundred miles out in the hills of Shantung. Still, I was pleased to see him. I had always had a strong desire to meet him.

It was a strange fact that although he was working in my district, taking instructions from me, we neither had the slightest idea of the other’s character, our correspondence being strictly limited, on my part to precise instructions, and, on his part, to terse neat reports. Judging by these reports, his work seemed to me entirely satisfactory; but at the same time there seemed to be something lacking about the man’s character. The Chinese, who had known him before my arrival in the district, qualified the few remarks they made about him with dubious shrugs.

His unexpected appearance placed me in an awkward position, for I wanted, of course, to be completely hospitable; and yet I certainly had to find out why he deserted his post in Shantung. This was difficult, as it was our first meeting; he was considerably older than I; and I saw much in him to make his friendship desirable.

We walked toward the compound, pressing through the noisy mob that closed about us, hawkers shrieking in our ears, solemn-faced babies playing under our very legs, and whining beggars plucking at our elbows,— without exchanging more than a few casual comments about local conditions. He made no explanation of his arrival, simply stating that he had left his interpreter, Pan Erh, with a string of laden carts, out in Shantung.

When we reached my room, bleak and bare though it was, he looked about with an expression that was almost hungry; and then settled back in the long wicker chair by the stove with an air of contentment. But I could not help noticing that he kept drumming nervously with his fingers, and when he laughed, it was a short low laugh, and almost querulous.

Finally I blurted out, with an air of facetiousness:

“What’s the idea of the surprise-party, Stanley? Get tired of millet gruel? . . . or . . . or what?”

“Why,” he said, with a short laugh, and a quick look at me that had a shade of defiance in it, “I thought you knew. I’m discharged . . . sacked . . . put on the beach.”

I was astonished and confused; and stammered out a hasty apology; but he only lifted his hand deprecatingly, his defiance vanishing instantly.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said, trying to be airy, and failing rather pathetically, I thought. “I’m quite used to it.”

I tried to figure it out in my mind.

“I simply bashed my interpreter,” he explained.

“Bashed your interpreter!”

“What else *could* I do? Some merchants gave me a dinner . . . seventeen courses. Then they started to play fingers . . . and I had to drink that beastly kaoliang wine. Of course I got tight as a tick; but I was sober enough to know when that sneering swine, Pan, insulted me. So I bashed him. Then he wrote a stinkin’ letter to Shanghai.” Stanley chewed his moustache for a moment. “They wouldn’t listen to *me*.”

“How long have you been in China?”

“Four months. I came up from the Straits.”

He spoke without heat, in a level, listless tone, as though merely stating the facts of an utterly hopeless case; and there was something about his manner, a philosophical resignation, a calm restraint, that rather appealed to me. I could easily understand him, unsophisticated in the ways of the Chinese, falling prey to the potent native wine; and in the conceit of my judgment, I felt that the Company might condone his actions. It would be impossible for him to remain in Shantung; but he could be sent up North. This I explained carefully. However, he took my advice in smiling silence; and our conversation veered around to other things.

While waiting for dinner, we smoked and chatted on indifferent subjects, until the long shadows fell and the boy lighted the lamps. As conversation languished, Stanley’s eyes frequently strayed to my shelf of books, and with each recurring glance his face brightened perceptibly. After a while he rose and drew some of them out.

“I suppose you had plenty of books with you up country?” I suggested.

“As a matter of fact, I didn’t have any. They get in the way. After you’ve read them, they’re just dead freight, and it’s a crime to throw them away.”

“A good book’s always worth re-reading. A good story can always be told again.”

“Jolly few. Two or three readings are sufficient to memorise the best; and you’ve a poor imagination if you can’t improve on most of them.”

He said this with such calm assurance that I was absolutely flattened, and I sat staring at him in silence while he rambled on.

“Some of your books here are rather good, though; but I wouldn’t waste time over them if I were you. There’s much more to be learned outside in the alleyways, you know. Your poetry’s right enough; but this Logic’s tricky. Words! It’s easier and just as good to evolve your own methods of reasoning. What rule does a Chinese use when he reads your thoughts in the finger game? He doesn’t know, and you don’t know; but he guesses just the same. The trouble with most of these writers is they don’t know enough. Take your economics . . . Menger and Marx at variance with each other . . . and both at variance with the facts, except as they relate to their own civilisation. Neither of them, I wager, knew anything of coolie labour. Men are essentially machines, machines that can be put to work; and it’s only superior intelligence that gives them a value above ordinary animals. An elephant can pile teak; a monkey can be trained to pick cotton; a mule on a treadmill can propel a boat . . . do they deserve all the produce of their labour? . . . Bally rot.”

