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the West "White Indian"
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The Four Red Circles

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

First published in *Blue Book Magazine*,
November, 1924.

One of the most tensely exciting stories ever written by the distinguished author of "Madagascar Gold," "Cactus and Rattlers" and many other well-remembered Blue Book Magazine successes.

Coralie Smith, like a good many women in these degenerate days, knew too much for her own good, was proud of the fact, and was very attractive to the average man. Certainly Captain Maignan found her so, as she stood in all her trim, alert beauty at the gate of his lonely Saharan outpost and chaffed him about the four red circles. If he had been astonished by her appearance, he was stupefied and astounded by her departure, for Captain Maignan knew very little about her ability. Her mention of the circles, however, drew a swift protest from him.

"Mademoiselle, I beg of you!" he exclaimed in dismay. "Such words must not be heard by my men here, by your own men. Above all, you must not go to Bou Saffra, as the town is called on our maps. It is horribly unsafe, particularly just now—"

"Must not?" Coralie surveyed him with that dazzling smile of hers, thrice dazzling by reason of her starry eyes and golden skin and sun-bleached red-gold hair. She had long since passed the stage of mere sunburn, and was richly tanned. "You forget, I am a seasoned explorer, and even speak some Touareg; moreover, I am interested in these four red circles

which have caused so much consternation in your district. You promised to tell me what you know—all you know—about them. Please!”

Poor Maignan threw out his hands, helpless before such a woman. He swept his glance around the courtyard where the Senegalese of his detachment lounged, looked at the camels which Coralie’s men were loading, wiped his brow, and began his recital.

“No white man has been to Bou Saffra—the Itessan tribe of Touareg live there, as you know, the oldest branch of the Touareg. The family uses four circles as a brand, for all their animals and livestock—”

Coralie laughed. “My dear Captain, I have written two monographs on the Egyptian and Tripolitan cattle-brands! And I know of the four-circle brand—the circles in a line. So, proceed.”

“Yes, in a line,” repeated Maignan. “Men have died, and there has been talk of these four red circles; it is a mystery, even to the manner of death. As you know, here in the A-ir district, the sultan is only a puppet. Each Touareg clan rules absolutely in its own region—”

“You have said that I know all this, and I do,” said Coralie. “Pray come to the point. All the northern tribes are afraid of these four red circles, and there is some singular connection with Bou Saffra and the Itessan family brand. Just what do you know about the place?”

“The Itessan family possesses there a spot which all the Touareg believe to be holy ground, and they admit no visitors,” said Maignan simply. “I know nothing more. Rumor tells how men die and babble about four red circles. That is all. The whole A-ir country is uneasy, and my five-and-twenty Senegalese are very unhappy men.”

“You know nothing about a holy man there named Belkho el Bagdadi?”

“No,” said Maignan, giving her a curious look. She smiled brightly, and gave him her hand.

“My dear Captain, I know more than you do, then. Come, I must leave—my camel is waiting. Thanks for your hospitality, for your kindness—”

“I beg you, wait here only a few days!” implored Maignan. “When that detachment of the camel-corps arrives, it will include many Touareg; I will go to Bou Saffra with you—”

“I am sorry; to delay is impossible,” she returned. “*Au revoir*, dear monsieur!”

She turned to the gateway. The ten mehari, fine racing camels, were ready; that of Coralie was kneeling. She mounted in approved desert fashion, was neatly pitched into the saddle as the bubbling beast heaved, and waved her hand at Maignan.

He stood watching the line of beasts depart. Six of them bore supplies; Coralie Smith rode the seventh. The other three carried Abdul, a masked Touareg from Ahaggar, and two of his masked slaves. Under escort of Abdul, she was reasonably safe; he was well known to the French, being a prominent noble, and a man of great authority here in A-ir. None the less, Captain Maignan sadly shook his head, for he had served through the local insurrection of 1917, and knew a few things.

“A beautiful creature, and I am sorry for her,” he reflected. “I would give something to know why that woman is going to Bou Saffra! She has one reason in her heart, and announces another reason openly.”

