P. C. WREN (1874–) *on leaving Oxford entered the Indian Educational Service and the Indian Army Reserve of Officers. He has served also in the British and French armies, where he gained much of the experience that he has put into his colourful tales of soldiering. His stories of the Foreign Legion—"Beau Geste," "Beau Sabreur," and "Good Gestes"—are known to all lovers of romantic literature.*

PRESENTIMENTS

WHEN a dam bursts, a mighty flood follows; when a notably silent man talks, he is apt to say a good deal. Wine sometimes loosens the tongue, particularly if the drinker be habitually abstemious. There are men who talk when they have fever; others when the moon is full, and the desert and night sky a vision of loveliness and a dream of peace; some when the nerves are frayed, so that they must do something or go mad, and talking is the easiest thing to do; others, again, when they are fey, and are well aware that to-morrow's battle will be their last.

Le légionnaire Max Linden, a forbidding person, so taciturn, so inarticulate, as to be known as the Dumb Devil, was talking to the Geste brothers—and to some purpose. It was the eve of the battle of El Rasa, and Linden affected to be perfectly certain that he would be killed on the morrow.

"Oh, rubbish, man," said Michael Geste; "not one in a hundred of these presentiments is justified."

"... Begun in blood ... ended in blood," growled Linden, raising himself on his elbow, and staring out into the moonlit night. ... "But that her blood oozed and spread and trickled in the direction of the door, reached it, and slowly, slowly crept underneath it and out on to the white doorstep, I should not be here now ... here now, awaiting my death from an Arab bullet."

"Cheer up, old bird," said Digby. "Have a cigarette," he added, offering a packet of *Caporal*. "I bet you I'll give you another this time to-morrow, and that you'll smoke it."

"You may stick it in my dead mouth if you like," replied Linden, "before they shovel me under the sand.

"No," he continued, "if her blood had never reached the door, I shouldn't be here now. . . . On the other hand, my father would not have been executed, which would have been a pity. Executed for the murder of my mother."

The brothers eyed each other uncomfortably. No wonder Max Linden was a bitter and tragic-looking desperado, whose rare speech was either a snarl or a growl.

"Your father murdered your mother before your eyes, and was hanged?" murmured Michael Geste, as Linden turned to him and apparently awaited a reply.

"He was hanged for it, anyhow," replied Linden, and he laughed horribly as he added:

"Death on the scaffold was the terror of his life, too. Yes, an absolute obsession, this fear of the rope. And the executioner got him all right. . . . What about *that* for a presentiment coming true? *And I could have saved him.*"

"What about a spot of sleep?" suggested Digby.

"It was all clear enough to the police, when they burst in," continued Linden, ignoring the hint. "It didn't need a Lecoq, nor your Sherlock Holmes, to see what had happened. It leapt to the eye.

"Picture it.

"Old Franz Muller, nosing about the dust-pails and gutters in the early morning, sees a pool of blood on the doorstep of the little house where lives the drunken *mauvais sujet*, Marc Linden. He knocks at the door, tries the handle, peers through the keyhole, kicks heavily, runs round to the window. No sound nor sign from within; and, full of importance, off he goes to the police.

"All in their own good time, they send a man along to see whether there's a word of truth in old Franz Muller's story; or whether there is a spot of red paint on our doorstep, and we peacefully asleep in our beds.

"The man reports that blood has oozed under the front door, spread across the step, trickled down the sides and soaked into the dust.

"The police come, burst open the door, and find—what?

"A woman lies at full length upon the floor, dead. So great a quantity of blood has flowed from her head and neck that, if she was not killed outright at the time, she has bled to death.

"Seated in a wooden arm-chair, and half sprawling across the table, is a man. He is still in a drunken slumber, his head pillowed upon his bent left arm, the hand of which clutches

an empty bottle. His right arm, outstretched before him, and resting on the table, points in the direction of the body of the woman. In the man's right hand is a pistol, its muzzle resting on the table. One chamber has been discharged. In a corner of the room, a boy—a stunted undersized boy—lies on the bare floor.

" They thought he was dead, too, until the police surgeon discovered that he was only suffering from a severe blow on the head, a dislocated leg, and various minor injuries. He was very emaciated, and had a number of old bruises, weals, abrasions, and contusions. It was noticed, too, that the eyes of the woman were blackened and that her face showed evidences of brutal injury.

" ' Aha ! ' said the police, ' a wife-beater ; a scoundrelly brute that assaults children in his drunken frenzy ; and now he has gone too far. He has deliberately murdered his wife, and perhaps has fatally injured his son ! '

" They reconstructed the crime.