I opened my eyes in astonishment. This was a strange man to be going about the country bashing Chinese. His glance, sparkling with feverish animation, fell upon me; and he paused and pondered.

“Well,” he resumed quizzically, “I suppose that does sound like rant, rather. Eh? But, damn it all, you can’t live long in the Orient without appreciating the real differences between caste, race and intellect; and you’re bound to admit that a really intellectual man of our own race and breeding is about the highest type of human development.”

“Oh, yes,” I said, like a complaisant schoolboy.

“Now here’s the way it shows,” he continued. “I ran a plantation for a man down near Kwala Lumpur several years ago, and I noticed the coolies didn’t use their tools with complete effect; so I showed them a new way. After that they called me a superman, a little god. Well, why shouldn’t they? Their fathers before them had used those tools in the self-same manner for untold generations, and I, who had never before even seen them, showed them a better way. Simply a matter of intelligence and initiative. So, of course, if those coolies represented the standard of manhood, I was above that standard, and therefore a superman. That’s logical, isn’t it?”

Like Plato’s pupil, I was “bound to admit it.”

“Well,” observed Stanley, stretching himself once more in his chair, “that just proves what a lie logic is.”

And then we both laughed unconstrainedly, and the cares of the humdrum world dropped from our shoulders. At that psychological moment the boy announced dinner.

The table was well laid, and the soup looked extremely tempting. For a while we ate in silence, Stanley making a light meal of it, even though he must have been poorly fed in the mountains. But what he ate, he ate with huge relish, and complimented me on its excellence.

“It’s a most extraordinary thing,” he remarked, “how talkative one gets after having been alone for a long time. Why, I’ve been gassing away here like a schoolgirl; and, as a matter of fact, I think I’m usually rather quiet.”

“It’s always that way,” I observed.

“Yes, I suppose so. You get crammed up with thoughts out in the hills, and then just as soon as you meet a white man you explode.”

I nodded. And then it dawned on me that I hadn't offered him a drink; and I was properly embarrassed, for I hadn't a drop in the compound.

"Not even a whiskey and soda," I confessed.

"Oh, well," said Stanley, "I don't believe I'd care for anything if you had it."

This satisfied me. But later on I noticed an unnatural flush on his cheek-bones; his eyes were glossy bright; and his hands trembled so that he spilled his coffee. He seemed to be on the verge of a bad fever, and I blamed myself for not having some brandy, at least. Afterward I gave him some quinine, which he took without protest.

Toward the end of the meal he began to talk freely again; and it was not long before he had me absolutely enthralled. My admiration was spontaneous and complete. The fact that he was virtually a discharged subordinate never even entered my head. At times he almost seemed like a distinguished guest. He was graceful, courteous, and spoke in a low even voice, except for an occasional querulous note. Whether due to incipient fever or reaction from months of enforced silence, his conversation was positively brilliant. I don't believe I have ever met a man with such a comprehensive knowledge of places and things—a knowledge that merely added nourishment to an already fecund intellect. From anecdotes and the experiences he told me, it was not difficult to form a sketchy idea of his whole life.

After leaving England he had gone to India; thence to South Africa and far up through Rhodesia—and this was in the old days. Afterward he had lived and worked in Burma, Malay, Java, Argentine, Japan, and God only knows where else. He had been a bank clerk; hunted for ivory; planted rubber; mined for tin; fought in a couple of small wars; and maintained an effervescent sort of existence in many other both adventurous and sedentary occupations. Having a well-trained mind and an observant eye, his experiences had naturally made him a brilliant, profound and forceful man. At least that was my impression of him.

