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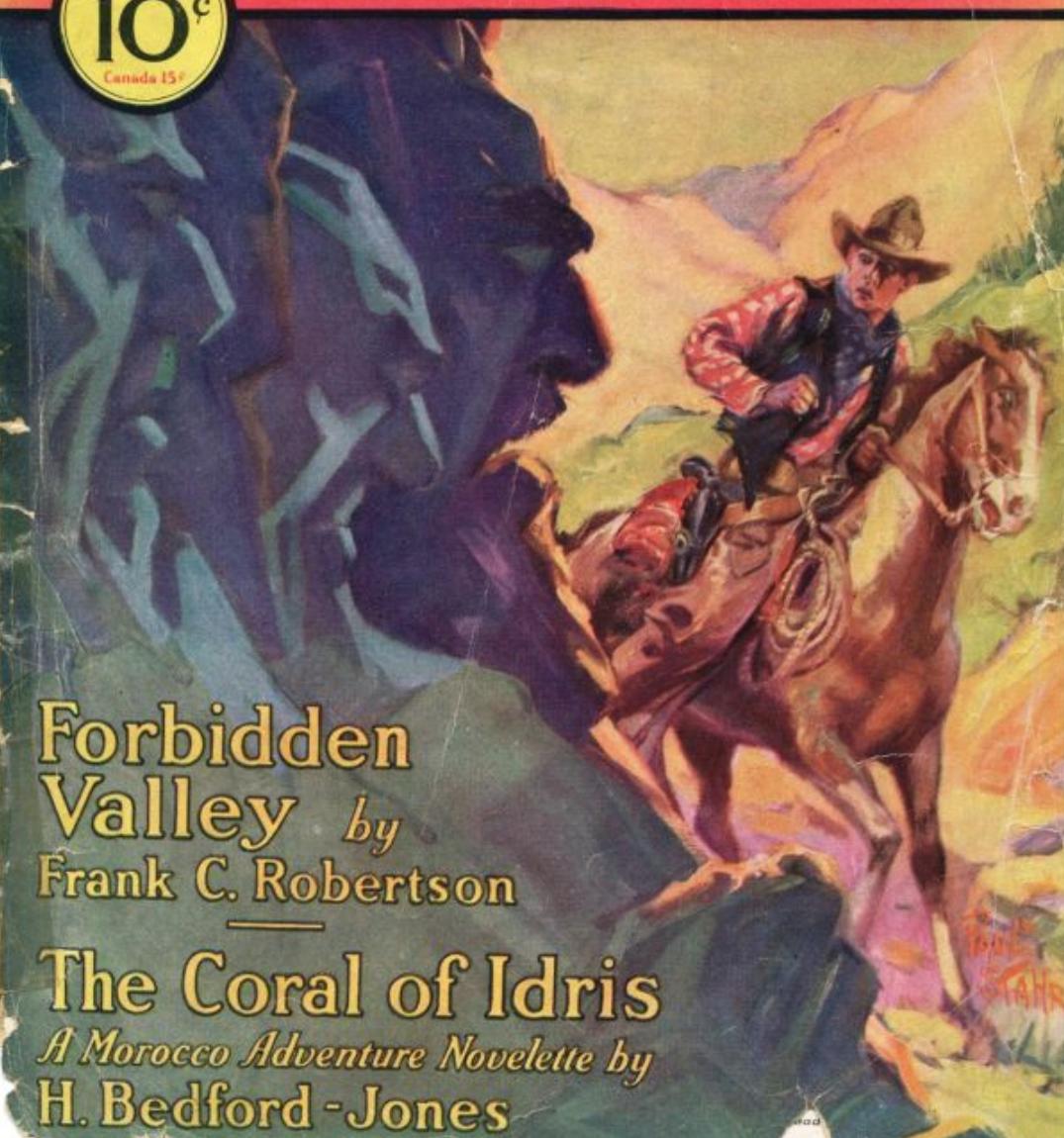


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The Coral of Idris
A Morocco Adventure Novelette by
H. Bedford-Jones

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There came the crack of a shot

The Coral of Idris

Novelette—Complete

By *H. BEDFORD-JONES*

Author of "Three Cat's-eyes," "The Luck of Nagore," etc.

First published *Argosy*, May 9, 1931.

Jim Burke's business investigation led him into a swift, fierce undercurrent of intrigue and greed in new-old Morocco, where secretive, scheming Moslems rub elbows with avaricious French

CHAPTER I. MOROCCAN CABARET.

Burke landed at Casablanca at two in the afternoon, from the Marseilles boat, and Merrit got him through the Sherifian customs and up to his apartment in the Avenue Kléber within half an hour. Merrit had the agency for the Goliath car in Morocco, and Detroit headquarters had cabled Burke in Paris to go down there and investigate.

Merrit was friendly enough. He was swarthy and looked capable. Going uptown in the taxicab, he looked at Burke and made a straight proposition.

"I know why you're here, of course. Suppose we devote the afternoon and evening to getting settled and having a bit of fun? Then, in the morning, you can take over the office and the books, and go through everything."

"Fair enough," said Burke cheerfully. He was blond, wide-shouldered, and with warm blue eyes that could turn icy at times. He had a good idea that Merrit was crooked as a corkscrew and he would have some nasty work, but there was no need to be unpleasant. "We go to your quarters?"

"For to-night, if you don't mind. You'll be more comfortable there, and to-morrow you can either stay on, or get a room at the hotel. We have a brand new one here," Merrit smiled evenly. Evidently he expected trouble, and meant to meet it like a man, with a shrug and a laugh. "Thought I'd take you down to the low quarter of town to-night—the new Arab town built by the Sultan. Some Berber dancers are in from the hills, and you will see something you won't often find around the corner."

"Suits me," rejoined Burke.

Casablanca, with the exception of the native town inside its walls, is a new, up-to-date French colonial city, and possesses nothing romantic or appealing, except the costumes and uniforms. It gets little tourist business, and consequently what it offers the night wanderer is not showy or fake, but the real article, frankly immodest and without shame.

Burke left the taxi with his companion at the entrance to the part of town known as the New Medinah. Off to the left the ground fell sharply in a ravine, rising again to the palace; this hollow was a mass of roofs and adobes. The moon was high, flooding everything with silver. The signs on the high walls to which the two men turned gave clear indication that they were entering upon no Sunday school excursion. Besides affording living quarters, this section of the city was a place of amusement for soldiers and hillmen, seamen from the port, foreigners from the town, Arabs from the old town and the open country. Women were muffled and veiled, men wore voluminous garments, with *chechia* or turban, or both—all of them looking rather shopworn, and all of them wearing yellow slippers. Many wore ragged *jellabs* of old sacking.

"They distinctly lack romance," said Burke.

Merrit laughed, but his tone came with a touch of eagerness.

"You may find it ahead—who knows? We'll hit the carnival section pretty soon."

They were walking along the narrow sidewalks now. Here were vendors of fruit and candy, women without veils, plenty of electric lights, and music on every hand. Presently Burke found himself dipping into a big room, half underground, with one main entrance and several exits; a café, in effect, with a regular cabaret. Along one end, on a shoulder-high

platform of solid beams, sat the Berber dancers, eight in number. Burke sidled into a place at a table beside Merrit, a long table, with a bench for seat, and met with a real surprise as two of the hillmen struck into a dance, drums and pipes making music.

This was real dancing—a sort of clog and tap, mixed with a real buck-and-wing. But there was no tap to it. Every touch of heel or toe was a rousing *wham!* It was hard to see why the platform did not come down or why they did not smash their ankles. This was a real mountain breakdown, and was kept up without a pause for full fifteen minutes, when the hat was passed.

By this time, however, Burke's attention had been diverted to those around him. A glass of strong mint tea was placed before him, and as he sipped it he used his eyes. About him were Arabs, Berbers, French—both soldiers and civilians—and girls galore. Brown girls with wild eyes and silken garments, Berber girls with tribal tattoo marks on chin and cheeks, negroid girls with frizzled hair.

And one other girl.