" The man has come home drunk, as usual, bringing with him a bottle of cheap and fiery spirit. He had savagely assaulted the woman, beating her insensible, and had then struck and kicked the boy, finally hurling him across the room, where he had lain unconscious and half-dead.

" The ruffian had then seated himself at the table to drink. Unfortunately, before he had fallen into this drunken slumber the unhappy woman had recovered consciousness, and, clutching at the table, had raised herself to her knees and reproached or defied him, or perhaps had begged him to get help for the injured child. His drunken fury blazing forth again, he had snatched the pistol from his pocket and shot her dead. He had then emptied the bottle at a draught, and fallen forthwith into the sottish, swinish slumber in which they had found him.

" Thus the police. And thus was the accusation of wilful murder framed against my father.

" Nor could a shadow of doubt remain in the mind of any reasonable and unbiased person who heard the impassioned speech of the prosecuting counsel, the Advocate-General, who demanded a life for a life, the heaviest of punishments for the foulest of crimes.

" Certainly there was no doubt in the mind of the Judge. How should there be ? What would you three have concluded if you had been the three policemen who burst into the room, and saw the body of a slaughtered woman lying in a pool of blood that had flowed from a wound caused by a bullet

that had severed jugular vein and carotid artery? What would you have concluded if, facing the murdered woman, there sat a man, a noted brute and wife-beater, whose hand clutched the pistol from which the bullet had been fired?

"What, I ask you?" insisted Linden, seizing the wrist of Michael Geste in his hot and shaking hand. "Tell me; what?"

"I should have said that things looked black against the man," replied Michael Geste, "very black."

"Would you have sent him to the scaffold if you had been his Judge?" asked Linden.

"Don't know, I'm sure," was the reply. "Probably. . . . Possibly not. Evidence all circumstantial. . . . We have a different system, you know. If a jury brought him in guilty of wilful murder . . .

"Yes, but it wasn't England, you see," interrupted Linden, "and we don't assume that every villainous criminal is innocent. We leave him to prove that he is—if he can.

"What would *you* have done if you had been the Judge?" he added, turning to Digby Geste.

"What the Judge did do, I suppose," replied Digby.

"And you?" continued Linden, turning to John Geste.

"Oh, I don't know," replied John. "Benefit of the doubt, if there were any doubt; and I suppose there always is a possibility of doubt when there are no witnesses."

"There *was* a witness," said Linden. "Myself . . . I witnessed the whole affair from beginning to end."

"And you could have saved your father," remarked Michael softly. "What a terrible position for you! Poor chap. . . . You'd have had to perjure yourself to have saved him, I suppose? What a ghastly predicament! Did you give evidence against him, or did you refuse to speak?"

"*Aha!*" replied Max Linden, and grinned unpleasantly.

Silence fell on the little group, and three of the four settled themselves for slumber. But Max Linden, sick-souled and devil-driven, had more to say.

"It is pretty generally true," he went on, "that bullies are cowards, and that those who are readiest in inflicting torture are the worst and feeblest in bearing pain.

"When they reconstructed the crime, my father made me, if possible, still more ashamed to be his son.

"As soon as I had recovered sufficiently, they took me back again from the hospital to the house, and put me on a mattress in the corner of the room, just as the police had found

me. The body of my poor mother was arranged exactly as it had lain when the police entered the room. My father was seated in his chair, and made to assume the position in which he had been found. The pistol, clutched in his right hand, was laid on the exact spot—marked by a pencil—where it had rested.

" A police agent then enacted my mother's supposed part in the tragedy. First he lay upon the floor as though stunned by a blow. He then seized the edge of the table opposite to my father, dragged himself to his knees, and showed how a bullet, fired from the pistol as it rested on the table, would penetrate the side of his neck while he was in the act of rising from the floor.

" My father shuddered, shrieked, covered his eyes, and then struggled to escape. Alternately he screamed his protestations of innocence and grovelled for mercy. Weeping, he would point out that he could not possibly have done such a thing and know nothing about it ; and he called God and all His saints to witness that he did know anything about it.

" Then, tearful and voluble, he would point out that he was drunk when the police found him, and that if he *had* done it, he had been too drunk to know what he was doing. Surely they would not punish him for a thing done in ignorance and innocence ? His only fault was that he had got drunk.