There was something about him, however, that impressed me disagreeably, though not at all in the sense of aversion. It was a half-furtive expression that sometimes crept into his eyes—half furtive, half sad—the expression of an utterly spent man. I did not notice it particularly at first, or, if I did, it was with the thought that probably he was one of those unfortunate men who have studied and meditated to such ill purpose that all things seem trivial and life itself hopeless. As a matter of fact, though, later on he even elaborated a theology of his own, half Brahmin, half Christian, which sounded rather pretty and was quite hopeful; and in the heat of argument, or when elaborating some picturesque incident, the cloud was swept away, and a lively intelligence shone forth, sparkling with wit and understanding.

Suddenly I felt a cool cynicism. I said:

"Well, of course, if everybody spent his life knocking around, the world would go slam, wouldn't it? The average man must settle down. I suppose the home life is sufficient compensation for all he misses. What was *your* object, anyway?"

In an instant the animation was wiped from his face. For a second he looked at me with a baffled expression. He tried to speak, without formulating his thoughts; then, shrugging his shoulders with an expression of utter weariness, he let his hands drop open by his side.

"I don't know," he murmured unevenly. "I don't know. I suppose my idea was to see the world; and then settle down. . . . Well, I've seen the world; and I've tried . . . I've . . . Well, I can't settle down now." He plainly endeavoured to make his explanation humorous by laughing softly, but it only intensified the misery in his eyes.

*“For to admire and for to see,  
For to be’old the world so wide,  
It never done no good to me,  
But I can’t drop it if I tried.”*

After that we were silent. Then I asked what he intended doing in Shanghai. He didn’t know.

“All I want now,” he said shamefacedly, “is to find some place where I can bury myself . . . and write my book. I have no children; and I want to leave something behind. A book!” He evidently thought it necessary to apologise. “Of course that’s what every one wants to do, every one who’s ever read anything decent or seen life with its clothes off . . . to put his egotistical mark on paper, and try fool himself it will make him immortal. A book! A child of my brain!”

“The idea’s all right,” I said; “but there’s no lotos-eating in Shanghai. I’m afraid you’ll have to be more practical; Shanghai’s no place to be on the beach, you know. Still, hang it all, there’s no reason in the world why you should worry. When you get to Shanghai, go in and see Richards himself; tell him the whole story—straight; admit yourself in the wrong. Richards will play the game.”

Stanley got on his feet, and walked uncertainly up and down the room, nervously biting the end of his moustache, and fumbling with the buttons of his coat.

“I don’t know.” Then his fevered cheek flushed still redder. “I wonder when I’ll have another meal like ours to-night.”

“Oh, hang it!” I cried impatiently.

“A bottle of Worcester sauce and a rifle were all I needed in Rhodesia; and less than that in the Straits. But it’s bally hell to be hungry in a city. It’s not half so bad to starve in the open where people can’t see you, you know.”

“This is perfect rot, Stanley.”

“No damned fear. You see, I’ve been .

I jumped to my feet.

“Very well,” I said. “We’ll employ Rhodesian precautions.”

Taking his valise, I emptied it on the cot, carried it over to the provision closet, which I kept in my room against the pilferings of the servants, and proceeded to fill it up with tins and glass jars of vegetables, *pâtés*, preserves and biscuits. His clothing I placed in a soft reed basket. He watched me in silence, and when I had done, merely said: “Thanks, old man.” But, after a moment, quite irrelevantly, he asked my age. I told him.

Without bitterness, he said:

“I left Cambridge over fifteen years ago.”

It was late when we put out the lights; but we remained awake far into the night talking. I took the opportunity to tell him of my own plans for travel in far places; for I was younger then and haunted by dreams.

“Don’t be a fool,” he said tensely. “Get home out of this.” In another second he was apologising. Then he came over to my cot and thanked me for the night’s entertainment. “It’s meant more to me than you or any one else can tell. It’s been the only lucid interval in a nightmare of years. You’ve given me a chance to see the old ideals again . . . the old . . .” His voice trailed off; and he stumbled back to his couch, and flung himself down heavily, and lay there silent; while I remained stupidly blinking up at the ceiling, not knowing what on earth to say.

When I awoke in the morning, he was gone.

For three days, lacking other distraction, my memory dwelt upon Stanley. Then I forgot him in the press of my own affairs, for I also received a call from Shanghai, to discuss the opening of new territory; and a week later I was on my way to the metropolitan port. When I passed out through the gate at Hsuechowfu, I felt the oppressive weight of unseemly years upon my shoulders; but when I sprang out of the Nanking train, a day later at the West Shanghai station, into the fresh sunlight of a spring morning, and caught one whiff of violets in the moist air, I shed all sober thoughts as a snake sheds its winter skin.

