

# **THE DESERT ISLANDER**

Stella Benson

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# THE DESERT ISLANDER

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CONSTANTINE hopefully followed the Chinese servant through the unknown house. He felt hopeful of success in his plan of begging this Englishman for help, for he knew that an Englishman, alone among people of a different colour (as this Englishman was alone in this South China town), treated the helping of stray white men almost as part of the White Man's Burden. But even without his claim of one lonely white man upon another, Constantine would have felt hopeful. He knew himself to be a man of compelling manner in spite of his ugly, too long face, and his ugly, too short legs.

As Constantine stumped in on his hobnailed soles, Mr. White who was evidently not a very tactful man – said, "Oh, are you another deserter from the Foreign Legion?"

"I am Constantine Andreievitch Soloviev," said Constantine, surprised. He spoke and understood English almost perfectly (his mother had been English), yet he could not remember ever having heard the word another applied to himself. In fact it did not – could not possibly – so apply. There was only one of him, he knew.

Of course, in a way there was some sense in what this stupid Englishman said. Constantine had certainly been a légionnaire in Tonkin up till last Thursday – his narrow pipe-clayed helmet, stiff khaki greatcoat, shabby drill uniform, puttees, brass buttons, and inflexible boots were all the property of the French Government. But the core – the pearl inside this vulgar, horny shell – was Constantine Andreievitch Soloviev. That made all the difference.

Constantine saw that he must take this Didymus of an Englishman in hand at once and tell him a few exciting stories about his dangerous adventures between the Tonkin border and this Chinese city. Snakes, tigers, love-crazed Chinese princesses and brigands passed rapidly through his mind, and he chose the last, because he had previously planned several impressive things to do if he should be attacked by brigands. So now, though he had not actually met a brigand, those plans would come in useful. Constantine intended to write his autobiography some day when he should have married a rich wife and settled down. Not only did his actual life seem to him a very rare one but, also, lives were so interesting to make up.

Constantine was a desert islander – a spiritual Robinson Crusoe. He made up everything himself and he wasted nothing. Robinson Crusoe was his favourite book – in fact, almost the only book he had ever read – and he was proud to be, like his hero, a desert islander. He actually preferred clothing his spirit in the skins of wild thoughts that had been the prey of his wits and sheltering it from the world's weather in a leaky hut of his brain's own contriving, to enjoying the good tailoring and housing that dwellers on the mainland call experience and education. He enjoyed being barbarous, he enjoyed living alone on his island, accepting nothing, imitating nothing, believing nothing, adapting himself to nothing – implacably home-made. Even his tangible possessions were those of a marooned man rather than of a civilized citizen of this well-furnished world. At this moment his only luggage was a balalaika that he had made himself out of cigar-boxes, and to this he sang songs of his own composition – very imperfect songs. He would not have claimed that either his songs or his instrument were better than the songs and instruments made by song-makers and balalaika-makers; they were, however, much more rapturously his than any acquired music could have been and, indeed, in this as in almost all things, it simply never occurred to him to take rather than make. There was no mainland on the horizon of his desert island.

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"I am not a beggar," said Constantine. "Until yesterday I had sixty piastres which I had saved by many sacrifices during my service in the Legion. But yesterday, passing through a dark forest of pines in the twilight, about twenty versts from here, I met "

"You met a band of brigands," said Mr. White. "Yes, I know you all say that."

Constantine stared at him. He had not lived, a desert islander, in a crowded and over-civilized world without meeting many rebuffs, so this one did not surprise him did not even offend him. On the contrary, for a minute he almost loved the uncompromising Mr. White, as a sportsman almost loves the chamois on a peculiarly inaccessible crag. This was a friend worth a good deal of trouble to secure, Constantine saw. He realized at once that the desert islander's line here was to discard the brigands and to discard noble independence.

"Very well then," said Constantine. I did not meet brigands. I am a beggar. I started without a penny and I still have no penny. I hope you will give me something. That is why I have come." He paused, drawing long pleased breaths through his large nose. This, he felt, was a distinctly self-made line of talk; it set him apart from all previous deserting légionnaires.

Mr. White evidently thought so too. He gave a short grunting laugh. "That's better," he said.