" Then he would call upon the world to witness that no man, so drunk as he had been, could possibly aim and fire a pistol. But the *Juge d'Instruction* coldly asked him what evidence there was that he had not deliberately murdered his wife and thereafter drunk himself insensible ?

" And that was where I came in.

" Sobbing, groaning, weeping, and sweating with fear for his own miserable skin, this creature, this man, this Noblest Work of God, suddenly caught a glimpse of salvation.

" A bright ray of hope shone into the black darkness of his soul.

" ' My son ! ' he cried, ' my son ! He was in the room throughout the night ! He can tell you what happened, *Monsieur le Juge.*'

" They took my evidence, and I gave it freely up to a certain point. I said :

" ' For as long as I can remember, my father has been a drunkard and a brute, living God knows how, and by any means but honest work. Times without number, I have seen him thrash my mother unmercifully, with a stick, with the

buckle-end of a heavy belt, with a whip, and with his fist. Times without number, I have seen him knock her senseless with a single blow, and then kick her as she lay. More times than I can tell, he has flogged me, either for no reason whatsoever, or because he had sent me out to steal and I had brought back nothing. It has been his habit, when in funds, to bring in good food —fish and meat and vegetables—and to stand over my mother while she cooked it. He would then eat the meal himself, while we had nothing but stale bread, and not enough of that. Frequently the rich food and bottle of wine would put him into such high good humour that he would observe that we had no need to eat dry bread, for we could wet it; and that there was no necessity for us to drink cold water, since there was no reason why we should not warm it. . . .

" ' On the night of my mother's death he came home neither more nor less drunk than usual, bringing with him a bottle of liquor, but no food.

" ' He demanded *soupe* and bread.

" ' When my mother told him that there was no food of any sort in the house, and that we had that day tasted nothing whatsoever but a cup of re-boiled coffee-grounds, he knocked her down, and then kicked her until she managed to pull herself together and rise to her feet. He then announced that he would " feed me to rights." Since I wanted food, he'd feed me with a stick.

" ' As I tried to dodge past him and escape from the house, he kicked me with all his strength, and then, picking me up from the floor, flung me across the room, so that I struck the wall and fell in a corner. He then got the stick, and, as my mother threw herself between him and me, he struck her repeatedly with all his strength, until she fell to the ground near the table. Having kicked her several times, he seated himself at the table and drank from the bottle.

" ' I think I then became unconscious for a time. When I recovered consciousness, my father was drinking from the bottle, and my mother was making feeble efforts to lift her head from the ground and raise herself upon her elbow.

" ' What I saw after that I will never tell. Not though I am *tortured* will I say one word; not though I spend the rest of my life in prison will I add another syllable.'

" Naturally, the police thought that I was reluctant to give testimony which would instantly destroy any chance my father would have of escaping the scaffold; and, while respecting the filial feelings of an unhappy boy, most miserably

situated, they drew their own conclusions. Naturally, too, it was perfectly clear to them that my mother could not have committed suicide, inasmuch as the pistol was in my father's hand. Moreover, had it been a case of suicide, I, of course, should have testified to the manner of her death, and removed all suspicion from my father.

" Still protesting his innocence, weeping, shrieking and struggling, my father was taken back to prison, charged with the wilful murder of his wife."

II

LINDEN bowed his head upon his hands and fell silent.

" Look here, you've talked enough for to-night, old chap," said Michael. " Lie down, and try and get to sleep."

" Oh, let me talk, let me talk, now I have started," groaned Linden. " Let me finish, anyhow. I shall be under the sand this time to-morrow—shot, as my mother was shot, through the face and neck, I want to tell the truth about my father. . . . Let me get it off my chest. . . . I must tell somebody. . . . Let me go on."

" Why, of course," agreed Michael, " talk as much as you like."

" Yes, rather," added Digby ; " if it will do you any good, we'll listen all night. But you've really told us everything, you know. . . . Poor old chap ! . . . Rough luck. . . ."

" Awful hard lines," murmured John. " Some people *do* have frightful tragedies in their lives. . . . But doesn't it make it worse for you, to rake it all up again ? . . . And as my brother says, you've really told us all about it."

" Oh, have I ? " replied Linden, again grinning unpleasantly. " Listen.

" Between the Examining Magistrate's preliminary investigations and the Court trial, I begged and prayed and implored that I might be allowed to have an interview with my father in his prison cell.

" And one day I found myself alone with the man who had made my life, and that of my mother, a hell upon earth.

" In the most revolting manner, he fawned upon me, kissing me repeatedly, and straining me to his breast.