That week in Shanghai was one of the happiest of my life. Trouble up country made it necessary to postpone the discussion of business, and almost all the time of day was my own. The flower stalls were filled with sweet-scented blossoms; the trees and shrubs along the Bund were bursting into many tints of jade; the warships of all nations, swaying lazily on the bosom of the tawny Whang Po, blossomed forth in fresh white summer coats of paint; the 'ricksha coolies cast aside their padded jackets and pounded along with a blithesome air; the song of the tramway gongs, the grunts of the motor cars, the "hi-hi-hi" of the mafoos, all seemed to take on a new significance—to sing and shout of happy endeavour, and joy of life.

At the close of one such pleasant day, I was standing on the balcony of my room in the hotel, staring dreamily across the roofs of the city at the great red eye of day, slowly winking into slumber. I breathed contentedly. The boy came quietly into the room and handed me a card: "Mr. R. Franklin Stanley."

Penned laboriously in the corner, as though by a palsied man, were the words, "Will you see me?"

At sight of the card I was overcome with a conflict of emotions, pleasure at again meeting Stanley, and mortification at not having looked him up as soon as I arrived in town. So full had my mind been with other more immediate concerns that I had not even inquired for him at the office; but now I realised that he must have been discharged or I should have heard of him.

"Why, of course," I exclaimed to the waiting boy. "Of course. Bring him up. And here, boy, touch a light to the grate—it's getting chilly."

I drew down the window blinds, and let the dancing flames light up the room; and placed a couple of chairs in the cosy glow. Then Stanley entered, wearing a lounge suit and carrying a cane.

I took him eagerly by the hand; but it wilted in my grasp like an empty glove; and suddenly he swayed perilously. I seized him by the arm.

"Here, sit down. . . . Good God, what is it, Stanley? What's the matter?"

He dropped limply into the chair with his cane between his knees, his eyes fixed on the leaping blaze, his face frightful, drawn, purple and twitching. The moustache was chewed into rags, and the lower lip hung pendulous and dripping. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, and struggled vainly for expression. For a moment I was too utterly overcome to know what to do, except to shake him gently by the shoulder. Suddenly his face lost its appearance of vacuity; his eyelids squeezed together; and his lips curled up in a grin. He cackled. I saw in an instant what was the matter with him.

He was stupefied, beastly drunk.

Involuntarily I stepped away from him. I was familiar enough with drunkenness, God knows; but the sight of Stanley slouching in his chair before the fire, cackling like a besotted loafer, all his fine sensibilities dulled, all his grand philosophy and expansive knowledge buried under a sickening load of drink, filled me with unutterable disgust.

It must have showed plainly in my face, for some flicker of sense in his befuddled brain perceived it. He became preternaturally morose and two tears rolled down his furrowed countenance, which enraged and sickened me; but I said never a word, simply stood there looking at him with revulsion, hardly believing it was the same man. After a while he arose unsteadily, studying the handle of his cane with alternate smiles and frowns.

“Salright, ol’ flick. . . . Shorry t’ disturb you. . . . Think I’m drunk, eh? Drunk, drunk, drunken lord ’f creation. . . . Marskee. . . . Going now . . .”

He groped for the handle of the door, lurched out into the hallway, and disappeared.

What devil’s impulse restrained me, I don’t know; but I let him stagger away without a word of advice, without an effort to sober him, without even a handshake.

This apparition rising before me in the midst of happy days dampened all my enthusiasm like a judge’s warning to a sarcastic witness. I spent many hours the next few days meditating on his case, wondering what had become of him, and feeling very much of a cad for not having tried in some way to assist him. I made an inquiry at the office, and one of the managers summed up his experience with him tersely:

“He came in here and sat down and stared at that waste-basket, slobbering all over the front of his coat, and rolling his head about as though he were searching for something. I thought he was going to have the D. T.’s right on the spot. The blighter was impossible. Why, he didn’t even report here until after he’d been in town three days.”

I protested that this was to be expected, that it is only natural for an up-country man to rip loose a bit when he gets in town.

“Why haven’t some of you taken him in hand and straightened him up?”

The manager spread out his hands with a gesture of despair.