Merrit had moved down to the end of the bench, and was talking with two of the Arab girls there in his rapid, fluent French; he did not see the other at all. This one sat under an arch with two French officers. She was looking straight at Burke and smiling; a girl in a rose-pink dress, a drooping leghorn straw hat, and a white coral necklace at her throat. A French girl? He fancied not; impossible to say, however.

"Burke!" Merrit was leaning over toward him. "I'll be back in a minute; a chap outside wants to see me."

He departed, shouldering aside the girls. Burke fancied that some one had brought him a message. Looking again at the girl with the two officers, Burke caught one swift, startling look that jerked him upright. She glanced after Merrit, then looked directly at him with a most imperative gesture. The two officers were laughing with one of the Berbers and paid her no heed.

Burke frowned, half started up, then resumed his seat. He had heard about the women in Morocco—how they had flocked in from all countries to make things lively for the troops. Yet this girl was not one of the sort. He looked at her again, and met an impatient grimace. Then she was talking with her companions again, gayly, quite ignoring him.

One of the officers rose and left the place. The other, a burly man whose heavy black mustache partly concealed a purple scar at the right corner of his mouth, looked at Burke for a moment carelessly, then turned at a sharp outcry from outside. He leaped up and strode out.

Swift as a flash, the girl slipped from her seat and in three quick strides was leaning over the table before Burke, her voice low, tense, striking at him. And she spoke English.

"Get out of here quickly! Get him away!"

"Eh?" Burke was startled. "Who do you mean?"

"Merrit. Quickly! Don't you know he hasn't a chance in the world here? It may be too late even now. Get him away! Move!"

Burke read the urgent anger in her eyes, and rose.

"I don't know what it's all about, but I'll get him away," he responded. "With whom am I speaking, if you please?"

She broke out in a passion of anger and despair.

"Fool! To stand here talking that way—move! He must have been mad to come here! Quickly, tell him to call me later to-night at this address—in an hour. Off with you!"

Burke thrust into a pocket the card she handed him, and made his way out of the place. The hubbub had subsided: it had been a fight between two women, he gathered.

He stood out in the street, dimly lighted, and glanced around. At this instant, from some point not far away came the crack of a shot, then another. A burst of cries went up; in a moment the street was filled with rushing figures and wild voices.

Burke stepped back into the darkness beneath an arched entrance, waited there, listening. Presently two Frenchmen came past, stopped to light cigarettes; he caught the glint of uniforms. One of them spoke softly.

“Who was it? Why, that fool American, Merrit. They did for him. He was crazy to come here to-night—but there you are. We knew he’d get it sooner or later.”

“There was another man with him,” said the second voice. “Who?”

“Don’t know. The Intelligence will know, of course. It doesn’t matter; he is not involved. Better get back, *mon ami*. This means we’ll be ordered up to Merrit’s apartment presently, to search for the yellow box. Baraud is set on having it. Come along!”

They disappeared. Burke remained motionless for a moment, stupefied by what he had just overheard; then, as a crowd surged past, he slipped in among the figures and made all haste to get out of the place.

Two minutes later he stepped into one of the waiting taxicabs, gave Merrit’s address, and went whirling away at breakneck speed toward the French town.

With the speed of the cab, his thoughts fell into some coherence. What it all meant, what it was about, he had not the faintest idea; but if Merrit were really dead, then it was a form of suicide. He knew perfectly well that Merrit, on the morrow, had faced exposure and disgrace for embezzlement and forgery. Merrit had known it, too. And Merrit had apparently come here deliberately seeking death. Who had murdered him, and why?

“No use asking foolish questions,” thought Burke, with a shrug. “The police or soldiers will be along soon enough. According to those French officers, I’m not under suspicion, and I’d better look up that yellow box myself and see what’s in it. And where does the girl come in? She was a stunner!”

He paid off the taxicab and mounted to Merrit’s apartment. Luckily, he knew all his papers were in order, and he had nothing to fear from any one.

Entering the apartment, he found it as they had left it, and went directly to Merrit’s bedroom; here, if anywhere, would be the mysterious yellow box, and he would not be likely to have much time.

Glancing around, he went to the dresser and opened drawer after drawer, in vain. Burke paused, asked himself what he would do if he had something to hide—and went to the closet, where a number of empty grips were placed high on a shelf. With a grunt of satisfaction he felt a rattle in one, as he got it down. It was unlocked, and he opened it, to find a package wrapped in newspaper—a large, square package. He stripped it open and disclosed a square box of yellow Morocco leather, locked. It had no key.

For a moment, Burke hesitated. This was none of his business. It was very likely something illegal. The part of wisdom was to leave it alone. Yet Merrit had been murdered, and Burke meant to know why, and if possible to bring the killers to justice; curiosity, a slow anger, a sense of comradeship with the dead man, consumed him.

He replaced the grips, and took the yellow box into his own room. It fitted inside his toilet case, which he dumped out. Putting the leather box inside the toilet case, he snapped it shut

again and left it on his dresser, shaving materials on top of it. As he finished, there came a long and authoritative ring at the bell, followed by a sharp knocking on the door of the apartment.

CHAPTER II. A SINISTER FRENCHMAN.

With the police, whose six-pointed stars proclaimed them civil servants, were two officers, Frenchmen of a Sherifian regiment. One introduced himself to Burke as a Captain Lamarte; he was very polite and cordial. When he had inspected Burke's papers, he nodded and returned them.

"Entirely in order, *m'sieu'*. We know you only arrived to-day. You were with M'sieu' Merrit when he was killed to-night?"

"I was at the *medinah* with him, yes. I heard the shots, some one rushed past saying that he had been killed. I did not know what to do, and came back here."

"Wisely. You know why he was in trouble?"

Burke explained why he had come here, and the officer nodded again.

"I am of the Intelligence, *m'sieu'*. Not only was M'sieu' Merrit in business trouble, but he had become involved with gamblers and worse. It is our duty to seal his rooms and inspect his belongings. May I suggest that you, being in no way involved, may find it more comfortable if you remove your own things to the hotel? We shall be glad to assist you."

This was, obviously, the thing to do, and Burke jumped at the chance.

Half an hour later he was installed at the Grand Hotel, with the comfortable knowledge that the gentlemen of the Intelligence had given his belongings a good search and had found nothing. The toilet case with its contents had been passed-up.

Once alone in his room—this spanking new hotel was well equipped with telephones—Burke went to the instrument, took the girl's card from his pocket, and looked at it. Upon the blank card was scribbled a name, Marie, and a telephone number. He called the number, and a woman's voice responded.

"I would like to speak to Mademoiselle Marie," said Burke.

"One moment, *m'sieu'*—she has just returned," was the answer. Then, after a moment, he heard the crisp, English voice of the girl he had seen that evening.

"This is Miss Thornton. Well?"

"This is Mr. Burke speaking—the gentleman to whom you gave a card—"

"Oh!" Her voice leaped slightly in alarm. "Wait a minute—where are you?"

"Room four twelve, Grand Hotel."

"Mention no names," she said quickly. "However, I don't think you can do anything for me. I wanted our friend to call me up, as he has been keeping something for me—"

"Something yellow?" asked Burke.

"Oh! You know?"

"I have it here. Others have been looking for it. Is it yours?"

"I'll have to tell you—it's frightfully dangerous! You can't possibly keep it! Where can I see you now, to-night, at once? That thing must be taken to Fez immediately—"

Burke intervened quietly.

"Suppose you meet me at one of the cafés near here? It's still pretty early. Name the one, and I'll be there in ten or fifteen minutes."

"The Marmontel, then. It's on the Place de France, close by you. Get an inside table if you arrive before me—not out in front, remember!"

“Very good, miss,” rejoined Burke with a laugh, and hung up.

“So!” He turned and regarded the yellow leather box. “This thing must go to Fez to-night, must it? And dangerous. Hm! And Merrit was in with gamblers and a bad crowd generally. And if it hadn’t been for Jim Burke, the police or somebody would have had their paws on this long ere now. Hm! Taken all in all, looks to me like Jimmy Burke had better know what he’s getting tangled into. If I’m any judge, that girl was straight as a die. But just the same, let’s play safe.”

He picked up the box, perceived that the lock was some small but ingenious mechanism that probably held it fast all around by steel bars in the French fashion, and without hesitation dropped it on the floor and stamped hard.

The top of the box was crushed in.