"These English," thought Constantine lovingly. "They are the next best thing to being originals, for they admire originals." "I like you," he added extravagantly, aloud. "I like the English. I am so glad I found an Englishman to beg of instead of an American though an American would have been much richer than you are, I expect. Still, to a beggar a little is enough. I dislike Americans; I dislike their women's wet finger-nails."

"Wet finger-nails?" exclaimed Mr. White. "Oh, you mean their manicure polishes. Yes ... they do always have wet finger-nails ... ha, ha ... so they do. I should never have thought of that myself."

"Of course not," said Constantine. genuinely surprised. "I thought of it. Why should you have thought of it?" After a moment he added, I am not a gramophone."

Mr. White thought that he had said, "Have you got a gramophone?" and replied at once with some pleasure, "Yes, I have it is a very precious companion. Are you musical? But of course you are, being Russian. I should be very lonely without my daily ration of Chopin. Would you like some music while the servants are getting you something to eat?"

"I should like some music," said Constantine, "but I should not like to hear a gramophone. I will play you some music some unique and only music on a unique and only instrument."

"Thank you very much," said Mr. White, peering doubtfully through his glasses at the cigar-box balalaika. "What good English you speak," he added, trying to divert his guest's attention from his musical purpose. "But all Russians, of course, are wonderful linguists."

"I will play you my music," said Constantine. "But first I must tell you that I do not like you to say to me, 'Being Russian you are musical' or 'All Russians speak good English.' To me it seems so stupid to see me as one of many."

"Each one of us is one of many," sighed Mr. White patiently.

"You, perhaps but I, not," said Constantine. "When you notice my English words instead of my thoughts it seems to me that you are listening wrongly you are listening to sounds only, in the same way as you listen to your senseless gramophone "

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"But you haven't heard my gramophone," interrupted Mr. White, stung on his darling's behalf.

"What does it matter what sounds a man makes what words he uses? Words are common to all men; thoughts belong to one man only."

Mr. White considered telling his guest to go to hell, but he said instead, "You're quite a philosopher, aren't you?"

"I am not quite an anything," said Constantine abruptly. "I am me. All people who like Chopin also say, 'You're quite a philosopher.'"

"Now you're generalizing, yourself," said Mr. White, clinging to his good temper. "Exactly what you've just complained of my doing."

"Some people are general," said Constantine. "Now I will play you my music, and you will admit that it is not one of many musics."

He sang a song with Russian words which Mr. White did not understand. As a matter of fact, such was Constantine's horror of imitating that the words of his song were just a list of the names of the diseases of horses, learned while Constantine was a veterinary surgeon in the Ukraine. His voice was certainly peculiar to himself; it was hoarse so hoarse that one felt as if a light cough or a discreet blowing of that long nose would clear the hoarseness away; it was veiled, as though heard from behind an intervening stillness; yet with all its hoarseness and unsonorousness, it was flexible, alive, and exciting. His instrument had the same quality of quiet ugliness and oddity; it was almost enchanting. It was as if an animal say, a goat had found a way to control its voice into a crude goblin concord.

"That's my music," said Constantine. "Do you like it?"

"Frankly," said Mr. White, "I prefer Chopin."

"On the gramophone?"

"On the gramophone."

"Yet one is a thing you never heard before and will never hear again and the other is a machine that makes the same sound for millions."

"I don't care."

Constantine chewed his upper lip for a minute, thinking this over. Then he shook himself. "Nevertheless, I like you," he said insolently. "You are almost a person. Would you like me to tell you about my life, or would you rather I explained to you my idea about Zigzags?"

"I would rather see you eat a good meal," said Mr. White, roused to a certain cordiality as almost all Anglo-Saxons are by the opportunity of dispensing food and drink.

"I can tell you my Zigzag idea while I eat," said Constantine, leading the way towards the table at the other end of the room. "Are you not eating too?"

"I'm not in the habit of eating a meat meal at ten o'clock at night."

"Is 'not being in the habit' a reason for not doing it now?"

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"To me it is."

"Oh oh oh I wish I were like you," said Constantine vehemently. "It is so tiring being me having no guide. I do like you."

"Help yourself to spinach," said Mr. White crossly.

"Now shall I tell you my Zigzag idea?"

"If you can eat as well as talk."