“Look here, I’ve been a good sight longer in this part of the world than you. I know the man’s type. I tell you, he’s utterly impossible, that’s all.”

“But Stanley’s no fool.”

“Of course not. But there’s a limit that can’t be passed, no matter how bright a man may be. In fact, the brighter they are, the worse they become.”

So that ended it, so far as the Company was concerned.

I tried then to locate him in the hotels, but in the end I had to give it up. There was no trace of him.

Then, one day, just at tea time, he dropped in on me again. I was wary in my reception of him, for he’d been drinking again, and I struggled hard with an involuntary aversion; but my innate sympathy for him finally won me over.

I ordered tea, and he ate the biscuits hungrily, but drank nothing. He mumbled an apology for intruding.

“You know you’re welcome,” I said . . . “welcome as my own brother would be, if you’d only come sober.”

His head sank forward on his chest, but he said nothing. He fixed his eyes glassily on the flames, hypnotising himself like a crystal-gazer, the dilation and contraction of his pupils, and the haggard lines on his relaxed face, telling me all too plainly of the desperate thoughts that gnawed at his brain. He was no pleasant sight to me who had thought to grow fond of him.

But then as I watched him, with his mouth dropped open and the muscles of his face twitching involuntarily, he was so pathetically helpless—a really great mind humbled—that I began to feel shame for my prejudice, and only a great sorrow for his failing. A feeling of companionship came over me, and I think he must have sensed it, for he suddenly broke the silence with a

murmured remark about a book of verses he had picked up in my room at Hsuehfu. It had appealed to him.

Anxious to distract his thoughts from his present condition I made a few random remarks about poetry, though, as a matter of fact, the subject had never keenly interested me. In my mind's eye I always see the poet scratching down rhyming words on the edge of a piece of paper. There's too much jingle and never enough sincerity to please me.

"I know some good poetry," mumbled Stanley, frowning heavily at the fire. "*Good* poetry. Better 'n anything y' ever read."

And then he began to wave his hand slowly about with a vague gesture, mumbling to himself; and I sat bolt upright, afraid to breathe for a moment, for I could have sworn he had them.

A piece of cannel coal collapsed into a hundred glowing embers, the little flames dancing about and leaping up the chimney with a lively crackling. Stanley lurched forward until his face flared with reflected fire.

All his body was bathed in shadow save his tormented countenance and a lean twisted hand which he thrust out toward the coals, like the hand of a lost soul clutching at vanished ideals. He began to mumble, incoherently at first, his eyes bulging with aching intensity, as though straining to visualise some vague memory or imagined phantom. To begin with I was thrilled at the mere sight of him, but as his words took form I sat there with my eyes fixed on him and listened breathlessly. He spoke in broken meters, but it was such poetry as I had never heard before.

The whole business seemed like an unpremeditated séance, Stanley the medium for two spirits, a riven soul from hell and an angel of light. The words were words of vitriol, of tinkling golden instruments, of hissing adders, of gently stirring streams. At first it seemed like the imagery of a gifted maniac, crude, appalling, despairing, but through the tumult of discordant pain came flashes of true inspiration. When his words were vague, his contracted face interpreted them. Then he began groping painfully through darkened space for something once familiar and very dear. It seemed that if he could grasp that essential idea, it would clear his brain, revive his old idealism. In the intensity of my interest I was lost to all surroundings; until suddenly the room was bathed in white light.

The room-boy had turned on the electric switch.

"Master wantchee light?"

I got dazedly to my feet, rubbing my eyes, as though awakening from a beautiful yet sinister dream.

"Confound you," I grumbled. "I suppose so. Now, get out." Then, turning to Stanley, I said:

"That's great. Who wrote it?"

He smiled wanly.

"I wrote it. . . . I think I must have been drunk or mad."

As I recall the scene now I can understand that it probably was not nearly so good as I supposed. It was, perhaps, only the aptness of it that made it seem so great; but then, I am no critic, and, God's truth, I was strangely stirred. However, I was wise enough not to over-praise it.

The interruption seemed to have killed Stanley's spirit. He sat gazing miserably into the fire. I tried to arouse him; but after a while he said:

"You remember Kipling's lost legion . . . the tale of the men who went before? . . . Well, I'm of that legion . . . a poor 'black sheep that's gone astray . . . baa! baa!'"