Burke picked it up, tore aside the wood and leather, and revealed a mass of tightly packed pink cotton. When he had removed this, he brought to sight something that drew a low whistle from him as he eyed it.

It was a necklace made from large disks of red coral. Each disk was carved intricately and mounted in gold, upon which were Arabic characters graven, and between each disk was a little ball of gold, likewise engraved. The pendant, however, was what drew Burke’s eyes—for it was an emerald full two inches long, with one flat surface upon which was deeply cut the word “Allah,” a word so common in Arabic that even Burke recognized it.

Then he perceived that this must be no necklace, but a Moslem rosary, each bead representing one of the hundred “ineffable names” of God. It was enormously long, and was very obviously of great age and value, even apart from the huge emerald. Opening one of his long windows, Burke switched off the lights in the room, flung the fragments of the box from the window, careless where they fell, shoved the rosary into his pocket, and strode out.

“What counts, evidently, is not the container but the thing contained,” he reflected cheerfully, as he sought the street and the big Place de France just around the corner, the center of life in Casablanca, with the walls of the older Arab town just opposite. “So we’ll dispense with the box, which doesn’t matter, and thereby get rid of danger also.”

In this eminently sensible frame of mind, he came to the Café Marmontel, one of the large cafés half bordering the square, and walking in, got a table inside, where there were few people. The outer terrace was well filled, as always, with French, officers and Arabs, but a private conversation might well be carried on here without eavesdropping.

Burke had no more than ordered a Rossi, when Marie Thornton entered, now wearing a warm evening cloak over her shoulders, and he held a chair for her. Then she accepted a cigarette, and as the match went out they looked for an instant into each other’s eyes. Burke read in the cool gray gaze that here was a girl straight as a die indeed, and unafraid.

“Come clean,” he said quietly. “If we’re going to do business, as I think we are, I want to be in on the whole thing. You’re a friend of Merrit?”

She nodded slightly. “I knew him back home, yes. Hadn’t seen him for years, until I came here a few months ago. I’m putting in a year here, painting.”

“Oh! You’re an artist?”

“Trying to be one. Before I do any confidential talking, however,” and her cool eyes probed him, “suppose you tell me who you are and why.”

Burke laughed. Laughter became him, lightening his rather harsh features and warming his blue eyes wondrously. He obeyed her behest, telling her frankly about Merrit's trouble, and she appeared little surprised.

"And you think he took you there to-night—on purpose?" she said, when Burke had told her everything.

"Yes," he rejoined. "You knew that he was in a bad crowd?"

"He admitted it," she said. "Some of the Arabs are a bad lot—the younger generation, with money, no morals, and some position. Plenty like that! I think they got him in their grip, and when he saw a chance to break clear, he took it; and failed."

The Rossis arrived. When the waiter had departed, Burke spurted water into the glasses and sipped the carmine drink.

"Come clean," he repeated laconically. "Where does Baraud come into it?"

He thought a swift pallor flashed across her face.

"Baraud? The man with me to-night? You know him?"

"Not at all. He was the chap with the scarred cheek, eh? An ugly brute. And he's after the rosary is he?"

She leaned forward, gripping the table edge, staring at him.

"Are you—have you lied to me?" she demanded. Anger flashed in her eyes. "You said you knew nothing—"

"Come clean," said Burke. "You first. Then I'll reciprocate."

With an effort, she relaxed and assented.

"All right. Baraud has been in the army here, with the Intelligence. He's made money, and has resigned. Tonight was his last night in uniform. I'm not fond of him by any means, but he's a gentleman, is very agreeable, and has influence. Also, he's intimate with many of the Arab chiefs and great men. Merrit has lost heavily to him at various kinds of gambling."

She paused, sipped her drink, and then resumed.

"Well, a week ago poor Merrit bet Baraud that he could steal the rosary of Idris from the tomb of Idris at Fez. Idris founded that city a thousand years ago and is buried there in the chief mosque. No Christian can even enter a mosque here, you know; the French uphold that law very strictly. This is supposed to be the rosary used by Idris, who is a saint among the Moslems, and was lavishly mounted in gold and jewels by one of the old Sultans. No white man has ever seen it, even, unless he became a Moslem. Merrit bet Baraud a hundred thousand francs that he could get away with it."

Burke whistled. Marie Thornton leaned back in her chair and nodded.

"He did. Presumably one of his disreputable Arab friends, Hussein, helped him do it. They figured that a huge reward would be offered; perhaps Hussein stole it and Merrit took it over. I don't know. Anyway, Hussein was found dead two days later, a knife in his back. They suspected Merrit was in on the robbery, but probably were not sure. Baraud, of course, told the natives nothing about the bet—"

"Are you sure of that?" interjected Burke.

"No; but he wouldn't do it, anyway," she returned with some indignation. "However, they suspected. A huge fuss was made about it. Baraud saw the necklace to-day, and paid Merrit the amount of the bet, or at least told me he had paid him. The rosary was in a yellow box."

"It's in my pocket now. The box was too dangerous, too easily recognized," said Burke, and while her startled eyes dwelt upon him, told of smashing the box. Further, he told of the

scrap of conversation he had caught about Baraud. "Looks to me like your friend Baraud wants that necklace. You think he's straight, do you?"

He was astonished by the sudden pallor that came into her face.

"Oh!" she said in a low voice. "Oh! Then—then that explains it—"

"Explains what?" said Burke.

"A—a good deal." For some reason she seemed badly shaken. "I—I never mistook Baraud for any angel, certainly. But I didn't think—"

She fell silent for a moment, then looked up and met Burke's gaze.

"Something happened there to-night, and this explains it," she said in a low voice. "Would you—would you be very shocked—if I were to think that perhaps Merrit had not been killed by the natives, after all?"

Burke's brows went up. "So! No, after sizing up your friend Baraud, I'd not be surprised at anything he might do. He looks to me like a bad egg. You think he might have had some one do the trick, do you?"

"I heard some one say, back there, that a Frenchman had done the shooting," she answered. "No one saw just who it was. Of course, there's no evidence—but—"

"But we don't need any more, just now," added Burke, with a short nod. "Want to see the rosary? There's a whopping big emerald on it—the thing must be worth a small fortune."

He reached for his pocket, but she stopped him swiftly.

"No, no—are you mad? Not here, in public! If it were suspected that you had it, the natives would be after you in an hour's time! Valuable? It's worth a fortune, to the Arabs! And if it's as I think, if Baraud really wants to get hold of it—"

Burke grinned. "Then his secret service work would have him all set to get it, eh? I see. Well, I've got the thing, and what am I to do with it? Turn it over to the police?"

"Not unless you're anxious to see Baraud get away with it," she rejoined. A glow of color grew in her face, and her eyes hardened a little. "And that he shan't do! Poor Tom Merrit—I don't hold any brief for him, and I certainly don't excuse him, but I hate to think of his having been murdered. And if Baraud really had it done or was behind it—"

"Then he has something coming to him," said Burke quietly. "I tell you what I'll do, Miss Thornton. I'll put this rosary into the proper hands—Arab hands—and bargain. I'll turn it over, on condition that Merrit's murderer is brought to book. How'll that be?"

"Excellent!" she exclaimed quickly. Burke nodded.

"Right. Now, young lady, let's have a clean breast of it, and excuse me if I'm too personal. Were you and Merrit in love?"

"Not in the least," she returned, with a slight smile. "I'm not in love at all. My whole interest in him was because we were friends years ago, back home."

"Good; no entanglements, then. You know this country better than I do. You said that the thing must go back to Fez at once. What would you suggest?"

"Well, I intended to take it back there myself and turn it over to a man I know," she responded. "It would have to be very carefully done, of course. But since you have it, and since this other matter—about Baraud—has come up, perhaps you'd better do it."

"Why not do it together?" asked Burke. "There's no great rush about my business here; I can untangle Merrit's affairs later. How far is Fez from here, by car?"

"We could make it to-morrow, easily." Her gray eyes lighted up. "Good! I'll take you up on it, Mr. Burke! Have you a car?"

“Three or four, unless Merrit’s burned ’em up!” Burke laughed. “I’ll have a Goliath eight ready any time you say, in the morning.”