He sighed, as he looked out across the great empty plateau where the caravan route of the central Sahara had worn great tracks ten feet deep in the course of centuries—the immense desert uplands where his tiny tricolor waved above a mud fort.

“A woman always has a reason,” he said; “yet she is always unreasonable. *Hélas!*”

“There is the place, *ya lella*,” said Abdul, pointing. “This is your last chance to turn back; and as Allah liveth, I advise you to turn! These people are not Inghad, of the slave tribes. They are of the Imajeghan, the very noble clans, oldest and most secret of all our people, the Kel Tagilmus.”

Thus the Touareg call themselves, from the veil or *tagilmus* which hides their fierce Berber faces from all eyes. Coralie Smith, however, appeared not to hear the warning; she gazed down the rocky slope at the valley beyond, her blue eyes bright and eager. Beside her the Touareg’s eyes smote sharply from the slit of his dark blue veil and headcloth; his two slaves, veiled and armed like himself, followed his uneasy glances. One would have said that the white woman was less afraid than were these three riders of the secret tribe.

They looked across a narrow, stony valley set between sharp ridges of rock that formed high walls, abrupt on the opposite side, sloping more gently on this. Although the afternoon was advancing, shadow and sunlight were intensely black and white. Down below in the gorge was a pool of water, motionless as an azure mirror, with a few date-palms and acacias scattered about its verge and drainage; camels, mules and horses were in evidence. Beyond this pool was the village itself, stone-built, consisting of a large flat mosque and several dozen houses. Beside the mosque was a larger house than the others, to which Abdul pointed.

“There lives Belkho el Bagdadi, the holy man, who came from Bagdad bringing to the Itessan family a new Tariq or law of salvation. So, at least, is the report.”

“I thought you said he had been captured as a slave?” asked Coralie quietly.

“Allah alone knoweth all things,” was the grave response, evasive enough.

“You are sure that the name might not have been—for instance, Belcombe?”

“Belkho is a Tamajegh name,” said Abdul, and transliterated it into Arabic and French, as he had done twice before this. Then he glanced at the sun, which was westering. “Do you wish to proceed, or to turn back? I have brought you here as I promised; Allah alone knoweth what the event will be, either to you or to us. I can promise you nothing, for these people are not of my family.”

Coralie smiled. “On!”

Abdul silently led the way, her camel following his. As she let the beast pick its own trail down the winding, rocky slope, Coralie Smith looked down at the pool and village, and noted carefully the path; yet her thoughts were of the man who had vanished into the Sahara three years previously. The world had given Roger Belcombe up for dead; the army lists had posted Flight Commander Belcombe as missing; but Coralie Smith could never visualize the dead face of the man she loved, the man who had gone away into the empty air of the Sudan and vanished. To think this man dead was impossible.

So she came to Africa, spent long months learning the language, studying the people, and thereafter went on fruitless voyages into the desert. It was now a year since, in the bazaar at Khano, she had one day heard mention of Belkho el Bagdadi; she had been twelve months in tracing down that name, in reaching this spot in the almost unknown plateau of A-ir, the country of the Touareg. She knew only too well how bitter might be the truth, how unlikely it was that this holy man could be Roger Belcombe; but because Belcombe had served on the Bagdad front and knew his Moslems thoroughly, the clue could not be idly passed by.

Then had come Abdul the faithful, bringing her rumors of this saint. Mystery surrounded him; he dwelt afar in the desert, Allah had endowed him with powers of life and death; the

jinn obeyed him, for he had brought from Bagdad the mystic Seal of the great Suleiman, of three triangles interwoven in a star—and so forth. Nothing definite, but men died and babbled of four red circles, and bazaar gossip linked this with the Itessan family, and the holy saint of Bou Saffra. There was nothing definite, but the French were disquieted, and there was talk of an expedition to Bou Saffra, as the place was mapped, to properly overawe the Touareg before a new Mahdi should arise.