Constantine was exceedingly hungry; he bent low over his plate, though he sat sideways to the table, facing Mr. White, ready to launch a frontal attack of talk. His mouth was too full for a moment to allow him to begin to speak, but quick, agonized glances out of his black eyes implored his host to be silent till his lips should be ready. "You know," he said, swallowing hurriedly, "I always think of a zigzag as going downwards. I draw it in the air, so ... a straight honest line, then see a diagonal subtle line cuts the air away from under it so ... Do you see what I mean? I will call the zig a to, and the zag a from. Now "

"Why is one of your legs fatter than the other?" asked Mr. White.

"It is bandaged. Now, I think of this zigzag as a diagram of human minds. Always human minds are zigs or zags a to or a from the brave zig is straight, so ... the cleverer, crueller zag cuts away below. So are men's "

"But why is it bandaged?"

"It was kicked by a horse. Well, so are men's understandings. Here I draw the simple, faithful understanding and here zag the easy, clever understanding that sees through the simple faith. Now below that see zig once more the wise, the serene, and now a zag contradicts once more; this is the cynic who knows all answers to serenity. Then below, once more "

"May I see your leg?" asked Mr. White. "I was in an ambulance unit during the war."

"Oh, what is this talk of legs?" cried Constantine. "Legs are all the same; they belong to millions. All legs are made of blood and bone and muscle all vulgar things. Your ambulance cuts off legs, mends legs, fits bones together, corks up blood. It treats men like bundles of bones and blood. This is so dull. Bodies are so dull. Minds are the only onliness in men."

"Yes," said Mr. White. "But minds have to have legs to walk about on. Let me see your leg."

"Very well, then, let us talk of legs. We have at least legs in common, you and I."

"Hadn't you got more sense than to put such a dirty rag round an open wound?"

"It is not dirty; it is simply of a grey colour. I washed it in a rice field." Constantine spoke in a muffled voice from somewhere near his knee-cap, for he was now bent double, wholeheartedly interested in his leg. "I washed the wound too, and three boils which are behind my knee. This blackness is not dirt; it is a blackness belonging to the injury."

Mr. White said nothing, but he rose to his feet as though he had heard a call. Constantine, leaving his puttee in limp coils about his foot like a dead snake, went on eating. He began to talk again about the zigzag while he stuffed food into his mouth, but he stopped talking soon, for Mr. White was walking up and down the long room

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and not pretending to listen. Constantine, watching his host restively pacing the far end of the room, imagined that he himself perhaps smelled disagreeable, for this was a constant fear of his that his body should play his rare personality this horrid trick. "What is the matter?" he asked anxiously, with a shamed look. "Why are you so far?"

Mr. White's lazy, mild manner was quite changed. His voice seemed to burst out of seething irritation. "It's a damn nuisance just now. It couldn't happen at a worse time. I've a great deal of work to do and this fighting all over the province makes a journey so dam "

"What is so dam?" asked Constantine, his bewilderment affecting his English.

"I'll tell you what," said Mr. White, standing in front of Constantine with his feet wide apart and speaking in an angry voice. "You're going to bed now in my attic, and to-morrow at daylight you're going to be waked up and driven down in my car, by me (damn it!) to Lao-chow, to the hospital a two days' drive three hundred miles—over the worst roads you ever saw."

Constantine's heart gave a sickening lurch. "Why to hospital? You think my leg is dangerous?"

"If I know anything of legs," said Mr. White rather brutally, "the doctor won't let you keep that one an hour longer than he has to."

Constantine's mouth began instantly to tremble so much that he could scarcely speak. He thought, "I shall die I shall die like this of a stupid black leg this valuable lonely me will die."

He glared at Mr. White, hungry for consolation. "He isn't valuable he's one of many ... of course he could easily be brave."

Mr. White, once more indolent and indifferent, led the little Russian to the attic and left him there. As soon as Constantine saw the white sheets neatly folded back, the pleasant blue rugs squarely set upon the floor, the open wardrobe fringed with hangers, he doubted whether, after all, he did value himself so much. For in this neat room he felt betrayed by this body of his this unwashed, unshaven, tired body, encased in coarse dirty clothes, propped on an offensive, festering leg. He decided to take all his clothes off, even though he had no other garment with him to put on; he would feel more appropriate to the shiny linen in his own shiny skin, he thought. He would have washed, but his attention was diverted as he pulled his clothes off by the wound on his leg. Though it was not very painful, it made him nearly sick with disgust now. Every nerve in his body seemed on tiptoe, alert to feel agony, as he studied the wound. He saw that a new sore place was beginning, well above the knee. With only his shirt on, he rushed downstairs, and in at the only lighted doorway. "Look look," he cried. "A new sore place.... Does this mean the danger is greater even than we thought?"