“Here at your hotel, then, at eight.” She rose. “We’d better not be seen together—let me leave alone, please. You’ve no idea how everybody in Morocco is a spy! And above all, be careful about letting a soul see that rosary. It’s a safe bet that every native is on the lookout for it, and about half the French. You will?”

“Naturally,” said Burke, rising. “Run along then, and all good luck! Until to-morrow.”

With a wave of the hand, she departed. Burke remained a few moments longer, finished his drink, and then sauntered back to his hotel. He was rather acutely conscious of his sagging coat pocket. He was still more conscious of it when he reached his own room, and opening the door, saw Captain Baraud, still in uniform, sitting there awaiting, him.

CHAPTER III. CLASH OF WILLS.

Captain Baraud bowed and introduced himself, cordially enough.

"I must apologize for being in your room," he said in fluent English. "I am, however, of the Intelligence, and have a few questions to ask in regard to Mr. Merrit—a mere formality, of course. If it will not inconvenience you—"

"Of course not. Make yourself at home," said Burke dryly. He did not need to be told that the Frenchman had made a thorough search of his room. As he dropped into a chair and met the probing dark eyes, he felt a flash of antagonism, but repressed it. Nothing had been found in Merrit's apartment, so the man had come here direct.

"By whom was poor Merrit killed?" asked Burke abruptly.

"By a soldier, a Frenchman," said Baraud. "I must tell you that Mr. Merrit was under suspicion of smuggling or handling narcotics. He was stopped for search, and resisted. He even drew a pistol, upon which he was shot and killed. A large amount of morphia was found upon his body, I might say."

Burke nodded. Very prettily covered up; the murder had been well planned. He did not believe for a moment that Merrit, whatever his faults, had been a narcotic peddler, but it would be rank folly to say so now.

"I'm at your service, Captain Baraud," he answered. "I imagine that you know all about me?"

"We are well informed, yes. I should say that you are in no way implicated in this whole affair, fortunately for you. I merely desire to ask a few questions."

Burke relaxed and took a cigarette. "Shoot," he said briefly.

"We are looking for a further supply of morphia, believed to have been kept in a box of yellow leather," said Baraud. "Did Merrit mention such a box, or did you see it, while you were in his apartment?"

The American shook his head.

"Sorry I can't help you there," he rejoined. "I was at the apartment only for a couple of hours this afternoon; then Merrit took me for a drive, we had dinner, and went out to the *medinah*. No, he never mentioned such a box, and I don't recall having seen the thing lying around. If he were in the dope business, he wouldn't want me to know it, naturally."

"Of course," agreed the Frenchman smoothly. He was studying Burke as they talked. "Still, it is rather odd that the very box we are seeking was found half an hour ago, crushed and broken, out here in the street—almost below this window."

"Yes, that is rather odd," agreed Burke amiably. "By the way, did you say your name was Baraud? I believe Merrit was speaking of you this afternoon. You were friends?"

Baraud's black eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yes, in a way. He did not know that I was handling the investigation of his case?"

"Apparently not," rejoined the American. "He said something about having won a large bet from you—I believe he was counting upon the money to help him out when I came to look over his accounts and books to-morrow."

The black brows shot up. "Yes? But I paid him the amount of the bet only this morning. A hundred thousand francs, quite a sum! In cash, also."

Burke knew the other was lying. Merrit had cashed a check that evening at the restaurant where they had dined. He looked at Baraud with a slight smile, but changed the subject.

“And what other information can I give you, captain?”

“None, at the present moment. You will be here for some days, no doubt?”

“For several weeks, I imagine. I’m going to Fez in the morning, to check up matters with the local agency there, and shall be back here in a few days.”

Baraud nodded carelessly and looked at the table by the wall. Upon it was heaped the pink cotton that had come from the yellow box.

“That looks like the stuff used by jewelers,” he observed significantly.

“It is,” said Burke. “Pretty, isn’t it? By the way, I think Merrit said that you were out of the Intelligence Service now, didn’t he? Or was I mistaken?”

In these words, the Frenchman sensed the antagonist who confronted him. The two men exchanged a level look, Burke smiling, Baraud keen-eyed and angry. It was a moment of sharp awakening for Baraud, who now perceived that this American had been quietly having fun with him all the while, had pierced his lies, probably knew a good deal more than he let on.

“Let me tell you something,” said Baraud slowly. “Morocco can be either a friendly or a very dangerous country, Mr. Burke. It is as you choose to make it.”

In a flash, Burke took his decision. Already the fat was in the fire—that accursed pink cotton had exposed all.

“Very well,” he rejoined, his eyes suddenly icy cold. “And let me tell you something, my dear captain. I know very well that you are not in the Intelligence Service; I know that you are not in charge of any case against Merrit; I know that he had nothing to do with any narcotic handling; I know that you did not pay him a hundred thousand francs to-day; and what is more. I know who was behind his murder and why he was murdered.”

Baraud’s dark features turned darker, and the scar half-hidden by his mustache became an angry, flaming purple. Yet he kept himself well in hand.

“It seems to me that you are a little out of your head,” he observed coldly. “Am I to construe your tone as a threat?”

“As you please, and be damned to you,” said Burke, and smiled a little. “Do I make myself clear?”

“You do.” The Frenchman bowed slightly, mockingly. “*Au revoir!* I shall make myself clear to you, in turn—before very long.”

He departed without more words.

Burke smiled, and undressed in a bad humor. He was disappointed. He had hoped that his abrupt defiance would throw the Frenchman into a temper, get some impulsive admission out of him; but the other had been far too clever. It was that confounded pink cotton that had given the game away! Still, Baraud had undoubtedly searched everything in the room with great care, and would not be sure about the rosary. Burke got out the relic and looked it over.

“You may be sacred, and worth a pile of money, but you’re blamed dangerous, all right!” he addressed the string of coral. “I expect there’ll be visitors to-night, and I need my sleep—so we’ll just take care of you right now.”

He filled his wash-basin, scrubbed his hands thoroughly, put the rosary plump into the soapy, dirty water—and left it there. Ten minutes later he was sound asleep, without even

troubling to lock his door. He was dead tired, for the day had been long and eventful; not even the ray of an electric torch, falling on his face two hours later, awakened him.

He had left an early call, and sent the native boy who summoned him with a note to the Goliath garage, to have an eight sent up for his use. Then he started dressing, and discovered immediately that he had entertained callers unawares during the night. Going to the wash bowl, he drew out the rosary, chuckled, and dried it off carefully before pocketing it.

“Outsmarted ’em for once, anyhow!” he reflected cheerfully, and went down to breakfast.

The car arrived at seven thirty, and he arranged with the garage man to have Merrit’s remaining stock taken care of until his return. He had packed a few things and had them fetched down, and was putting them in the car when a taxicab drew up and Marie Thornton alighted, bag in hand. She came directly to him, and he saw a glow of excitement in her face.

“Can we get off quickly—this very minute?” she demanded breathlessly, without so much as a “good morning.”

“Hop in,” said Burke, and took his place under the wheel. With the slam of her door, the car was off. “What’s the rush? Trouble? Better direct me, first.”

Across the square, and in five minutes they were on the Rabat Highway, which runs along the coast to the capital.

“No trouble,” she explained, “but I was followed here. Something’s happened. What?”

“Nothing much,” said Burke amiably, “except that you and I have met. Oh, yes—Baraud paid me a visit last night. He got nasty, and so did I, and he departed. He lied like a house afire, too. There isn’t a bit of doubt that he did in poor Merrit.”

Once out on the highway, with no speed laws to hold him back, he opened up the eight and an excited laugh broke from the girl.

“Splendid! And you really had it out with him? He’s a bad man to have for an enemy.”

“And a worse for friend,” said Burke. “I’m not worrying, so cheer up. If you see any one following us, let me know.”

She laughed again. “Small chance of that! They’ll be ahead of us at Rabat, though.”

“Nonsense!” scoffed Burke. “Look here, young lady, be sensible! This is broad daylight and the Twentieth Century. Baraud isn’t going to have us pinched, believe me. That bird doesn’t drag in any police—he’s too wise! He might try banditry, I’ll grant you. Let him! If we’re going to Fez, can’t we pass up Rabat?”