" ' My son ! My son ! ' he snivelled, ' my saviour ! You'll be famous throughout Europe as the boy who saved his innocent father's life. . . . How wonderful are the ways of God ! Wonderful and yet terrible—for I have always had this

awful fear of the scaffold, and now I have stood within its very shadow. The thought has been my nightmare and presentiment from childhood, and here I sit within a dozen yards of the dreadful thing itself. But my own beloved son has come to save me! . . . My little Max has come to tell me all that happened on that dreadful night when his poor dear mother took her life."

"And again he thrust his beastly and tear-bedewed face against mine.

"'Yes, father,' I replied, 'that is just what I have come to do. Listen:'

"'You nearly committed two murders that night. It was not *your* fault that you did not first kick your own beloved little Max to death, and then his poor dear mother. As a matter of fact, you beat them both insensible. The mother recovered first, thought her child was dead—as he lay there, white and still, where his loving father had flung him.'

"'And thinking so, she took her life. . . . She took her own life. . . . *She committed suicide*,' gabbled my father.

"'Listen," I repeated. 'The half-murdered woman, regaining consciousness, despairing, dazed, beside herself with agony and grief, stared at what she thought to be the body of her murdered child, and then at the sodden brutal face of the bestial ruffianly sot whom she supported by her unceasing labours, and who repaid her love and generosity as a wild animal would not have done. . . . It was a terrible look, and would to God that the eyes of the swinish drunkard could have encountered it.'

"'But they could not! But they could not!' yelped my father. 'He was drunk, he was insensible; the poor fellow was helpless in a state of stupor, dead to the world . . . innocent, *unconscious*.'

"'Quite unconscious'; I agreed, 'drunk and incapable. Entirely unable to see that terrible stare from the woman who had loved him. Nor could he see her, after many failures and superhuman effort, rise to her hands and knees and drag herself to her feet.'

"'But *you* saw, *you* saw!' cried my father.

"'Oh yes, I saw everything,' I reassured him. 'I saw her drag herself to the cupboard where you hide your pistol. I saw her stagger from the cupboard with the pistol in her hand, and I saw her crawl into a chair, fainting, and apparently about to die."

"'Yes, yes, yes,' urged my father, 'and then *she shot*

herself, eh ? Thank God ! Praise God that my own precious boy saw it all, and can save his innocent father from this horrible, false charge ! '

" ' Listen,' I said a third time. ' How long my mother sat there, I do not know, but, after a time, she got to her feet once more, went and drank water, and then, with one hand holding the pistol and the other supporting her against the wall, she stood and peered at me.

" ' *Dead !* ' she whispered. ' *My little Max, dead !* ' and turned again and looked at you, dear father. . . . I would willingly have died if I could have made you meet that look. It would have haunted you, sleeping and waking, to your grave.'

" ' But you were *not* dead,' interrupted my father. ' Why did you not speak to her ? Why did you pretend ? '

" ' Because I thought she was going to shoot you, dear father,' I replied. ' Going to shoot you, in the belief that you had killed me. Not for worlds would I have let her see that I was alive. I was dazed and half-delirious, but I had my wits sufficiently about me to realize that mother was (thank God !) about to shoot you, and that I could swear that I had seen you commit suicide ! So I lay still as the dead, in that dark corner, my eyes half-closed, and looking like the corpse I almost was.

" ' And *then* ? And *then* ? ' begged my father.

" ' And then my mother made her maimed and broken way across to where you sat and snored, your head upon your left arm, your left hand clutching the bottle, your right hand and arm extended across the narrow table. . . . And, to my astonishment, what did she do but carefully, painfully, gently, slowly, open your right hand and clasp it about the handle of the revolver, your forefinger through the trigger-guard, and resting on the trigger.

" ' And then my brain cleared somewhat, and my heart beat fast with joy, for I realized that my brave and clever mother was going to make *you* commit suicide ! *You* were going to be found with your pistol in your hand and such brains as you have scattered about the room ! . . . I almost moved and spoke. I nearly cried " *Bravo*, mother ! " and blessed her name.

" ' And wide-eyed, I watched as she went round to the opposite side of the table and knelt facing you . . . watched to see her take your right hand in hers and bend it round so that the pistol touched your loathsome face . . . watched to see her press your forefinger when the muzzle of the pistol

was against your temple, or your eye, or thrust into your open slavering mouth. . . .

