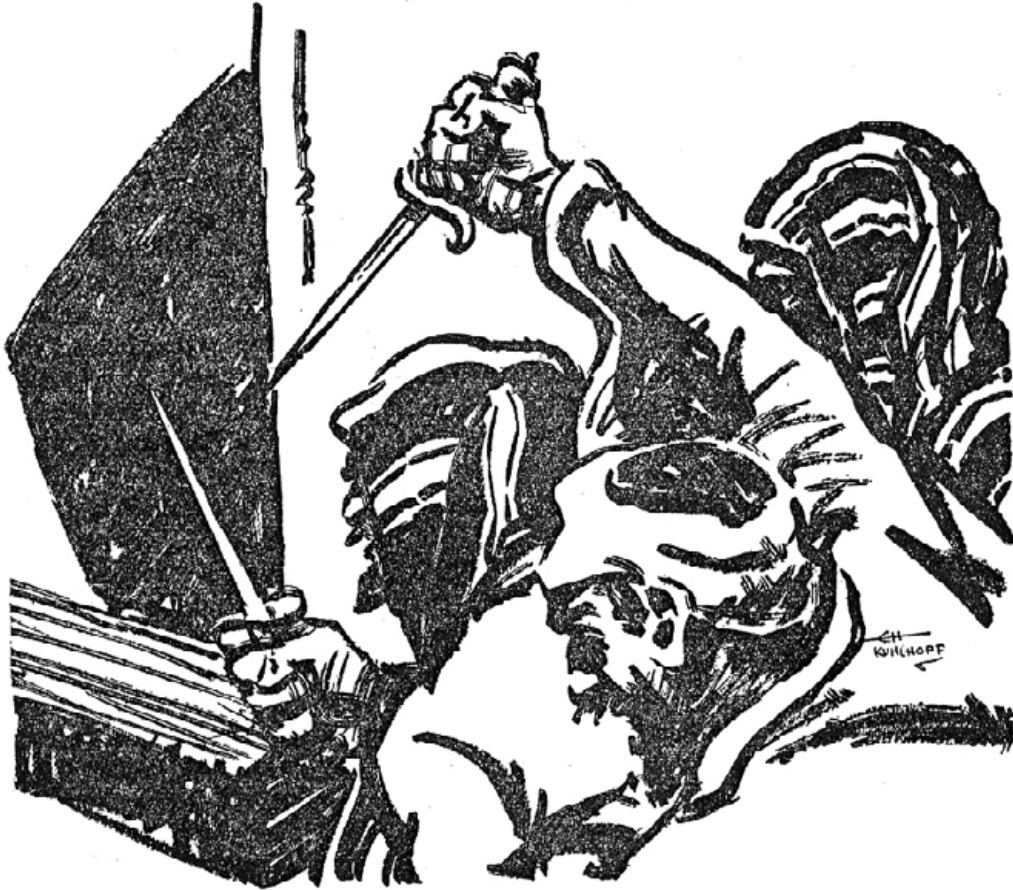


*As the French Agent said to the Young American,
"Burke, you are a Scoundrel, a Rascal—
and I have a Certain Respect for you."*



RENDEZVOUS

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I

BURKE was collecting his bets on the fourth race. It was a cleanup, an enormous cleanup. All around swarmed the money-mad throng—Arabs, civilians, soldiers, women. His hands filled with bundles of thousand-franc notes, Burke turned.

He collided sharply with Captain

Crepin, who was of course in mufti.

A simultaneous word of apology broke from the two men. Burke's lean, incisive features broke into a whimsical smile as he met the eyes of the Intelligence officer. Crepin did not return the smile. His thin, mustached, severe countenance was menacing.

"A word with you, M. Burke," he said.

"Faith, my dear Crepin, I'm at your

service!” returned Burke gaily, stuffing the sheaves of notes into his pockets: “You’re always full of the most charming surprises!”

The other grunted sardonically, as they worked a way through the crowd.

The sun hung in the west, glittering on the snowy peaks of the Atlas that rise above Marrakesh. Nearby showed the new French city, lively, naked, spick-and-span. Off to the right, amid its glorious date-palm groves, lifted the savage red walls of old Marrakesh.