“We’d have to stop at the hotel in Rabat to get some lunch,” she rejoined dubiously. “But it’s only a two-hour drive with this car. Hm! We might stop at roadside hot-dog stands, or what passes for them here, and then skim the outskirts in Rabat and over to the Meknez and Fez road. But I’m afraid he’ll be ahead of us, or will have telephoned.”

“Never be afraid,” said Burke. “It doesn’t pay. By the way, here’s the rosary, in case you’d like to look it over.”

While she exclaimed in delight and wonder over the coral, the big eight purred on, past other cars, past busses loaded from running-boards to roof with Arabs, past donkeys and carts and fortified farms and ancient castles, with the Atlantic smiling to the left in the sunlight and the great Moroccan upland swelling and billowing off to the right.

The better he became acquainted with this American girl, the better Burke liked her. He even managed to pick up a mutual friend or two, thanks to having summered in the little Michigan resort town whence she came, so that in no time at all they were on a very friendly

basis. Then, abruptly, as they swung about a curve and pitched down into a deep ravine, she caught suddenly at his arm, in swift alarm.

Burke had already seen the blockade, however—a cart overturned below, a big bus drawn up waiting to pass, with a number of soldiers and Arabs from the bus helping to right the cart. Two French officers were standing to one side, watching. They looked at the approaching Goliath and exchanged a word.

As Burke brought the car to a halt behind the bus, one of the officers, very gay in his blue and scarlet and tan and gold, stepped up and saluted smartly.

“Good morning,” he said, “Am I by any chance addressing Monsieur Burke?”

“Correct,” said Burke. “What can I do for you? Give you a lift?”

“Thanks, but it is not necessary, *monsieur*.” From his tunic pocket the officer produced an envelope, and passed it over with a flourish. “I was asked to give you this, in case I met you on the road. Thank you.”

With another salute, he turned away and rejoined his companion.

Burke tore open the envelope, which bore no address, and from it removed a single sheet of paper bearing a few lines of writing. He scanned it, gave a sniff, and passed it on to the girl beside him. The cart was just being swung off the road, and the bus, taking on its load, resumed its way. Burke swung in behind, then opened up and passed it.

“Our friend Baraud thinks he’s being very durned impressive, eh?” he said. “That’s the French of it for you!”

Marie Thornton held up the paper and read the brief epistle:

M. BURKE:

If you stopped at the Transat Hotel in Rabat and asked for Captain d’Estrees, you would be able to turn over what you carry at a very good profit. If you neglect the opportunity, it will be most unfortunate—for you.

BARAUD.

A gasp escaped the girl. “Of all things! Delivered in this manner!”

“Bah!” Burke chuckled. “We’ll just call his bluff, savvy? That’s us, comrade!”

CHAPTER IV. LAND OF SPIES.

Rabat dropped behind, with only a pause for gas and oil to fill the maw of the Goliath. On up over the hills to the east, and a pause toward noon at a roadside bus stop, with wine and sandwiches for refreshment, and luscious crimson pomegranates, dead ripe at this season, for dessert.

Then on again, until the gigantic walls of Meknez came into view, the big car purring smoothly with the throttle wide open most of the way. The afternoon was hot, sun-white, blinding. They wound along past those massive walls, into which were budded the bodies of Christian slaves by the thousand, down to the stream and on up the long slope beyond, leaving the ancient city behind, toward the new French town on the opposite hills.

"This Baraud of yours," said Burke, as they hummed along, "is a poor bluffer. If he's any good, he'll have the description of this car, and will have telephoned ahead—he may even be ahead of us himself, for we've seen several airplanes this morning. But I think we'll stop in here, and do a little of the same work ourselves."

He drew up before the imposing structure of the P. T. T.—Postes, Telephones and Telegraphs—and met the inquiring glance of his companion with a smile.

"Who's the chap we're going to see in Fez? The one to work the deal for us?"

"Oh! Of course." She swung open the door on her side, and alighted. "Come on. I'll get him on the line—he's the manager of a branch bank there and knows me. You can speak with him. His brother is one of the big lawyers here. They're French-Algerian, and hate the military, and all the big natives are their firm friends. *Allons!*"

Burke swung in at her side. "Does he know Baraud?"

"Of course. Every one here does."

In another ten minutes Marie Thornton got her connection and broke into smiling speech with one Monsieur Souzane. She introduced Burke, and handed him the receiver.

"Hello!" he said in French. "Mademoiselle Thornton is here with me in Meknez. We have something with us which most of the natives are looking for—something in a yellow box. Do you get me? It was recently stolen—"

"For the love of heaven, *m'sieu!*" came the sharp response. "Are you in earnest?"

"Entirely. So is a certain Captain Baraud, who is either ahead of us or behind us or somewhere on the trail. We want to turn this object over to you, for restitution. I've a large car, a Goliath, and we're heading for Fez. I have every reason to think we may have trouble before getting there. What do you suggest?"

"Does Baraud know your car?" came the instant query.

"He does."

"Where are you now?"

"At the Bureau des Postes."

"Good. Stay there." The voice was curt, energetic, vibrant. Burke liked the unseen man at once. "Within fifteen minutes a Fiat car will come to pick you up; the driver will mention my name. Trust him. Good-by!"

And M. Souzane hung up.

Out on the sunlit steps of the building, Burke turned to regard the girl whimsically.

“He’s a fast worker, eh?” he observed, telling her what Souzane had said. “Evidently he’ll telephone some chap here—and we’ll be relieved of the Goliath. I’d better arrange to have it taken care of here, then. Hop in. We’ll apparently depart, but stop at that garage down the street and walk back here.”

“Where’s the rosary?” she asked. “Still in your pocket?”

Burke nodded, as he swung the car about. “It bulges, too. Can’t be helped.”

“Let me tell you something,” she said gravely. “You take all this very lightly, Mr. Burke, but you don’t know Morocco. Every man you meet may be a spy. Every native, every resident, has heard about the theft of that rosary. Baraud may be out of the secret service, but he has all the connections necessary; and human life is valued at less than nothing here. You must realize—”

Burke grinned. “My dear girl,” he intervened, “if we stopped to realize how serious every step of our daily life might be, we’d go crazy! Now, forget it. Here’s our garage.”

They turned in at a small garage. Inside the entrance, Burke halted the car, and the girl alighted, taking her hand bag. No one was visible here, and he drove on to the far end, where a mechanic was talking with two Arabs.

“I want to store the car with you for a day or two,” said Burke, as the mechanic came up.

“Gladly, *m’sieu’*,” was the smiling response. “It will be quite safe here.”

As Burke got out, he was aware that the two natives had come up and were watching him with a curiously intent expression, but with the cordial, friendly smile which he had noted upon the faces of all the Arabs in Morocco. Just what that smile meant, he had not yet learned.

He glanced at the entrance, and saw that Marie Thornton had stepped outside and was waiting on the sidewalk. The mechanic saluted him.

“One moment, *m’sieu’*—I will get a receipt card from the office.”

As the mechanic departed, Burke leaned into the car for the toilet case that carried his few personal belongings. Some vague prescience—certainly no sound—caused him to glance around. Not three feet away, he saw the two Arabs darting upon him, one of them with knife plunging in for his side.

Off balance as he was, unprepared, unarmed, Burke could do only one thing—but he did it like a flash. Shoving against the car, he kicked up and backward. His boot, with all the weight of his shove behind it, slammed into the knife-wielder. The blow caught the Arab somewhere amidships with terrific force. The man uttered a startled gasp, doubled up, and dropped to the cement floor.

The second native, however, fell upon Burke, clawed him away from the car, and bore him to the floor, tearing at the bulging coat pocket. Obviously the plan had been for one man to knife him while the other secured the coral.

This scheme had already gone agley. Burke let the Arab claw, and got to one knee, then smashed in a hammer-blow to the brown face. The man snarled, and erupted in a perfect fury of passionate rage. A knife gleamed in his hand. Forgetting the rosary, he was now at Burke’s throat with a lightning blow.

