

TONTON

By A. Cheneviere

There are men who seem born to be soldiers. They have the face, the bearing, the gesture, the quality of mind. But there are others who have been forced to become so, in spite of themselves and of the rebellion of reason and the heart, through a rash deed, a disappointment in love, or simply because their destiny demanded it, being sons of soldiers and gentlemen. Such is the case of my friend Captain Robert de X----. And I said to him one summer evening, under the great trees of his terrace, which is washed by the green and sluggish Marne:

"Yes, old fellow, you are sensitive. What the deuce would you have done on a campaign where you were obliged to shoot, to strike down with a sabre and to kill? And then, too, you have never fought except against the Arabs, and that is quite another thing."

He smiled, a little sadly. His handsome mouth, with its blond mustache, was almost like that of a youth. His blue eyes were dreamy for an instant, then little by little he began to confide to me his thought, his recollections and all that was mystic and poetic in his soldier's heart.

"You know we are soldiers in my family. We have a marshal of France and two officers who died on the field of honor. I have perhaps obeyed a law of heredity. I believe rather that my imagination has carried me away. I saw war through my reveries of epic poetry. In my fancy I dwelt only upon the intoxication of victory, the triumphant flourish of trumpets and women throwing flowers to the victor. And then I loved the sonorous words of the great captains, the dramatic representations of martial glory. My father was in the third regiment of zouaves, the one which was hewn in pieces at Reichshofen, in the Niedervalde, and which in 1859 at Palestro, made that famous charge

against the Austrians and hurled them into the great canal. It was superb; without them the Italian divisions would have been lost. Victor Emmanuel marched with the zouaves. After this affair, while still deeply moved, not by fear but with admiration for this regiment of demons and heroes, he embraced their old colonel and declared that he would be proud, were he not a king, to join the regiment. Then the zouaves acclaimed him corporal of the Third. And for a long time on the anniversary festival of St. Palestro, when the roll was called, they shouted 'Corporal of the first squad, in the first company of the first battalion, Victor Emmanuel,' and a rough old sergeant solemnly responded: 'Sent as long into Italy.'

"That is the way my father talked to us, and by these recitals, a soldier was made of a dreamy child. But later, what a disillusion! Where is the poetry of battle? I have never made any campaign except in Africa, but that has been enough for me. And I believe the army surgeon is right, who said to me one day: 'If instantaneous photographs could be taken after a battle, and millions of copies made and scattered through the world, there would be no more war. The people would refuse to take part in it.'

"Africa, yes, I have suffered there. On one occasion I was sent to the south, six hundred kilometres from Oran, beyond the oasis of Fignig, to destroy a tribe of rebels.... On this expedition we had a pretty serious affair with a military chief of the great desert, called Bon-Arredji. We killed nearly all of the tribe, and seized nearly fifteen hundred sheep; in short, it was a complete success. We also captured the wives and children of the chief. A dreadful thing happened at that time, under my very eyes! A woman was fleeing, pursued by a black mounted soldier. She turned around and shot at him with a revolver. The horse-soldier was furious, and struck her down with one stroke of his sabre. I did not have the time to interfere. I dismounted from my horse to take the woman up. She was dead, and almost decapitated. I uttered not one word of reproach to the Turkish soldier, who smiled fiercely, and turned back.

"I placed the poor body sadly on the sand, and was going to remount my horse, when I perceived, a few steps back, behind a thicket, a little girl five or six years old. I recognized at once that she was a Touareg, of white race, notwithstanding her tawny color. I approached her. Perhaps she was not afraid of me, because I was white like herself. I took her on the saddle with me, without resistance on her part, and returned slowly to the place where we were to camp for the night. I expected to place her under the care of the women whom we had taken prisoners, and were carrying away with us. But all refused, saying that she was a vile little Touareg, belonging to a race which carries misfortune with it and brings forth only traitors.

"I was greatly embarrassed. I would not abandon the child.... I felt somewhat responsible for the crime, having been one of those who had directed the massacre. I had made an orphan! I must take her part. One of the prisoners of the band had said to me (I understand a little of the gibberish of these people) that if I left the little one to these women they would kill her because she was the daughter of a Touareg, whom the chief had preferred to them, and that they hated the petted, spoiled child, whom he had given rich clothes and jewels. What was to be done?