“I congratulate you,” said Crepin acidly, “on picking the right horse.”

Burke chuckled. “Congratulate me, rather, on having the right friends, my dear fellow! If you didn’t make such a nuisance of yourself, I might let you in on something good tomorrow.”

Crepin merely sniffed. Presently they were clear of the throng, and Crepin halted. He lit a cigaret and handed Burke one, surveying the trim, hard figure with the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor at its lapel. Burke held a match to both cigarets.

“M. Burke, I have a certain respect for you,” said Crepin bluntly. “You’re a rascal. A scoundrel. You’ve run guns to dissident chiefs. I intend to land you in jail or have you expelled from Morocco. None the less, you have a certain sense of honor which I appreciate.”

Denis Burke bowed, and his blue eyes danced gaily.

“I may return the compliment,” he said whimsically. “You’re a bitter hard devil. You are devoted to your duty. You’ve no more human feeling than a snake, apparently. At the same time, you’re a gentleman. Your mere word on any subject would be good with me.”

Crepin inclined his head. “Thank you. In that case, M. Burke, I give you my word that I know your business here in

Marrakesh. I know whom you expect to meet, what you expect to do. You’ve run your last gun, and your number is up. I advise you to leave here, leave Morocco, immediately.”

Burke’s brows lifted. “I like Morocco,” he answered. “It likes me. I’ve been here for three years—”

“Raising hell.”

“Making trouble, if you like. Well, expel me if you can! You’ve tried hard enough to get something on me. You’ve failed. You’re too much of a gentleman to frame me.”

“This time,” said Crepin stiffly, “there will be no failure. *Au revoir!*”

HE STRODE away. Burke directed his steps toward the French town, at first in sober thought. His lips twisted in a grimace.

“A devilish unpleasant fellow, that!” he reflected. “Does he really know, indeed? Has somebody babbled that I’m here to meet El Hanech? In that case—but no, it’s impossible! El Hanech sent me word to meet him at a certain time and place. His brother carried the message, was caught and killed an hour afterward. No one else could have spoken. Yet Crepin seemed damned sure of himself! Well, I’ll chance it.”

He swung along with his lithe, clean stride, nodding to acquaintances, exchanging occasional cheery greetings with cloaked Arab figures. He had cast his lot here in Morocco, and loved the country.

A certain part of Morocco, however, did not love Denis Burke.

Presently he was seated before a table, on the shaded terrace of a cafe. Across the railroad tracks on the far side of the square, was a glorious outspread view of Marrakesh and the palm groves. From this thronged square radiated all life and

activity between the huge native city on the one side, and the enormous semi-circle of the French town, aviation camp and forts on the other side.

A short, bearded Arab, nearly black in complexion but wearing beautiful snowy garments, passed among the tables, saluted Burke, and pulled out the chair beside him.

"Peace be upon you, sidi," he grunted.

"And upon you, Si' Dris," said Burke in Arabic, then broke into a laugh. "How the devil you worked it, I don't know! But Fanchon romped home and paid twenty to one. I got your money and mine down. I've a bale of notes here—"

"Keep them until later; bring them to my office in the morning," said Sidi Idris, and crooked a finger at the nearest waiter. He accepted a cigaret from Burke, and smiled faintly beneath his white hood. "Not so bad for the first day of your visit in our charming city, eh? But there is better to come, by Allah! We have not seen you here for two months. There is work to do."

"You and I work together all right, Si' Dris," said Burke. "We can trust each other, and that's more than I can say for most! What kind of work?"

The Arab did not reply until the waiter had brought his mint tea and departed. He sipped the tea, his eyes stabbing about the place, then spoke softly.

"I have four boxes, small enough to be inconspicuous in the rear end of an automobile. Three of ammunition, one containing automatic rifles taken apart. We split thirty thousand francs for their delivery. A day's run from here."

Burke's eyes lighted up, then narrowed.

"To whom?"

"El Mekhnezi; he'll meet you on the highway near Jeb el Saghro."