Mr. White, in neat blue—and—white pyjamas, was carefully pressing a tie in a tie—press. Constantine had never felt so far away from a human being in his life as he felt on seeing the tie—press, those pyjamas, those monogrammed silver brushes, that elastic apparatus for reducing exercises that hung upon the door.

"Oh, go to bed," said Mr. White irascibly. "For God's sake, show a little sense."

Constantine was back in his attic before he thought, "I ought to have said, 'For God's sake, show a little nonsense yourself.' Sense is so vulgar."

Sense, however, was to drive him three hundred miles to safety, next day.

All night the exhausted Constantine, sleeping only for a few minutes at a time, dreamed trivial, broken dreams about establishing his own superiority, finding) for instance, that he had after all managed to bring with him a

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suitcase full of clean, fashionable clothes, or noticing that his host was wearing a filthy bandage round his neck instead of a tie.

Constantine was asleep when Mr. White, fully dressed, woke him next morning. A clear, steely light was slanting in at the window. Constantine was always fully conscious at the second of waking, and he was immediately horrified to see Mr. White looking expressionlessly at the disorderly heap of dirty clothes that he had thrown in disgust on the floor the night before. Trying to divert his host's attention, Constantine put on a merry and courageous manner. "Well, how is the weather for our motor-car jaunt?"

"It could hardly be worse," said Mr. White placidly. "Sheets of rain. God knows what the roads will be like."

"Well, we are lucky to have roads at all, in this benighted China."

"I don't know about that. If there weren't any roads we shouldn't be setting off on this beastly trip."

"I shall be ready in two jiffies," said Constantine, springing naked out of bed and shuffling his dreadful clothes out of Mr. White's sight. "But just tell me," he added as his host went through the door, "why do you drive three hundred miles on a horrible wet day just to take a perfect stranger a beggar too to hospital?" (He thought, "Now he must say something showing that he recognizes my value.")

"Because I can't cut off your leg myself," said Mr. White gloomily. Constantine did not press his question because this new reference to the Cutting off of legs set his nerves jangling again; his hands trembled so that he could scarcely button his clothes. Service in the Foreign Legion, though it was certainly no suitable adventure for a rare and sensitive man, had never obliged him to face anything more frightening than non-appreciation, coarse food, and stupid treatment. None of these things could humiliate him on the contrary, all confirmed him in his persuasion of his own value. Only the thought of being at the mercy of his body could humiliate the excited and glowing spirit of Constantine. Death was the final, most loathsome triumph of the body; death meant dumbness and decay yet even death he could have faced courageously could he have been flattered to its very brink.

The car, a ramshackle Ford, stood in the rain on the bald gravel of the compound, as Constantine, white with excitement, limped out through the front door. His limp, though not consciously assumed, had developed only since last night. His whole leg now felt dangerous, its skin shrinking and tingling. Constantine looked into the car. In the back seat sat Mr. White's coolie, clasping a conspicuously neat little white canvas kit-bag with leather straps. The kit-bag held Constantine's eye and attacked his self-respect as the tie-press had attacked and haunted him the night before. Every one of his host's possessions was like a perfectly well-balanced, indisputable statement in a world of fevered conjecture. "And a camp-bed so nicely rolled," said Constantine, leaning into the car, fascinated and humiliated. "But only one...."

"I have only one," said Mr. White.

"And you are bringing it for me?" said Constantine, looking at him ardently, overjoyed at this tribute.

"I am bringing it for myself," said Mr. White with his unamused and short-sighted smile. "I am assuming that a légionnaire is used to sleeping rough. I'm not. I'm rather fixed in my habits and I have a horror of the arrangements in Chinese inns."

"He is morally brave," thought Constantine, though, for the first time, it occurred to him how satisfactory it would be to slap his host's face. "A man less brave would have changed his plans about the camp-bed at once and said, "For you, my dear man, of course why not?" Constantine chattered nervously as he took his seat in the car next to his host, the driver. "I feel such admiration for a man who can drive a motor-car. I adore the machine when it does not like the gramophone trespass on matters outside its sphere. The machine's sphere is space, you see

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it controls space and that is so admirable even when the machine is so very unimpressive as this one. Mr. White, your motor-car is very unimpressive indeed. Are you sure it will run three hundred miles?"