As the ten mehari filed down to the valley floor, sunset was drawing near. The arrivals had been seen and were awaited; a dozen horses were pricking toward them, bearing blue-veiled riders whose lances and rifles glittered in the reddened light. There was no hurry, no confusion. The Itessan riders came forward calmly, others following in smaller groups, without shouting or powder-play. Abdul hastened his beast and presently addressed the Touareg in their own peculiar pre-Arab language. They listened to him, made no response, only wheeled their horses and left him to follow. He made a signal to Coralie Smith and rode on, the mehari trailing behind.

So they came into the village, and from the mosque ascended a quavering singsong voice, the call to sunset prayer. Coralie looked about at the unveiled women, the Touareg dismounting, the thronging children; then these were on their knees, Abdul and his two fellows joining in a short two-bow prayer and adding a *ratib* for their safe journey. Coralie did not dismount, for she never made any pretensions to being one of “the enlightened,” and usually gained a corresponding respect from the men of the desert. She sat watching, her gaze flickering to the recessed windows of the house where lived the holy man from Bagdad; but those recesses were empty.

Now the prayer was over. Coralie’s camel knelt, and she joined Abdul and his two men. The Touareg thronged about in silence, and she thought that Abdul seemed uneasy before this reception, before the lack of all response to his words. After a little time the door of the house of the saint was opened. From it came a tall man who uttered a few short, sharp words. Abdul replied, and was given a peremptory answer. He turned to Coralie, and spoke in French:

“I have told them that you came to see the man of Bagdad; they say he sleeps now and you must wait until morning. This is the chief of the village. I do not like the looks of all this, mademoiselle. If there is trouble, mount and ride while we hold them. There has been no threat; yet—”

He shrugged, and at a word from one of his own men, turned. The tall Itessan chief came forward to him and threw back his burnous, then placed something in the hand of the astonished Abdul. Coralie leaned forward to see what it was, and was amazed to behold an ordinary white paper envelope, upon which were scrawled four irregular circles in red, newly done.

The crowd suddenly fell back, leaving the new arrivals in a group. Abdul turned over the envelope, which appeared quite empty, with an air of perplexed dismay. Then, as though coming to a decision, he tore swiftly at one end of the paper, and peered into the empty envelope. It was empty, yes; and yet—

From Abdul broke a wild, sudden cry of unbearable anguish. He clapped both hands to his face, ripped away his veil and headcloth—the greatest shame of a Touareg man—and with a frightful scream plunged into a blind run. He ran only ten steps, then staggered and fell prostrate in the sand, and lay there motionless.

The crowd surged forward, without a word, and weapons slithered out. Abdul's two slaves tried to fight, but before they could pull trigger were shot down and knifed. Coralie Smith found herself held helpless in the grip of two men, and the tall chief came to her. In that same ominous silence he deliberately searched her, removed her pistol and belt, jerked the watch from her wrist. Then she was bound and shoved into the same house from which the chief had emerged—the house of Belkho el Bagdadi.

Like most real Touareg houses, this one was orientated and had two rooms; unlike most, it had also an upper room, attained by a ladder and trapdoor, situated above the room in which Coralie Smith lay bound upon a mat. And while she lay there waiting for the swift sun to plunge over the rim of the world and draw tropic night in his train, Coralie observed certain things. Her observation was singularly close and accurate.

Fortunately for herself, Coralie was no heroine of fiction—somehow these heroines never observe things on the desert. They do not know that Arabs are keener trailers than any Mohawk; they fail in the knowledge of tremendous trifles, such as the ablutions and the eating-hand of an Arab; they are not alive, in a word, to the realistic side of their desert sojourn. Coralie was fully alive to it. She had seen Abdul die, and his two men murdered at her side, but she was not particularly overcome by horror or hysterics; one never is, in real life, unless the horror goes too far. However, she was keenly sensible of two things; first, her own position, and second, that of the man from Bagdad in the upper room. So, instead of bothering her head about theoretical problems such as that of the four red circles, she concentrated on actualities.

Shortly after her enforced sojourn began, she perceived the chief of the village and two of his men come into the house. These three carried her personal belongings, but none of the provisions or other luggage, and bore them up the ladder. Of the room above, she was unable to see anything. The three men came down again; the trapdoor closed behind them; and they stood conferring in low tones.

Coralie watched them closely, finding something singular in their conversation.