"I had a wide-awake orderly, a certain Michel of Batignolles. I called him and said to him: 'Take care of the little one.' 'Very well, Captain, I will take her in charge.' He then petted the child, made her sociable, and led her away with him, and two hours later he had manufactured a little cradle for her out of biscuit boxes which are used on the march for making coffins. In the evening Michel put her to bed in it. He had christened her 'Tonton,' an abbreviation of Touareg. In the morning the cradle was bound on an ass, and behold Tonton following the column with the baggage, in the convoy of the rear guard, under the indulgent eye of Michel.

"This lasted for days and weeks. In the evening at the halting place, Tonton was brought into my tent, with the goat, which furnished her the greater part of her meals, and her inseparable friend, a large chameleon, captured by Michel, and responding or not responding to the name of Achilles.

"Ah, well! old fellow, you may believe me or not; but it gave me pleasure to see the little one sleeping in her cradle, during the short night full of alarm, when I felt the weariness of living, the dull sadness of seeing my companions dying, one by one, leaving the caravan; the enervation of the perpetual state of alertness, always attacking or being attacked, for weeks and months. I, with the gentle instincts of a civilized man, was forced to order the beheading of spies and traitors, the binding of women in chains and the kidnapping of children, to raid the herds, to make of myself an Attila. And this had to be done without a moment of wavering, and I the cold and gentle Celt, whom you know, remained there, under the scorching African sun. Then what repose of soul, what strange meditations were mine, when free at last, at night, in my sombre tent, around which death might be prowling, I could watch the little Touareg, saved by me, sleeping in her cradle by the side of her chameleon lizard. Ridiculous, is it not? But, go there and lead the life of a brute, of a plunderer and assassin, and you will see how at times your civilized imagination will wander away to take refuge from itself.

"I could have rid myself of Tonton. In an oasis we met some rebels, bearing a flag of truce, and exchanged the women for guns and ammunition. I kept the little one, notwithstanding the five months of march we must make, before returning to Tlemcen. She had grown gentle, was inclined to be mischievous, but was yielding and almost affectionate with me. She ate with the rest, never wanting to sit down, but running from one to another around the table. She had proud little manners, as if she knew herself to be a daughter of the chief's favorite, obeying only the officers and treating Michel with an amusing scorn. All this was to have a sad ending. One day I did not find the

chameleon in the cradle, though I remembered to have seen it there the evening before. I had even taken it in my hands and caressed it before Tonton, who had just gone to bed. Then I had given it back to her and gone out. Accordingly I questioned her. She took me by the hand, and leading me to the camp fire, showed me the charred skeleton of the chameleon, explaining to me, as best she could, that she had thrown it in the fire, because I had petted it! Oh! women! women! And she gave a horrible imitation of the lizard, writhing in the midst of the flames, and she smiled with delighted eyes. I was indignant. I seized her by the arm, shook her a little, and finished by boxing her ears.

"My dear fellow, from that day she appeared not to know me. Tonton and I sulked; we were angry. However, one morning, as I felt the sun was going to be terrible, I went myself to the baggage before the loading for departure, and arranged a sheltering awning over the cradle. Then to make peace, I embraced my little friend. But as soon as we were on the march, she furiously tore off the canvas with which I had covered the cradle. Michel put it all in place again, and there was a new revolt. In short, it was necessary to yield because she wanted to be able to lean outside of her box, under the fiery sun, to look at the head of the column, of which I had the command. I saw this on arriving at the resting place. Then Michel brought her under my tent. She had not yet fallen asleep, but followed with her eyes all of my movements, with a grave air, without a smile, or gleam of mischief.

"She refused to eat and drink; the next day she was ill, with sunken eyes and body burning with fever. When the major wished to give her medicine she refused to take it and ground her teeth together to keep from swallowing.

"There remained still six days' march before arriving at Oran. I wanted to give her into the care of the nuns. She died before I could do so, very suddenly, with a severe attack of meningitis. She never

wanted to see me again. She was buried under a clump of African shrubs near Geryville, in her little campaign cradle. And do you know what was found in her cradle? The charred skeleton of the poor chameleon, which had been the indirect cause of her death. Before leaving the bivouac, where she had committed her crime, she had picked it out of the glowing embers, and brought it into the cradle, and that is why her little fingers were burned. Since the beginning of the meningitis the major had never been able to explain the cause of these burns."

Robert was silent for an instant, then murmured: "Poor little one! I feel remorseful. If I had not given her that blow.... who knows?... she would perhaps be living still...."

"My story is sad, is it not? Ah, well, it is still the sweetest of my African memories. War is beautiful! Eh?"

And Robert shrugged his shoulders....