Somehow, Burke knocked the knife aside, and then came to his feet. His fists drove in, right and left; the Arab staggered, but recovered and leaped back at him. Burke met that leap with one smashing drive, accurately timed. It went straight to the angle of the jaw, and knocked the native off his feet. He stretched out with a spasmodic jerk of his knee, and then lay still. The first Arab was drawn up in a groaning knot, clutching his stomach.

Burke leaned forward and explored the ragged garments of the senseless man. A grunt of satisfaction broke from him as his fingers came upon a pistol. He jerked it out and thrust it into his pocket, then rose.

The mechanic was returning, gaping, staring at the scene. Burke chuckled.

"These fellows tried to rob me. Are they friends of yours?"

"But no, *m'sieu*!" burst forth the mechanic. "They had but just come in when you arrived. They had begun to inquire after a car—yours, perhaps. I will call the police—"

"Let them go," said Burke. "I'm in a hurry."

He pocketed the car ticket, got his toilet kit, and a moment later was joining the girl outside. She looked at him and uttered a sharp exclamation.

"What's happened? You—oh! Your hand!"

Burke looked down and saw blood over his left hand. The knife had cut across the back of it, but he had not felt the hurt. With the grimace, he produced a handkerchief and wrapped it about his hand.

"Come on, no time to waste," he said. "A couple of Baraud's men were in there. I got a gun off one of them, so now I'm fixed for business. Is that a Fiat in front of the bureau?"

It was. They hurried along to the building, and were met by the driver of the Fiat, a bearded Arab in nondescript garments and a wretched *jellab* made of burlap sacking. He grinned and spoke in French.

"Good morning! M. Souzane sent me—"

"Then move quickly," said Burke. "In with you, young lady! Get going, my friend."

By the time they were in the back seat, the Arab was under the wheel, and the Fiat went away from there with a jump.

"I have iodine here," and the girl opened her bag. "Give me your hand."

"With pleasure," said Burke cheerfully. "Both of them, if you like!"

The driver glanced around, saw the crimsoned hand, and grinned. Burke asked where he was taking them.

"To Fez, *m'sieu*'. You have had trouble?"

"No," grunted Burke. "Others had trouble."

The native laughed and sent the car forward at breakneck speed, with imperative honks of his horn at any one in the way.

In ten minutes they were out of town, following railroad tracks across high gorges, winding through deep valleys, sweeping up again to the highlands. His hand bandaged, Burke lit a cigarette, met the anxious eyes of the girl beside him, and laughed. He hauled the rosary from his pocket and shoved it into her lap.

"You take it—Marie is the name, I think? No use standing on formality. You see, I'm the one they're after, now, so you'll have more chance of getting through with the thing."

She hastily put it out of sight, and with a nod leaned forward to the driver.

"Where are we going in Fez?"

"To the Dar Jamai, *mademoiselle*. M. Souzane said to take you there, as it is the closest to the gates, and he will meet you there. Thus you will not have to pass through the city. He said that he might meet us on the road, but was not certain."

Marie turned. "Good! That's the Transat Hotel—an old palace made over. I'm beginning to feel that we've pulled through, Mr. Burke!"

"Eh? Who's Mr. Burke? My name's Jim."

“Jim, then.” Laughter rose in her eyes, then they sobered. “And to think that only last evening I was at that native café with Baraud, when everything began to happen!”

“It sure began then, when I saw you,” observed Burke. “No use blinking the fact, Marie. And I noticed the way Baraud looked at you, too! That’s why I didn’t like him from the start.”

She met his gaze, and nodded.

“I know; just the same, he’s always been very polite. I was a little afraid of him at times, though he’s really rather fascinating.”

The Arab glanced around at them. “Baraud, eh?” he said in English, to the amazement of Burke. “You friends of Baraud?”

“No, we’re not,” said Burke. “Where in the devil did you learn English?”

“In America,” and the native laughed. “Ringling’s circus two years, mister. With fine horses. Ismail my name.”

“Hurrah! Glad to meet you, Mr. Ismail,” responded Burke. “Step on the gas, boy! I laid out two of Baraud’s friends back yonder, and we’re in a hurry.”

“You bet, damn’ good,” was the merry rejoinder, and the Fiat spurted down a long steep hill. Marie touched Burke’s arm and spoke very softly.

“You never know what you’ll strike in Morocco, Jim! Be careful.”

He nodded. Five minutes later, her words were exemplified, when there came a drumming roar from overhead, and Burke looked out the side of the car to see a military airplane not a hundred feet above, sweeping along beside them and then zooming up with a roar and a leap, to swerve, away and vanish above the hills.

CHAPTER V. AN ARAB STUMBLES.

The afternoon was more than half gone when Fez came into sight, their first glimpses of it being the new French city off to the right, with sprawling brown walls on ahead. Here was Fez-Bali, or Old Fez, the so-called "new" city of Fez-Djedid having been founded a hundred years or so later.

They turned abruptly from the gates of Fez-Bali, to follow the road along the walls and animal market toward the heights of Fort Chardonner and the Merinide tombs of the twelfth century. Even the anxiety of the girl, caused by the sight of that hovering airplane, had now vanished, for the end of their road was in sight, and danger over.

The cattle market behind, with its dust and herds and throngs of Arabs, they were winding up among the trees, when a native scurried out on the road ahead, to cross before them. The driver honked at him. The Arab gave the car a startled glance, tripped, and went down in the road square in front. The driver slammed on his brakes, missed going over the man by a few feet, and leaned out to pour a flood of invective upon him. The native rose, to show a negroid countenance and a forked black beard, and flew into a passion. He came up to the side of the car, shaking his fist and crying out furiously—then, unexpectedly, seized the driver by the arm and half jerked him out over the side of the car.

And at this instant a dozen men came running from the side of the road, closing about the car before Burke realized their presence. The hapless driver was hauled out into the road and hammered senseless.

Burke leaped out, the pistol in his hand. Even as he did so, he sensed that it was a trap, that this was no haphazard affair. The spot was isolated, with the vast city of Fez far below, to their right, stretched out across the valley in a blue haze. As he came to the ground, an Arab leaped upon him from behind, bringing him down, and iron hands seized his arms.

He pressed the trigger blindly. A shot cracked out, and another. He heard a cry from the girl in the car, then a harsh, imperative voice that he vaguely recognized. Something struck him heavily across the head. For the third time, he fired, weighted down by bodies, and heard a man scream in response to the shot. Then a blow on the head laid him out senseless.

A second car came up beside the first. One of the Arabs flung back the hood of his brown *jellab* and stepped up beside Marie Thornton, revealing the face of Captain Baraud.

"Into my car, if you please," he commanded curtly. "No argument, I beg of you! Talk later. Or must I have you put in the car?"

"You beast!" she returned heatedly. "And I took you for a gentleman—"

"Put this woman into my car," he said in French, beckoning his men.

"No need," said the girl angrily.

She left the Fiat, whose bleeding driver had been lifted and flung senseless in among the brush, out of sight. Going to the other car, whose Arab driver held the door open for her, she got in. Baraud ordered in two of his men, then spoke to her again.

"Your pardon, Miss Thornton. You will not be hurt unless you call out or endeavor to attract attention. In that event, you will suffer, and I shall be forced to kill your friend here. Remember!"

Burke, fast bound, was flung into the Fiat. The group dispersed and vanished, leaving Baraud and two other men beside the Fiat. They searched this car swiftly and diligently, having already gone over Burke's body. Then Baraud nodded and climbed in.

"All right, Emile. You know where. They have hidden it, or she has it. Go ahead!"

The Fiat was turned about and driven away rapidly, following Baraud's car.

When Burke came to himself, he was lying upon a couch in a handsomely furnished room with tiled walls and floor. His head ached painfully, but he was unbound. A trickle of water came from a wall fountain at one side, and rising, he repressed a groan and bathed his head. The high windows admitted level sunset light, and he looked around in quick interest. There was one massive door to the room, and it was fast barred or locked.

Except for his lost pistol, none of his belongings had been disturbed. He sank down on the edge of the couch, wondering at it all.

"Baraud was too smart for us, eh?" he reflected savagely. "And now he's probably got what he was after. He's got me as well, blast him! But he's not through with me, that's certain."

A moment later he looked up, at a sound from the door. It was opened by a native, and into the room stepped an officer in uniform, the same Captain Lamarte who had come to search the apartment of Merrit. He gave Burke a smiling greeting.