He tried to leave then without another word; but I held him and pleaded with him, and damned him like an erring brother, conjuring up bus manhood, reviving his ideals. . . .

“Ideals.”

He tried to laugh cynically.

But I flattered myself afterward that I had brought back the love of life to his heart, and stirred the zest of battle in his soul. Then I loaned him some money, gave him cards to a number of business houses, and sent him away. These were my concessions to conscience, but I continued to worry about him for several days afterward.

There was no reason in the world why he should not be of value to a good firm, always provided he kept sober; and there was no reason I could see why he could not keep sober. A man with a small mind might not have sufficient will to combat the inclination to drink, but Stanley in his sober moments certainly realised his degradation. . . . I could tell by the lines of mental suffering on his face . . . and that, I thought, ought to check him up.

At all events I felt optimistic; and when next I met him his changed mood seemed to confirm my hopes. In the first place he was sober. Then, although I could just perceive that he was covering up a profound gravity, his tone was light, almost bantering, but with a strong flavour of cynicism about it. “I’m sorry to bother you again,” he said by way of opening, slapping his hands together, and rubbing his palms with the air of a man who has just put through a good bit of business. “In fact I wouldn’t have come here at all if I hadn’t thought you were interested. You see, you have the proud distinction of being the only friend I possess in the Orient. Something to boast of, eh?”

He laughed, almost cheerfully.

“But don’t let it worry you, because I’m not going to impose on you again. You see, I’ve found a way out. . . .”

“Fine!” I cried. “Great! What are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

I looked blank, and he grinned feebly.

“It’s an easy job . . . nothing to do except look for trouble, only popping when the pan is hot. I’m only a failure at anything else . . . no will power, no energy, no stomach. . .”

I jumped to my feet.

“For Heaven’s sake, Stanley . . .”

“Please don’t argue! Please!” he protested peevishly. “I’m fed up with moral dissertations. Besides I ought to know what I’m talking about; I’ve worked the whole bally thing out. I tried to scoop myself the other day, and I didn’t have the nerve to finish it decently. Made a mess of it.”

He turned his head and showed me a nasty gash behind his ear, rubbing his hand gently over it, with the ruminative air of a man feeling a second day’s growth of beard.

“Rotten,” he mused. “Rotten. And I didn’t have the nerve to try again.”

What could I say? I opened my lips several times to speak; but I could think of nothing.

“Oh, well,” he said quite cheerfully, rubbing his hands briskly together again, “if you can’t do it one way, you can do it another. Might as well have a run for your money too. . . . About the cards you gave me. Thanks awf’ly, but I was drunk when I presented them, so of course there was nothing doing.”

“Well, what *are* you going to do?” I demanded.

“I’ll tell you. First I tried your people, and failed; then I tried the dirk, and made a bad job of that . . . couldn’t live respectably, and couldn’t die quietly. Then things began to look serious. I didn’t know *what* I was going to do. I was feeling rather fed up with the whole affair when I happened to see the French consul go by in his carriage. That gave me an idea.

I called on him; and to-morrow I’m leaving for Saigon.”

“Saigon? What in the world will you do in Saigon? And how are you going to get there?”

He placed his trembling hand on his chest, and bowed satirically.

“In me you see a French legionary . . . soldier of France, offering his life in the forefront of battle for eleven sous and a handful of onions per diem . . . accoutrements, simple . . . ammunition, ad lib.”

The thought flashed through my head: “By Jove, it’s the best place for him.”

“Fine!” he continued mockingly. “Great! The grandest reward for my noblest achievement will be a grave to myself . . . instead of being a unit on a community pyre . . . and three honorific volleys over my slumbering carcass. A great ending, eh? Well, anyway, in another incarnation I may have a better chance. Unless I come out a wood-tick or a bedbug or something like that.”

All of a sudden a fit of laughter came over him, and he doubled up, coughing and spluttering.

I conjured up another picture then . . . a picture of Stanley in the Legion, virtually a prisoner for life, fighting his way through the reeking jungle or over blistering sands; wracked on a bed of fever under a shower of poisoned darts; or cursing his useless sand-choked rifle, and trying desperately to fend the dervish’s lance that finally impales him. And all to what end? I looked at Stanley, struggling with his unseemly mirth. I thought of the tragic waste of it all. But suddenly it came to me that this was the only chance left him . . . death or glory . . . or, at least, in the end to go down to his grave without dishonour.