"No," snapped Burke, and his gaze hardened. "That fellow's a blackguard, an

outright murderer. He and his gang are lice on the face of the earth! To supply a fellow of that sort with automatic rifles would be criminal."

"Does it matter?" asked Sidi Idris gently. "You have taken guns to others—"

"That was different, and you know it," cut in Burke, his eyes glinting dangerously. "With El Mekhnezi, no! I'll help the right sort, but not the wrong sort at any price!"

"*Allah i samah!*" murmured Sidi Idris, and so dismissed the matter with the proverbial "God will pardon!" which his people apply to anything and everything. Presently he finished his tea and pushed back his chair.

"You are leaving?"

"Not yet, my friend," said Burke. "I have an appointment."

The other nodded comprehension, and took his departure.

DENIS BURKE lit a fresh cigaret, sipped his drink, and let his thoughts drift back to Captain Crepin. He had no hesitation in risking French anger, for he had potent friends among French, Arabs and Berbers also. Now that military rule was superseded by civil government, Crepin must needs step softly.

True, Burke lived by his wits, was an adventurer. He risked his neck by running guns with the same gay laughter that accompanied a big haul on a fixed horse-race; but he sold his help to those who needed it. There was plenty of oppression in Morocco. The native chiefs, the great caids and pashas, were supported by the French; the feudal system still prevailed; slavery, even, was still in existence.

El Hanech was a typical case. That chieftain of a little Berber hill tribe was a doomed man. The French wanted to hang him, the powerful pasha who had taken his lands wanted to shoot him—chiefly

because he had resisted oppression. El Hanech, "the serpent," could command money enough, but was too fiercely proud, too independent, too dangerous, not to be doomed. And Burke had come here to meet this man.

Precisely to the minute of the appointment made two weeks earlier, El Hanech came.

Burke had expected to see the man he knew, a wild blond savage from the hills, bearded, clad in arrogant Berber garments of filth and tatters. He was astonished to see a slim figure with a pure white *sulmah* flung over European clothes. Under the white hood showed a clean-shaven, hard-jawed face as white as his own, blue eyes as reckless as his own, a thin-lipped smile tinged with bitterness.

"Greeting, my friend!" said El Hanech in French, "So you would not recognize me, eh? Excellent. Neither will anyone else."

"You're a fool to come here," said Burke. The other took the opposite chair and threw back the white hood to display red hair. A strong man, vigorous, virile.

"No; it is safe enough. My shaven face is unknown. Well, the pasha has taken the last of my lands, all my cattle and sheep. It is the end. The French support him."

"And you dare to come to Marrakesh?"

"This is only the French city. No, I'm not going into the pasha's den yonder!" and El Hanech flung a glance over his shoulder toward the ancient city—of hatred.

"You are my one hope," went on El Hanech softly, looking back to Burke. "Behind the pasha are the French; to resist, were utter folly. If you had not kept this appointment, I would have gone into the city, sought out the pasha, and put my knife into his liver. My people have scattered with their possessions, among

other tribes. For me there is no refuge. The pasha has put a price upon my head."

"And it's a damned shame," said Burke hotly. "Your family?"

"You have it. Three wives, two sons; no more. Six of us. As you know, my cousin Moussa lives in Larache, in the Spanish zone to the north, far beyond the power of this dog of a pasha. He is wealthy, a great man, with much land. He offers me an asylum."

"But how the devil will you get there?" exclaimed Burke, astonished. "By train, you'd be pinched in no time, even if you had forged papers. You can't cross the frontier—"

El Hanech grinned.

"The frontier is nothing; Moussa will arrange that. You will arrange all else."

"Oh, will I?"

"Assuredly. Three days ago I killed the pasha's steward and took the year's taxes he had collected. Here is twenty thousand francs," and into Burke's hands he passed a fat roll of notes. "Get me an automobile. Have it at a certain place tomorrow night. Yes?"

BURKE pocketed the money.

"Yes. Where?"

"On the Casablanca road. Once through the palm groves, you know the bridge across the Tinsift river? Just beyond is a fork, one highway branching off to Safi. At that fork, I'll be waiting. I'll send back the car from the frontier. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Burke. "At eight tomorrow night."