"So we meet again, *mon ami!*" he said pleasantly. "Sorry to find you in this fix. My friend Baraud will see you in half an hour or so. Make yourself comfortable. I'll have some food and wine brought to you. Mlle. Thornton is quite safe, so be at ease."

"Very kind of you, captain," said Burke. He rose and glanced at the open door and the native there. "You didn't find what you wanted at Merrit's rooms, eh?"

"No, but it's all right now," and Captain Lamarte laughed.

"Probably. You and Baraud are in on the game together, eh?" Burke shrugged and broke into a laugh. "Well, you've won the big stake, anyhow; and as you can't get the emerald necklace without my help, I suppose you'll be satisfied."

"Eh?" Lamarte's countenance lost its good-humored negligence. His eyes narrowed greedily, and he gave Burke an intent look. "What necklace is that?"

With an air of surprise, Burke glanced at him and then at the door.

"But I thought you knew! Well, since you don't, there's no more to be said."

Lamarte turned, went to the door, shot a few words at the native, and then slammed the door and came back to Burke.

"Now, my friend, just what is this about an emerald necklace?" he said quietly. "Baraud knows nothing of it; he need not know. I can befriend you, if you make it worth while."

"Yes?" said Burke, hesitant. "But why am I a prisoner here?"

Lamarte waved his hand. "Oh, Baraud merely wants some information from you. He has the rosary, we're in his house in Fez-Djedid, and if you play up a bit, there'll be no more trouble. About the emeralds, now! You left them in Casablanca? Trust me, and in half an hour you'll be out of here and on your way to safety."

Lamarte made the unlucky error of thinking that the American wanted to get out of here at any cost. Burke wanted no such thing.

"I suppose you're right," said Burke, lowering his voice and glancing around. "Merrit may have been wrong, of course, in saying the necklace was worth a million francs—but if you'll promise to help me—"

“Gladly, gladly!” exclaimed the officer, his dark eyes gleaming eagerly as he scented the chance to grab off something rich on his own account.

“Then,” and Burke leaned forward, “I’ll tell you—”

His right came up. It was a short, snappy uppercut, but he was balanced to get full weight into it. Lamarte’s head rocked back, then he sagged forward as his knees loosened; Burke caught him, laughing a little, and lowered him to the couch.

“That was a mean crack, but you deserved it!” murmured the American.

He removed the Sam Browne belt, unsnapped the shoulder strap, and with the two bits of leather bound Lamarte very effectually, pocketing the pistol from its holster. Over the recumbent, senseless figure he drew two thick Shleu rugs from the floor.

“Quite as good as any gag!” he observed cheerfully. “Ta-ta, my dear Lamarte—pleasant dreams! And now, let’s see your friend Baraud, a little before he’s ready.”

He went to the door and flung it open. As he had expected, the native had departed. Stepping out, Burke closed and barred the door again.

He found himself at one end of a long corridor, closed on the left, with doors opening off. On the right were arches, opening on a huge tiled court, with a fountain in the center. Opposite, across the court, were the usual native rooms, opening full upon the central square, without doors in their open arched walls. Baraud was certainly not over there, and since the doors down the corridor were closed, with no natives loafing outside, he would not be in any of those rooms either. The daylight was now rapidly failing.

To his right, Burke saw a circular staircase, and went to it. He descended halfway, and paused. Below was a glare of electric light, and two Arabs were talking idly and smoking, before a closed door. This was probably a hillside house, he reflected, and Baraud’s private rooms would be on the first floor, below.

As Burke paused, a bell jangled. One of the two Arabs jerked open the door, and Baraud’s voice came in Arabic. The two men responded. One of them disappeared. The other closed the door and came to the staircase, starting upward.

Burke crouched down behind the three-foot inner wall of the staircase, waiting. In the obscurity, the native did not see him until too late. One startled cry burst from the Arab, checked midway as he was hurled against the outer wall; then, before he could cry out again, Burke’s boot drove into him and he lay sprawled and motionless.

A moment later, Burke was at the door below. No one was in sight. Carefully grasping the knob, Burke drew open the door a crack, and heard Baraud’s voice.

“You see, my dear Miss Thornton,” the man was saying in English, “it was really very foolish of you and this man to combine against me. I gave him full warning, and he ignored it. You ask me for his life—well, what can I do? I will grant your request. I will let him go free from here, on one condition.”

“And what is that?” came the voice of Marie Thornton.

“It is, that you will give me your company for the evening. We shall dine with El Mokri, whose house not half a dozen Christians have ever seen. He is the wealthiest man in Morocco. And later, you shall go to the Dar Jamai or where you will. Come! This is a little price to ask, eh?”

“Far too little,” she made answer angrily. “What is behind it?”

“You shall see there is nothing behind it,” said Baraud, with a silky laugh. “I have sent for Lamarte—you remember him? He obeys me. You will hear my orders regarding this foolish

American; you comprehend, I must keep the man in my power, even if I let him go free. You shall see! I will have a million francs in cash to-night from El Mokri for this little bauble on the table. A million? Two million at least! These dogs of Arabs are wealthy men, many of them, and they can afford to pay for their relics. What do you say? Do you agree?"

"I must," came the girl's voice. "You must not harm Mr. Burke. If you merely want to have my company for the evening, very well. If there's anything behind it, then look out!"

Burke smiled grimly, having a fairly good idea of what might lie behind it, for he had seen Baraud's eyes when the man looked at Marie Thornton, and he knew what thoughts bred such a look.

Then, straightening up, he knocked at the door.

"Enter," came Baraud's voice.

Pistol in hand, Burke walked into the room and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER VI. A FIGHTING ATTEMPT.

The room was magnificent—the floor thick with Berber rugs, the walls half tile and half the ancient carved plaster work which is now a lost art, the ceiling of inlaid woods, a superb fountain plashing softly down one wall, old mosque lanterns filled with the soft glow of electric bulbs.

Upon a divan against the far wall sat Marie Thornton. In an easy chair, facing her, his back to the door, was Baraud. The rosary of Mulai Idris lay on a tabouret beside him. He was just lighting a cigarette, and did not turn as the door opened.

“Enter, enter, Lamarte!” he repeated. “I want to speak with you about the American upstairs. Give him a strong dose of narcotics and take him to-night to the Dar Jamai. Plant some morphia in his belongings, and have the police seize it, while he sleeps. Then leave the rest in my hands. You understand?”

Burke stepped forward.

He came to the side of Baraud’s chair and his pistol-butt tapped down. The Frenchman never knew what hit him. He slumped in his chair and the cigarette fell from his fingers to the rug. Burke stepped on it calmly, and looked at Marie Thornton.

She had fainted.

“Oh, heck!” muttered Burke disgustedly. “If I—hello! Why, the poor kid—”

Swift revulsion of feeling seized upon him. One of the girl’s arms was outthrust, and upon the exposed wrist he saw the marks of bruises, fast turning black. He seized her other hand and found more marks. He realized now how Baraud had gained that rosary beside him, and cursed the precious thing as he glanced down at it, the coral and gold and emerald gaudy in the shimmer of light.

Striding to the door, he locked it and then brought water from the fountain in an ash tray. After a moment, Marie opened her eyes, and her fingers closed on his hand.

“You—it’s really you!” she murmured, and sighed as he helped her to sit up. “I thought it wasn’t real!”

“Real enough,” Burke said, and her eyes dilated upon the slumped figure in the chair.

“The women!” she murmured, and shivered. “Those women—they hurt me, and then they found it—those black women—”

“Forget it,” said Burke. “Snap out of it, Marie. Do you know your way out of here?”

“I—I think so,” she returned, with a puzzled frown. “I’m not certain. Is he hurt?”

“Not as badly as he should be,” said Burke, and leaned over the Frenchman. His fingers went through the man’s pockets swiftly, and he thrust a number of papers into his own pocket, then produced a second automatic, which he handed to Marie. “Can you use it?”

“Some.”

“Know your way around this burg?”

She nodded. “Pretty well. I was here for a month, sketching.”