"It always seems to," said Mr. White. "I never do anything to it except pour petrol, oil, and water into the proper openings. I am completely unmechanical."

"You cannot be if you work a gramophone."

"You seem to have my gramophone on your mind. To me it doesn't answer the purpose of a machine it simply is Chopin, to me."

Constantine stamped his foot in almost delighted irritation, for this made him feel a god beside this groundling. After a few minutes of self-satisfaction, however, a terrible thought invaded him. He became obsessed with an idea that he had left fleas in his bed in Mr. White's attic. That smug, immaculate Chinese servant would see them when he made the bed, and on Mr. White's return would say, "That foreign soldier left fleas in our attic bed." How bitterly did Constantine wish that he had examined the bed carefully before leaving the room, or alternatively, that he could invent some elaborate lie that would prevent Mr. White from believing this revolting accusation. Constantine's mind, already racked with the fear of pain and death and with the agony of his impotence to impress his companion, became overcast with the hopelessness and remorselessness of everything. Everything despairing seemed a fact beyond dispute; everything hopeful, a mere dream. His growing certainty about the fleas, the persistence of the rain, combined with the leakiness of the car's side-curtains, the skiddiness of the road, the festering of his leg, the thought of the surgeon's saw, the perfection of that complacent kit-bag in the back seat, with the poor cigar-box balalaika tinkling beside it, the overstability and overrightness of his friend in need there was not one sweet or flattering thought to which his poor trapped mind could turn.

The absurdly inadequate bullock-trail only just served the purpose of a road for the Ford. The wheels slid about, wrenching themselves from groove to groove. Constantine's comment on the difficulties of the road was silenced by a polite request on the part of Mr. White. "I can't talk while I'm driving, if you don't mind. I'm not a good driver, and I need all my attention, especially on such a bad road."

"I will talk and you need not answer. That is my ideal plan of conversation. I will tell you why I joined the Foreign Legion. You must have been wondering about this. It will be a relief for me from my misfortunes, to talk."

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind," said his host serenely.

"Mean old horse," thought Constantine passionately, his heart contracting with offence. "It is so English to give away nothing but the bare, bald, stony fact of help no decorations of graciousnesses and smilings. A Russian would be a much poorer helper, but a how much better friend."

The car ground on. Constantine turned over again and again in his mind the matter of the fleas. The wet ochre-and-green country of South China streamed unevenly past, the neat, complex shapes of rice fields altering, disintegrating and re-forming, like groups in a country dance. Abrupt horns of rock began piercing through the flat rain-striped valley, and these, it seemed, were the heralds of a mountain range that barred the path of the travellers, for soon cliffs towered above the road. A village which clung to a slope at the mouth of a gorge was occupied by soldiers. "This is where our troubles begin," said Mr. White peacefully. The soldiers were indolent, shabby, ineffectual-looking creatures, scarcely distinguishable from coolies, but their machine-guns, straddling mosquito-like about the forlorn village street, looked disagreeably wideawake and keen. Constantine felt as if his precious heart were the cynosure of all the machine-guns' waspish glances, as the car splashed between them. "Is this safe?" he asked. "Motoring through a Chinese war?"

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"Not particularly," smiled Mr. White. "But it's safer than neglecting that leg of yours."

Constantine uttered a small, shrill, nervous exclamation half a curse, "Is a man nothing more than a leg to you?"

As he spoke, from one side of the gorge along which they were now driving, a rifle shot cracked, like the breaking of a taut wire. Its echoes were overtaken by the sputtering of more shots from a higher crag. Constantine had been tensely held for just such an attack on his courage as this and yet he was not ready for it. His body moved instantly by itself, without consulting his self-respect; it flung its arms round Mr. White. The car, thus immobilized at its source of energy, swerved, skidded, and stood still askew upon the trail. Constantine, sweating violently, recalled his pride and reassembled his sprawling arms. Mr. White said nothing, but he looked with a cold benevolence into Constantine's face and shook his head slightly. Then he started the car again and drove on in silence. There was no more firing.