"May Allah recompense you!" For an instant the Berber's hard face softened. Then he drew up his hood. "One thing more. My family lie out in the hills, a few miles away. They are starving. I will take back some food today, but we will need more, both food and water. Put some in

the car. We have no luggage except rifles, so there'll be room enough."

"Very well," said Burke. "Do you think that Captain Crepin has any word of this?"

"Crepin?" The white teeth of El Hanech showed in a snarl that was like a wolf's snap. "That dog? No. Only I knew and my brother, who is now dead. And you."

"Then perhaps he guessed, for he gave me a warning." Burke shrugged and laughed. "No matter! I'll bring the car. Eight tomorrow night; be ready for anything."

II

BY NINE o'clock that evening, Denis Burke found that he was unable to rent a car in Marrakesh. December had come, the tourist season was on full blast, and every available car was out. The few other private cars he might have obtained were only diminutive Citroens.

Burke was not worried, however. The huge Transatlantique system of hotels, spread over the whole of northern Africa, was at his service. In the morning he could go to the "Transat" and get anything from a sedan to an autobus at five minutes' notice. So, with a shrug, he returned to his pension in the French city.

With morning, he passed by the office of Sidi Idris—who was a lawyer, with up to date offices in the French town—and left the other's share of the racing spoils. Then he went his way toward the savage red Marrakesh whose legions had poured forth to the conquest of Spain.

Coming in by the Dukala gate, he had only a few steps to go before reaching the charming old palace that had been transformed into the Transat hotel. Burke passed the gaily clad group of native guides clustered inside the entrance, and

strode on to the desk, with a cheery nod to the French manager.

"Good morning, M. Dufresne! How are you off for automobiles this morning?"

"Ah, M. Burke! How goes it? Automobiles? Mon Dieu! I never knew such a season! It is terrible!"

"Good! I'll have no trouble getting a closed car, then?"

Dufresne spread his hands wide. "You misunderstand! The *courrier* that reached Casablanca yesterday morning from Marseille, flooded us with tourists. Trippers, season visitors, artists, Americans—name of a dog! It is terrific, it is formidable! Every company car from here to Fez has been engaged; every private car we could rent has been taken."

"The devil!" exclaimed Burke. "Look here, Dufresne. You have a Fiat sedan yourself. Rent it to me for three days and I'll pay any price you ask."

The other looked sorrowful.

"Monsieur, I am desolated. But five minutes ago it, too, was engaged."

"By whom?" snapped Burke. Dufresne pointed across at the writing room.

"By that species of a camel in there. An Englishwoman—what a woman! One who walks like a man, and writes a book on politics."

"Her name?"

"Madame Stillwater."

Burke turned and strode across the glorious lobby, whose thick Berber rugs and old cut plaster decorations formed a riot of color. In the little writing room sat a woman of perhaps fifty, severely clad. At Burke's bow, she lifted frigid eyes.

"My card, Mrs. Stillwater; permit me," said Burke. For once that charming smile of his had no effect.

"I am not aware that I have your acquaintance, sir," said the woman brusquely.

"Faith, you are now!" and Burke

laughed. Then he sobered. "Madame, I am in the most urgent need of a car for a couple of days. It is, I assure you, a matter of life and death. I find that you've hired the last car to be obtained in Marrakesh, that of the hotel manager."

"Certainly I have," she broke in coldly, without glancing at his card. "If you mean to ask that I let you use it, you're wasting your time and mine. I need that automobile myself."

"Not as badly as I do, perhaps," said Burke. "I'll be glad to pay the rent on it, and to offer you a bonus of five thousand francs."

SHE surveyed him suspiciously. "No! It's for no good, I'll be bound. An American, by your accent; well, I don't intend to give up my comfort for American dollars."

"Ten thousand francs, madame."

Her brows lifted. "That is all. Good day to you."

"Twenty thousand francs, madame! I tell you it's a matter of—"

"And suppose I asked fifty thousand francs?" she demanded.