" She took your right hand in both of hers, and, to my puzzled amazement, presented the pistol—the butt of which rested on the table as you gripped it—*straight at her own neck.*

" ' Even as my amazement turned to horror and I screamed aloud " *Don't, mother ! Don't !* " she must have pressed your forefinger with her two thumbs.

" ' There was a deafening report, and she fell back.

" ' Even as she died, she seemed to be trying to get farther from the table. . . .

" ' And then, too late, I understood. Thinking me dead, she had come to join me, leaving you, the murderer of her child, to explain as best you could the corpses, the blood, the discharged revolver clutched in your hand.'

" ' *Devilish ! Devilish !* ' whispered my father. ' The vile hag. . . . But God looks after the innocent ; and my child was there and saw it all—to testify truly that his dear father was the victim of a horrible plot.'

" ' Yes, dear father,' I replied. " Your child was there, and saw it all, and has truly testified.' "

" My father was now anxious to be rid of me, and could scarcely contain himself until he could communicate with the lawyer charged with his defence. From this gentleman I soon received a visit in hospital.

" ' Well, well,' quoth he, standing beside my bed and rubbing his hands. ' What is this, what is this, my silent young gentleman ? You've found your tongue with a vengeance ! . . . Now tell me again very carefully all that you told your father,' he continued as he opened his bag, took out a large notebook, and seated himself on my bed.

" ' Now, my little man,' he smiled, smug and self-satisfied, ' let us have it.'

" I gazed with blank incomprehension upon the smug face of the lawyer. *Found* my tongue with a vengeance, had I ? On the contrary, I had lost it with a very real vengeance.

" ' Sir ? ' I stammered.

" ' Come on,' he encouraged, " and be very careful and exact, especially about your mother putting the pistol in your father's hand and pressing the trigger.'

" ' About my mother doing *what*, sir ? ' I faltered.

" ' You heard what I said,' he snapped.

" ' Yes, sir,' I agreed. ' I heard what you said, but I don't know what you are talking about.'

" ' Your father has just told me,' was the reply, slow and patient, clear and impressive, ' that you have admitted to him that you witnessed the whole affair, and did not, as you previously stated, lie unconscious until you awoke to find your mother dead. He says you told him how you saw your mother put the pistol in his hand, and then deliberately shoot herself.'

" I smiled with pale amusement.

" ' My father seems to have been dreaming, sir,' I said.

" The lawyer stared at me in amazement.

" ' *Dreaming?* . . . *Dreaming?* . . .' he said, at length. ' What do you mean? Are you implying that the whole story is a tissue of lies? '

" ' *I* called it a dream, sir,' I answered meekly.

" The lawyer stared the harder.

" ' A wonderfully coherent and circumstantial *dream*,' he said. . . . ' Astonishing amount of detail . . . don't you think so? '

" ' My father didn't tell it to me, sir,' I said simply.

" ' Well, I'll tell it you now, my young friend.' . . . And he proceeded to give a very full and accurate repetition of what I had told my father.

" ' A really marvellous dream, sir,' I remarked, when he had finished.

" ' And haven't you dreamed the same dream yourself? ' he asked.

" ' I *never* dream, sir,' I replied.

" ' Couldn't you dream that dream to-night? ' he suggested, with a subtle smile and a would-be hypnotic gaze.

" ' I *never* dream, sir,' I repeated, and matched his subtle smile."

The three brothers stared incredulous at *le légionnaire* Max Linden, their young faces expressing a variety of emotions —wonderment, contempt, pity.

" But did they confront you with your father? "

" Oh yes," replied Linden, " and he, having faithfully repeated the story I had told him, flung himself at my feet, and implored me to corroborate it; begged me to speak the truth; besought me to save him; shrieked to me that he was innocent, *and I alone could prove it.*"

" And what did you do? " asked Michael Geste, as Linden fell silent.

" I saw the wraith of my mother standing behind him, and turning to the Advocate-General, who was present, I tapped my forehead and smiled."

" ' Dreaming again, eh ? ' " growled the great man.

" ' Yes, sir,' I agreed, ' he is still dreaming.'

" And so my father's presentiment came true."

" Excuse me," asked Michael Geste, as *le légionnaire* Max Linden lay back and prepared to sleep, " but was the tale you told your father *true*, or did you actually invent it with the object of torturing him ? "

" *Aha,*" grinned *le légionnaire* Linden, and composed himself to slumber.

On the following day his own presentiment came true, and he died on the battlefield of El Rasa. A bullet struck him in the neck, and, as no one had any time to attend to him, he bled to death.