"Oh, oh, I do wish you had been a little bit frightened too," said Constantine, clenching his fists. He was too much of a desert islander to deny his own fright, as a citizen of the tradition-ruled mainland might have denied it. Brave or afraid, Constantine was his own creation; he had made himself, he would stand or fall by this self that he had made. It was indeed, in a way, more interesting to have been afraid than to have been brave. Only, unfortunately, this exasperating benefactor of his did not think so.

The noon-light was scarcely brighter than the light of early morning. The unremitting rain slanted across the grey air. Trees, skies, valleys mountains, seen through the rain-spotted windshield, were like a distorted, stippled landscape painted by a beginner who has not yet learned to wring living colour from his palette. However, sun or no sun, noontime it was at last, and Mr. White, drawing his car conscientiously to the side of the bullock-trail, as if a procession of Rolls-Royces might be expected to pass, unpacked a neat jigsaw puzzle of a sandwich-box.

"I brought a few caviare sandwiches for you," he said gently: "I know Russians like caviare."

"Are your sandwiches then made of Old England's Rosbif?" asked Constantine crossly, for it seemed to him that this man used nothing but collective nouns.

"No; of bloater paste."

They said nothing more but munched in a rather sullen silence.

Constantine had lost his desire to tell Mr. White why he had joined the Foreign Legion or to tell him anything else, for that matter. There was something about Mr. White that destroyed the excitement of telling ingenious lies or even the common truth; and this something Constantine resented more and more, though he was uncertain how to define it. Mr. White leaned over the steering-wheel and covered his eyes with his hands, for driving tired him. The caviare, and his host's evident weariness, irritated Constantine more and more; these things seemed like a crude insistence on his increasing obligation. "I suppose you are tired of the very sight of me," he felt impelled to say bitterly.

"No, no," said Mr. White politely but indifferently. "Don't worry about me. It'll all be the same a hundred years hence."

"Whether my leg is off or on whether I die in agony or live it will all be the same a hundred years hence, I suppose you would say," said Constantine, morbidly goading his companion into repeating this insult to the priceless mystery of personality.

"My good man, I can't do more than I am doing about your leg, can I?" said Mr. White irritably, as he restarted the car.

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"A million times more a million times more," thought Constantine hysterically, but with an effort he said nothing.

As the wet evening light smouldered to an ashen twilight, they drove into Mo-ming, which was to be their night's stopping-place. Outside the city wall they were stopped by soldiers; for Mo-ming was being defended against the enemy's advance. After twenty minutes' talk in the clanking Cantonese tongue, the two white men were allowed to go through the city gate on foot, leaving the Ford in a shed outside, in the care of Mr. White's coolie. Mr. White carried his beautiful little kit-bag and expected Constantine to carry the camp-bed.

"What and leave my balalaika in the car?" protested Constantine childishly.

"I think it would be safe," said Mr. White, only faintly ironic. "Hurry up. I must go at once and call on the general in charge here. I don't want to have my car commandeered."

Constantine limped along behind him, the camp-bed on one shoulder, the balalaika faintly tinkling under his arm. They found the inn in the centre of a tangle of looped, frayed, untidy streets a box-like gaunt house, one corner of which was partly ruined, for the city had been bombarded that day. The inn, which could never have been a comfortable place, was wholly disorganized by its recent misfortune; most of the servants had fled, and the innkeeper was entirely engrossed in counting and piling up on the verandah his rescued possessions from the wrecked rooms. An impudent little boy, naked down to the waist the only remaining servant showed Mr. White and Constantine to the only room the inn could offer.

"One room between us?" cried Constantine, thinking of his shameful, possibly verminous, clothes and his unwashed body. He felt unable to bear the idea of unbuttoning even the greasy collar of his tunic within sight of that virgin new kit-bag. Its luminous whiteness would seem in the night like triumphant civilization's eye fixed upon the barbarian like the smug beam of a lighthouse glowing from the mainland upon that uncouth obstruction, a desert island. "I'm not consistent," thought Constantine. "That's my trouble. I ought to be proud of being dirty. At least that is a home-made condition."

"Yes one room between us," said Mr. White tardy. "We must do the best we can. You look after things here, will you, while I go and see the general and make the car-safe."