"Fifty thousand? Very well. I'll pay it—"

"You are certainly a madman," said the lady. "Will you kindly cease to annoy me, or must I have you put out?"

Livid with anger, Burke bowed and withdrew in silence. In this austere, frigid woman was utter finality—an absolute refusal to listen or comprehend.

He was appalled by what he had learned, a few hours too late. No time now to telephone for a car from Casablanca. He had no way of reaching El Hanech, who was lying out on some sun-scorched hillside. Desperate, he returned to the desk.

"Dufresne, I must have a car by five this evening. I'll pay twenty thousand

francs if you can hire one for me."

Dufresne turned pale. "Twenty thousand! For that I would sell you the Fiat! But no, m'sieu. To rent a car at any price is impossible today. I have just had a telephone call from the Rabat hotel. A rich tourist there has offered any price for a car. It cannot be found. Automobiles, alas, do not grow on trees in Morocco! By tomorrow, it will be different."

"By tomorrow," muttered Burke, as he left the hotel, "the man who depends upon me will be lost."

Behind him, as the doors closed, a trim figure crossed the lobby, spoke briefly with the manager. The latter then accompanied him to the writing room and introduced him to Madame Stillwater. At her invitation, Captain Crepin sat down and spoke fluently.

"My dear sir," said the lady firmly, "I have whole-hearted respect for government. I knew from the very start that this man was a scoundrel!"

"You were right," assented Captain Crepin, fingering the card Burke had left. "He supplies ammunition and guns to dissident chiefs. He lends help to escaping prisoners. He laughs at the government, defies the Sultan himself."

"And you do not punish him?" exclaimed the indignant lady.

"First he must be caught. And this time, madame, I expect to catch him—with your help. Will you give it?"

"I shall, most certainly!" and flinty eyes were bent upon the intelligence officer.

Captain Crepin leaned forward and spoke rapidly.

DENIS BURKE, meantime, was walking along the dusty road toward the French city. He needed to walk, needed to think. A car capable of taking El Hanech and his family at top speed to the

frontier—well, it did not grow on Moroccan palms, as Dufresne had said. A taxicab would be useless; one might get El Hanech as far as Casablanca, but there was too much risk. The Berbers must reach the frontier before daybreak, to be safe.

Sidi Idris? He would not help willingly. Arab and Berber regard each other with the virulent hatred of a thousand years. He would probably betray the Serpent. Burke could trust Sidi Idris with his life, but not with the life of a Berber chief.

“El Hanech has put his life in my hand, and I can’t fail him,” thought Burke desperately. “I’ll get a car somewhere if I have to steal it—”

Ahead of him opened out the French city, with its bustle and thronging crowd filling the Square of the 7th September. Then Burke paused. He heard his name called, and turned.

“Sidi! Sidi Burke!” It was one of the guides from the hotel, stripped of his gay outer garments, running hard to overtake him. “A message! *Ya Lalla!*”

“Eh?” exclaimed Burke. “What lady?”

“She who is like a camel, sidi. She sent me for you, asks that you return.”

Twenty minutes later, Burke once more bowed to Madame Stillwater.

“Mr. Burke, if that is your name,” she said stiffly, “I have reconsidered. My first impression was that you were a very impudent young man, and I resented it. Perhaps I was wrong; not that I am often mistaken in my judgments, however. If you desire the car for three days, it is yours. I will accept no payment whatever.”

Denis Burke could not believe his ears. With a sudden access of joy, he extended his hand to the lady, his eyes shining with delight.

“Madame, you are an angel!” he exclaimed warmly. “Upon my word, an angel! I thank you with all my heart.”

“Never mind all that, if you please. The car is at your service now. I have spoken to the manager. Good day to you.”

Burke withdrew, and scarce knew what was going on around him until he deposited the Fiat before the door of his own pension. Then he dared believe that it was true.

“The rest is simple,” he reflected happily. “Gas and oil. Provisions and water. I’ll have them packed in boxes for the sake of neatness and to save room. This car can go like the devil, and El Hanech can drive like another devil. Good! Tomorrow night he’ll have the car back here. Couldn’t be better!”