At first I played the hypocrite, and protested, feebly. In another moment, however, I was eagerly supporting his decision. And then we talked the whole thing over.

It was not a flippant boyish conversation, rendered picturesque by lying imaginations; for I think we both fully realised that we were sitting at the funeral of a man’s ambitions. We were conspirators deliberately plunging a fine mind into oblivion, not merely annihilating it; but destroying it in such a manner that not even a ripple would betray its passing.

Still we had a mind to be pleasant over the affair, as one who, shaming to weep at pathos, strengthens himself by conjuring up his sense of the ridiculous. So when our conversation drew to a natural conclusion we still had an appearance of light-heartedness. But suddenly a silence fell upon us, and when he rose to go, I said nothing but walked slowly with him to the elevator, my hand upon his shoulder.

He chuckled quite unexpectedly.

“A dying man may have his last desire in peace,” he said, “and to-night, by the sacred tooth of Siva, I’m going to get gloriously drunk.”

To this I had nothing to say. He was already beyond the pale.

It was the evening hour. We heard the elevator descending through the gloom to our level. We shook hands solemnly. The elevator came to a stop; the mummy-faced Chinese boy opened the gate with a clang; and Stanley stepped in. At that moment I made the most unfortunate remark that has ever come to my lips:

“Don’t lose your nerve, old man. . . . And may it be glory! Remember you haven’t got a thing to lose. It’s not as though you were leaving some one behind.” . . . The gate closed and the elevator was about to drop. . . . “That is, you know, no one to give the thing the air of tragedy. . . . *I mean to say, there was no woman, for instance!* . . .” The words faltered on my lips.

He had turned swiftly toward me, raising his hands as though to ward off a blow. His face was ashen and contorted, like that of a cholera victim. The cage was dropping, but through the cell-like mesh I could still see him clearly.

“Oh, my God,” he said with misery. “My God, that’s just it. There . . .”

But I couldn't catch the last words, for his face fell forward into his clutching hands, while the Chinese boy glanced amusedly at him . . . and he was suddenly swallowed in the black maw of the shaft.

Thus he had dropped out of my life, and apparently into oblivion; but we hadn't reckoned on the passion of nations . . . on a storm that stirred up the depths.

What my ambitions were in those days I am ashamed to say; but here I was in Aden, rather lonely despite my well-meaning messmates, and feeling strangely useless and out of it all. And Stanley, about whom I used to wonder if that fine brain had become food for the black vulture or the little white ant. . . .

"Gad, this is good stuff," said Eric. "Listen."

Two of our messmates, absorbed in their own reading, looked up impatiently.

"Carry on," I urged.

"No," he said, tossing me the paper, and yawning. "These blasé brutes wouldn't appreciate it . . . Read it yourself."

So I read the last chapter in the epic tale of that romantic crew—the Foreign Legion—how they captured an important fort in the Bois Sabot, a salient that menaced the French lines . . . a horseshoe-shaped affair behind a field of barbed wire that could be swept by shells and enfiladed by machine guns. They were two days fighting their way for a position from which to assault. And on the last day as they stood in a wood, drenched with rain and wracked by shells, a fifth of their men were down even before they debouched for the assault. When they got into the open it must have been hell.

They were smashed to pieces. When a man went down his body twitched and rolled under the blast of lead, like a mole in a hail-storm. Miniature craters burst open at their feet, and, falling, they were buried with earth by the next explosion. None but the Legion could have done it. They actually reached the entanglements, and smashed and tore their way through. But when the path was cleared, they were all down, all except one man. He alone of all his battalion got through, and reached the first trench before he fell, with a fresh battalion, unhindered by entanglements, charging after him. When I finished the article I closed my eyes and saw Stanley once more, peering into the shadows of the future, searching for some lost ideal, believing that his end would be a futile waste. And I wondered dully of the woman whose name had faltered on his lips. . . . I should like to have told her that he was that last man to fall, as I like to believe, face forward, giving his life for an ideal, after all, within the entanglements of the fort in the Bois Sabot.

"Soldiers of the Legion," said General Deligny, fifty years ago, "the folds of your flag are not broad enough to hold your claims to glory."