Left alone, Constantine decided not to take off any clothes at all even his coarse greatcoat but to say that he had fever and needed all the warmth he could get. No sooner had he come to this decision than he felt convinced that he actually was feverish; his head and his injured leg ached and throbbed as though all the hot blood in his body had concentrated in those two regions, while ice seemed to settle round his heart and loins. The room was dreary and very sparsely furnished with an ugly, too high table and rigid chairs to match. The beds were simple recesses in the wall, draped with dirty mud-brown mosquito-veils. Constantine, however, stepped more bravely into this hard, matted coffin than he had into Mr. White's clean attic bed. As he lay down, his leg burned and throbbed more fiercely than ever, and he began to imagine the amputation the blood, the yawning of the flesh, the scraping of the saw upon the bone. His imagination did not supply an anaesthetic. Fever came upon him now in good earnest; he shook so much that his body seemed to jump like a fish upon the unyielding matting, he seemed to breathe in heat, without being able to melt the ice in his bones. Yet he remained artistically conscious all the time of his plight, and even exaggerated the shivering spasms of his limbs. He was quite pleased to think that Mr. White would presently return and find him in this condition, and so be obliged to be interested and compassionate. Yet as he heard Mr. White's heavy step on the stair, poor Constantine's eye fell on the fastidious white kit-bag, and he suddenly remembered all his fancies and fears about vermin and smells. By the time Mr. White was actually standing over him, Constantine was convinced that the deepest loathing was clearly shown on that superior, towering face.

"I can't help it I can't help it," cried Constantine, between his chattering teeth.

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Mr. White seemed to ignore the Russian's agitation. "I think the car'll be all right now," he said. "I left the coolie sleeping in it, to make sure. The general was quite civil and gave me a permit to get home; but it seems it's utterly impossible for us to drive on to Lao-chow. Fighting on the road is particularly hot, and the bridges are all destroyed. The enemy have reached the opposite side of the river, and they've been bombarding the city all day. I told the general about your case; he suggests you go by river in a sampan down to Lao-chow to-morrow. You may be fired on just as you leave the city, but nothing to matter, I dare say. After that, you'd be all right the river makes a stiff bend south here, and gets right away from the country they're fighting over. It would take you only about eighteen hours to Lao-chow, going down stream. I've already got a sampan for you.... Oh, Lord, isn't this disgusting?" he added, looking round the dreadful room and wrinkling his nose. "How I loathe this kind of thing."

"I can't help it. I can't help it." Constantine began first to moan and then to cry. He was by now in great pain, and he did not try to control his distress. It passed through his mind that crying was the last thing a stupid Englishman would expect of a légionnaire; so far so good, therefore he was a desert islander even in his degradation. Yet he loathed himself; all his morbid fears of being offensive were upon him, and the unaccustomed exercise of crying, combined with the fever, nauseated him. Mr. White, still wearing his expression of repugnance, came to his help, loosened that greasy collar, lent a handkerchief, ordered some refreshing hot Chinese tea.

"You should have known me in Odessa," gasped Constantine in an interval between his paroxysms. "Three of the prettiest women in the town were madly in love with me. You know me only at my worst."

Mr. White, soaking a folded silk handkerchief in cold water, before laying it on Constantine's burning forehead, did not answer. He unrolled the pillow from his camp-bed and put it under Constantine's head. As he did so, he recoiled a little, but after a second's hesitation, he pushed the immaculate little pillow into place with a heroic firmness.

"I wore only silk next the skin then," snuffled Constantine. The fever rose in a wave in his brain, and he shouted curses upon his cruelly perfect friend.

Mr. White lay only intermittently on his camp-bed that night. He was kept busy making use of his past experience as a member of an ambulance unit. Only at daylight he slept for an hour or so.

Constantine, awakened from a short sleep by the sound of firing outside, lay on his side and watched Mr. White's relaxed, sleeping face. The fever had left Constantine, and he was now sunk in cold, limp depression and fear. Luckily, he thought, there was no need to stir, for certainly he could not be expected a sick man to set forth in a sampan through such dangers as the persistent firing suggested. At least in this inn he knew the worst, he thought wearily, and his companion knew the worst too. "I will not leave him," Constantine vowed, "until I have somehow cured him of these frightful memories of me somehow amputated his memory of me...." He lay watching his companion's face hating it obscurely wishing that those eyes, which had seen the worst during this loathsome night, might remain for ever shut.