Burke had entirely forgotten that, on the previous day, he had refused to earn thirty thousand francs by delivering four small boxes to the bandit, El Mekhnezi.

III

AT SEVEN-THIRTY that evening, Denis Burke was switching on the lights of the Fiat, when a voice came to him in the darkness.

“Sidi! I am from Si ‘Dris.”

He was aware of a dark figure beside the car. A messenger, then.

“Yes?” he said. “What does Sidi Idris want?”

“A warning, sidi,” came the response. “You have been followed, watched. Even now two misbegotten Arabs of the intelligence service are standing at the corner.”

“Let them stand!” and Burke laughed a little.

“More, sidi. Captain Crepin has given orders, assembling his men at seven-thirty.”

Burke started. “Where? Quickly, in the name of Allah!”

“At the camp, sidi—”

Like a flash, Burke started the car,

threw in the gears, and went roaring away without lights. A faint yell drifted after him from the corner. He was around another corner on two wheels, shifted into second, switched on his lights, and swung into the Avenue du Gueliz with the speed of a madman.

This wide boulevard went straight past the railroad station to the great camp. But Burke was not headed for the camp.

Crepin gathering his men at seven-thirty—it was seven-thirty now! Then it was a matter of minutes, as Burke realized instantly. Ahead of him was a triangle. At the railroad tracks, the Casablanca highway turned sharply right. Straight ahead was the camp under the Gueliz forts. To block the highway, Crepin must come from the camp; while Burke had only to swing into it here ahead—

He sent the Fiat roaring along the street. Those watchers must telephone to Crepin, who would then make a dash to cut off evasion at the railroad bridge, just this side the rendezvous. It was a gamble, a good gamble!

“Faith, I can make it—I must make it!” thought Burke, leaning over the wheel. There was the railroad ahead. His horn blared at a party of soldiers; they scattered with wild curses. The car swung, the brakes ground, the tires screamed. The Casablanca highway!

Crepin knew everything, then. The warning had been honest. Somewhere, somewhere, there had been a leak. No matter! Burke opened the throttle wide.

Up there at the fork of the roads was the hillman who trusted him, who depended absolutely upon him, with terrible simplicity. To El Hanech, this car meant life; safety for himself and his family. Without it, he was doomed.

And Crepin knew everything! The words rang in Burke’s brain like a knell. Here was a rendezvous he must not fail!

What it meant to him, he knew well enough. He had intended to turn over the car and walk back to town; a few miles meant nothing. Now there would be no escape, no evasion. El Hanech would get away in the Fiat. Denis Burke must remain afoot, delay the pursuers, hold them ignorant of which road El Hanech had taken, there at the fork.

THERE was no way out, no choice. Burke crouched over the wheel as the car roared madly on, and cursed under his breath. He had given his word, and this was something Denis Burke had never broken. Prison—deportation—no matter! Another man had trusted him, and must not trust in vain.

The buildings, the outspread palm groves, were behind him now. An open stretch ahead, then the hills, the railroad bridge, the road-fork. The mileage needle quivered and mounted, but Burke never looked at it. Somewhere ahead, the road from the camp came into the highway. Crepin was beaten! Not a car in sight!

Burke felt the heart upleap in him, felt the wild surge of exultation that comes from victory. A laugh on his lips, he drove at the curving road ahead, found the low hills closing in. His insane speed slackened. No car could take these curves at such wild pace—

A sudden fierce oath burst from him. Around a curve now; and dead ahead showed two cars, their headlights trained on the road, figures of men strung out. The two were placed with converging headlights—barely space for a car to pass between them. A soldier stood there, waving a flag, halting him.

Burke did not halt. He knew instantly that somehow he had been outguessed. Crepin might have sent that messenger, in fact; the whole thing was a trap. A trap! The blood thrummed at his temples. The

soldier was waving frantically now. There was Crepin, in the full headlight glare, waving a pistol. Other men with rifles.

"To hell with you!" roared Burke, and opened the throttle wide again.