“Then let’s get out. Feel able?” He inspected her critically, and his blue eyes lighted up with his warm smile. “Marie, you’re a peach! I don’t wonder this bird wanted to take you along for the evening! It wouldn’t have been a healthy visit, though. He figured on making me

out a dope handler, and you'd have gone to sleep at this Arab's house, and so forth. The more I think about it, the sorrier I am I didn't hit our friend harder! Feeling fit again?"

She smiled and rose.

"Quite, thanks." Her hand came out and touched his bandaged hand. "Jim, you're wonderful! I don't know how you did it, but—well, when you showed up I was thinking of grabbing one of those weapons on the wall and going for him."

Burke glanced at the wall above her, which was decorated with all manner of ancient weapons, most of them inlaid with ivory and silver and stones. He ran his eyes over them, and then stepped to the divan.

"That's quite an idea, young lady," he said, and caught down a heavy whip of woven thongs intermeshed with gold wire and having a handle of barbaric silver workmanship. "I'll just take this along. You'd better be prepared for a scrimmage. We'll not get out of here very easily."

Ripping the bandage from his left hand, he shifted his automatic, and swung the heavy whip. Its lash hissed and cracked sharply.

A quick rap sounded at the door, and Burke swung around.

"Ready for it, Marie?" he said, and lifted his voice. "Enter!"

The door swung open, to reveal an Arab who started into the room. He checked himself in amazement at sight of them. Then the long lash flicked out at him. With a shriek, he turned and fled, holding his hands to his face.

"Clumsy," said Burke, striding forward. "Come on. Start shooting if you see any one—it's noise we need now! The sooner the police show up, the better."

"You don't know Fez," she responded, and laughed shakily. "Turn right outside—I know that much—we'll get to the gardens that way."

Burke swung down the corridor in which he found himself, obeying her direction. Ahead of him flitted several figures. He flung up the automatic and fired, the shot reëchoing with a roar through the place.

His bullet missed its mark, but the figures vanished. Shrill voices, the pounding of feet, resounded on every hand. A trim figure appeared running toward them, an officer in uniform, flourishing his pistol and calling sharply at them to halt. Burke laughed and fired, and the officer pitched sidewise and was gone from sight. A moment later appeared a wide archway, with gardens beyond, dimly lighted by occasional electric bulbs.

"This way, Jim!" The girl's voice came, clear and cool, to guide him. "We came in across these gardens from the gates."

"Right," he said, and swung toward the arch. Then his whip curled up. "Look out—stay behind me! The fools are rushing us."

A burst of voices, a mass of Arab figures ahead, suddenly massed to block their passage. Careless now of the outcome, Burke fired into the midst of them, and with the shot his pistol jammed. A growl, a savage animal snarl, and the Arabs leaped at him, knives agleam in the light. A shot rang out, and the bullet sang past his ear.

Burke hurled himself full at the lot of them, his eyes aflame with the lust of fight. The whip curled and cracked among them, battered at them, lashed across arms and faces like a golden snake. One native plunged forward, screaming, flinging himself at Burke's throat, but the whip butt crashed over his head and he went down. At his elbow, Burke heard the girl's

gun crack out, and then the thong broke and he was through, striding along a graveled path among the trees.

“Hurt?” exclaimed Marie, panting. She was running now, to keep up with his fast stride.

“Not a bit.”

Sharp while it lasted—a swift, deadly ten seconds of cruel work, but they were through, and yells leaped up behind them. They passed under a light, and rushing shapes came hurtling at them from ahead, voices yelping in shrill excitement. The whip cracked and bit out, the yelps changed to wild shrieks. An Arab rolled at their feet, blinded; the others screamed and vanished.

Burke laughed as he strode, a fierce wild note in his voice.

“There’ll be a great clean-up of this rats’ nest when the authorities get busy!” he exclaimed. “Baraud and his gang staked everything—and lost. Officers in uniform, eh? Courts-martial by wholesale on that head alone—Look out! Damnation—”

They came suddenly, leaping from the trees and bushes on either hand, three or four of them. Marie fired twice, as Burke lashed out, but it was a near thing. One Arab bore Burke backward, gripping for the throat, and was stabbing desperately when the whip butt cracked his skull. Burke straightened up, unhurt.

“Get to the gates, quickly!” he exclaimed. “We can’t keep this up.”

He could see only bushes, trees, fountains, a dark mass of high walls, the lights of the building behind. If they were in the city, it was invisible. Burke felt something dragging at his pocket, and felt for it. A chuckle came to his lips, as he felt the rosary of Idris. He must have caught it up as he left the room, stuffing it into his pocket.

Just ahead showed another light, a bulb hanging in a tree. As they came to it, two rapid shots cracked out somewhere.

Burke halted. The whip dropped from his hand. He half started to pick it up, then checked himself, repressed a groan.

“Marie! Give me your gun. Go on ahead, reach the gates, get through—somehow—”

Startled by his voice, she caught at his arm, clung to him.

“You’re hurt, Jim—oh, where is it? Come on with me, you must! It’s not far now—”

He swung around a little, grimacing with pain. He got his back to the trees, snarled at her fiercely, almost incoherently.

“Damn it, let go of me! Go on, I tell you—yes, they’ve got me, all right. Go on, will you? Get out of here—damn it all, get out! Move! Run for it!”

The desperate urge of his voice compelled her. With a half-strangled sob she shoved the gun into his hand, pushed on past him, disappeared, running in the darkness. Burke knew that her pistol could have only a shot or two left. A groan broke from him. He put a hand to his back, felt the warm sticky blood.

Above the uproar sweeping through the gardens he caught the voice of Baraud. The weight dragged at his pocket; he jerked out the rosary, and with grim bravado flung the thing about his neck. A dark mist came over his eyes; only with an effort did he keep himself from falling. He stood there, a swaying, hurt figure, awaiting the end.

It came swiftly enough. As the dark mist cleared away, he saw them there fronting him, a half circle of savage faces staring at him, eyes rolling wild, weapons glittering. They were pointing at him, pointing at the coral of Idris about his neck. He laughed grimly as he looked at them.

“Forward, rabble!” he taunted them. “Finish it, finish it! And the first of you will go down the road to hell ahead of me. Come along! Where is your master? Where’s Baraud?”

The Arab voices broke into a furious snarl of hatred and rage. The circle started forward, then broke. Baraud came bursting through them, pistol in hand. He saw the American, and halted.

“You dog!” he cried out. “So it was you, eh? Take it, damn you!”

He fired. Burke felt the shock of the impact, then stared curiously as Baraud toppled forward on his face. A man who falls that way is done for. He realized that his own pistol had spoken. Then he saw them closing in, saw the steel flashing in the light. This was the end.

Burke laughed as they yelled at him in a surging wave of hatred. His automatic cracked, and again. They wavered—another shot would break them. But his last shot was gone now. The hammer clicked. One fierce yell of exultation, and they surged forward. Burke hurled the empty weapon in their very faces as the dark mist closed down.

About him was a furious, swaying, fighting mass of figures. His eyes cleared. A dark shape rushed at him, and Burke’s hand went out, gripped a throat, clung tight. Voices were at his ears, he heard Marie Thornton crying at him, pulling at his arm. She was there indeed, her face a blaze of excitement.

“Let him go, let him go! Jim! Wake up!”

His grip relaxed. The man before him was no Arab, but a bareheaded Frenchman, trying to uphold him. Burke tottered.

“It’s all right, my friend!” came the man’s voice. “I’m Souzane—thank the good God we got here in time! My driver brought us word. You’re all right now. *Ma’m’selle*, get that cursed rosary out of sight! Quickly, hide the thing!”

Burke tried to realize it all, and succeeded dimly. The tide of figures had ebbed and broken and left them there alone, Baraud dead on the ground. Police whistles were shrilling. Souzane patted his arm, after a moment.

“All right, my friend, take it easy! Two bullets, but neither of them vital. We’ll have you bandaged in a jiffy and taken care of—and there’s a million francs waiting in Arab hands for a reward.”

“Reward be damned!” said Burke, and laughed a little as his hand closed on that of Marie. “I’ve a better one—eh, my dear?”

Her fingers pressed his in response, and he was still laughing gayly as darkness closed over him.

THE END.

[The end of *The Coral of Idris* by Henry Bedford-Jones]