Mr. White woke up quite suddenly. "Good Lord!" he said, peering at his watch. "Nearly seven. I told the sampan man to be at the foot of the steps at daylight."

"Are you mad?" asked Constantine shrilly. "Listen to the firing quite near. Besides I'm a very sick man, as you should know by now. I couldn't even walk much less dodge through a crowd of Chinese assassins."

Mr. White, faintly whistling Chopin, laboriously keeping his temper, left the room, and could presently be heard hee-hawing in the Chinese language on the verandah to the hee-hawing innkeeper.

When he came back, he said, "The sampaneer's there, waiting only too anxious to get away from the bombing they're expecting to-day. He's tied up only about a hundred yards away. You'll be beyond the reach of the firing

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as soon as you're round the bend. Hurry up, man; the sooner you get down to hospital, and I get off on the road home, the better for us both."

Constantine, genuinely exhausted after his miserable night, did not speak, but lay with his eyes shut and his face obstinately turned to the wall. He certainly felt too ill to be brave or to face the crackling dangers of the battle-ridden streets, but he was conscious of no plan except a determination to be as obstructive as he could to assert at least this ignoble power over his tyrant.

"Get up, you damn fool," shouted Mr. White, suddenly plucking the pillow from under the sick man's head, "or I'll drag you down to the river by the scruff of your dirty neck."

Dirty neck! Instantly Constantine sat up hopeless now of curing this man's contempt, full of an almost unendurable craving to be far away from him to wipe him from his horizon to be allowed to imagine him dead. Invigorated by this violent impulse, he rolled out of bed and sullenly watched Mr. White settle up with the innkeeper and take a few packages out of that revoltingly refined kit-bag.

"A small tin of water-biscuits," said Mr. White, almost apologetically, "and the remains of the bloater paste. It's all I have with me, but it ought to keep you alive till you get to Lao-chow to-morrow morning.... I'll see you down to the river first and then pick up these things." He spoke as if he were trying to make little neat plans still against this disorderly and unwonted background. He brushed his splashed coat with a silver clothes-brush, wearing the eagerly safe expression Constantine had seen on his face as he bent over the tie-press the night before last. The orderly man was trying to maintain his quiet impersonal self-respect amid surroundings that humiliated him. Even Constantine understood vaguely that his attacker was himself being attacked. "Well, I've done my best," added Mr. White, straightening his back after buckling the last strap of the kit-bag, and looking at Constantine with an ambiguous, almost appealing look.

They left the inn. The steep street that led down to the river between mean, barricaded shops was deserted. The air of it was outraged by the whipping sound of rifle fire echoes clanked sharply from wall to wall.

"It is not safe it is not safe," muttered Constantine, suddenly standing rooted, feeling that his next step must bring him into the path of a bullet.

"It's safer than a gangrenous leg." With his great hand, Mr. White seized the little Russian's arm and dragged him almost gaily down the steps. Constantine was by now so hopelessly mired in humiliation that he did not even try to disguise his terror. He hung back like a rebellious child, but he was tweaked and twitched along, stumbling behind his rescuer. He was pressed into the little boat. "Here, take the biscuits good-bye good luck," shouted Mr. White, and a smile of real gaiety broke out at last upon his face. The strip of rainy air and water widened between the friends.

"Strike him dead, God!" said Constantine.

The smile did not fade at once from the Englishman's face, as his legs curiously crumpled into a kneeling position. He seemed trying to kneel on air; he clutched at his breast with one hand while the other hand still waved good-bye; he turned his alert, smiling face towards Constantine as though he were going to say again "Good-bye good luck." Then he fell, head downward, on the steps, the bald crown of his head just dipping into the water. Mud was splashed over the coat he had brushed only five minutes before.

There was a loud outcry from the sampan man and his wife. They seemed to be calling Constantine's already riveted attention to the fallen man still only twenty yards away; they seemed uncertain whether he would now let them row yet more quickly away, as they desired, or insist on returning to the help of his friend.

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"Row on row on," cried Constantine in Russian and, to show them what he meant, he snatched up a spare pole and tried to increase the speed of the boat as it swerved into the current. Spaces of water were broadening all about the desert islander home on his desert island again at last. As Constantine swayed over the pole, he looked back over his shoulder and flaunted his head, afraid no more of the firing now that one blessed bullet had carried away unpardonable memory out of the brain of his friend.