Wild, shrill yells from either hand. The man with the flag leaped frantically for safety as the Fiat thundered at him. Burke crouched low, saw one of the two cars shoved forward. The fools! Trying to wreck him! A red spat of rifles.

Then a crash, a shuddering shock. The Fiat seemed to stagger, and next instant was roaring on again full speed. A bullet came through the rear window, smashed the windshield before Burke's eyes. He was through them, through! Ahead, his lights picked up the railroad bridge. Through them!

Then the Fiat plunged wildly.

Burke wrenched at the wheel with savage strength. Another plunge. A horrible lurch sideways, as the brakes screamed. Halfway down the descent, the Fiat swung across the road and came to a stop, with a tire shot out.

AND ahead, not half a mile distant, El Hanech waited.

A great sob broke from Denis Burke—half oath, half groan. Suddenly weak, he lowered his head on his hands, as they clutched the wheel. They were coming behind him, one car loaded down with men. No escape now, no evasion. He was taken. He had failed.

"Good evening, M. Burke," said Captain Crepin stiffly. "Will you descend, if you please?"

Burke obeyed.

"Devil and all!" exclaimed Burke, with the shadow of his old gay smile. "I gave you a run for it, anyhow!"

Crepin, standing beside him, shrugged lightly.

"You will have a long repose," he made dry response. "Out with those boxes, men! Smash into them."

"Why waste time?" said Burke. "You have me, you know."

Crepin smiled thinly beneath his clipped mustache.

"I have you, yes. But, my friend, I must have the evidence also."

For one wild instant, Burke stared. Had Crepin stooped so low? Was there some planted evidence in his car? Impossible! There was a crash of wood, another. Then startled faces were turned to the two who stood there, and sudden silence fell. A sergeant, prying into one of the smashed boxes, straightened up and saluted.

"My captain! There is some mistake."

Crepin craned forward, and Burke caught a suppressed oath from him. What the devil did it mean? Suddenly the intelligence officer turned on him fiercely.

"Eh? You, M. Burke—this is incredible! Here. Come with me."

Burke obeyed. Crepin halted him at the roadside, spoke in a low voice.

"Come! You have just one chance. Tell me where they are hidden, or I'll tear the cursed automobile apart!"

"What the devil are you talking about?" demanded Burke.

"The arms and ammunition for El Mekhnezi. I know all about it. Quickly!"

BURKE knew that a laugh would ruin him—and suppressed it.

"Crepin—give me your word! Is that why you were after me?"

"You know it damned well," snapped the other. Burke fumbled in his pocket, produced cigarets, struck a match.

"I was offered thirty thousand francs to run that stuff to El Mekhnezi," he said coolly. "That blackguard is a criminal, a

murderer, and I'd be the same if I put arms in his hands. I refused."

Crepin started, stood looking hard at him.

"M. Burke," he said in a low voice, "there are some things it is hard to credit."

"I've never broken my word," said Burke gravely. "And I gave my word to El Hanech that tonight I'd bring him a car, with provisions. He wants to get out of the country, over the frontier."

"El Hanech!" exclaimed Crepin sharply. "El Hanech! That poor devil!"

"Exactly. I supposed you wanted to shoot him down—"

"Damnation take you!" cried Crepin angrily. "Am I an assassin of hunted men?"

"You're not far from it. Am I scoundrel enough to give El Mekhnezi guns?"

"Well, you're the next thing to it," snapped Crepin.

Burke broke into a laugh. He could afford it, now.

"Well, you know everything, or nearly everything! But you'll not find out from me where El Hanech is hiding, so save your breath."

Crepin turned to him with a savage oath.

"You've refused to obey orders to halt," he said. "You've damaged government property—you wrecked my car back there! You'll have all sorts of charges against you. Do you realize it?"

"Perfectly. Make the most of it."

"I intend to do so. The court will fine you at least five hundred francs," said Crepin. "Will you give me your word to appear in court tomorrow and answer the charges I shall lay against you?"

"Eh?" said Burke. "Why, of course! But—"

"As soon as my men have replaced that tire of yours, go on with your car," said Crepin harshly. "And tell El Hanech I hope to thunder he gets away safe. Good night."