Unable to watch their faces, unable to comprehend their language, which was not like the little northern Touareg she had picked up, Coralie had only their gestures on which to base an opinion; yet she formed one. This opinion was that these three men here stood in active hatred and fear of El Bagdadi up above. Then, presently, the three stood farther apart, drew back from one another. The chief took from beneath his burnous an envelope duplicating that given Abdul—an envelope on which were clearly marked the four red circles. A last word; then, with a sudden air of decision, the chief darted to the ladder and climbed it, thrust up the trapdoor with one hand, and with the other slid the envelope into the upper room. Then he descended, and after a careless glance at the captive woman, all three men left the house.

Coralie waited for a scream, the sound of a fall, from above. None came. She was far from comprehension of the whole matter; yet she had formed an opinion. This in itself was a distinct achievement.

Twilight was gathering when two strapping Touareg women entered and came to her. One set down a bowl of *kouskousu* while the other untied her arms. When she spoke, they shook their heads and pointed to the bowl; so she began to eat mechanically, her nerves in suspense, her thoughts still busy with what had so recently transpired, as she waited for some sound of

death from above. None came. When she had finished the bowl of food, the two women stooped over her to tie her wrists again. Coralie submitted meekly, but held her arms out in front, fists clenched, for the operation. The two women, evidently in high contempt, drew the lashings tight, left her ankles unbound as before, and departed. Darkness, swift night of the desert, was falling.

Coralie smiled slightly. In wandering to and fro across the face of the Sahara, she had picked up a thing or two not found in novels. For example, it is difficult to cast an efficient lashing about one's arms, short of dislocating them, when they are held out in front with rigid muscles, and her arms had by no means been dislocated.

Coralie fell to work with sharp teeth, and in ten minutes her hands were free. Her sole obvious weapon had been removed, but now she opened the trim khaki shirt below her burnous and bared her bosom to the darkness. Between her breasts, comfortably snug and safe from any but the most careful search, was fastened a tiny, ugly little automatic. She took the pistol from its holster, freed herself of the holster, and then searched her pockets. Nothing remained to her except a few loose French sulphur-matches and a packet of Algerian cigarettes.

For a space she sat in silence, reflecting. Why had that message of mysterious death been given the man in the upper room? From jealousy of his power and sanctity, no doubt; it had not been done by general consent of the tribe, certainly. The furtive movements of the village chief and his two men pretty well explained themselves.

Suddenly, in the silence, Coralie caught a slight sound from above—the shuffling tread of a foot. So, the man from Bagdad was not dead? She rose, drew her dark burnous tightly about her, went to the ladder. From the village outside came no sound; all was dark, silent, abandoned to the night. She set foot on the ladder and started up. Scrutinizing the trapdoor above, she found no glimmer of light around its edges.

“Boldness is the only possible course,” she reflected, and got out her matches. “Either that man is Roger—or he is not.”

She ascended to the trap. There, listening, she once again heard the faint thud of a footstep, but was certain that the upper room was in darkness. Deliberately she put up one hand, slightly lifted the trapdoor, verified the darkness above; then, coming to the next rung of the ladder, she supported the door on her head and shoulders and scratched a match. She held up the sliver of blue flame into the room above.

She had a glimpse of a tall veiled Touareg figure, whirling about in alarm at the light. Then, under her very hand, at the edge of the opening, she saw the envelope with the four red circles.

“For the love of heaven put out that light!” cried the voice of Roger Belcombe.

“It’s really you—really you!” murmured Belcombe in a low voice, as he held Coralie against him in the darkness. “I saw you arrive—gad, it’s beyond belief! My dear, my dear, what are you doing here? Why did you come to this place?”

“To find you, of course,” said the girl, and laughed softly. Then, in a few vivid words, she etched for him an outline of the past three years. Belcombe swore under his breath.

“Coralie, you’re wonderful! But you don’t know what—”

“Let me light that candle,” she suggested. He exclaimed sharply, urgently.

"No, no! They must think I've been finished off. That rascally chief expects to find me dead in the morning—"

"Suppose you elucidate those four red circles, then," she said composedly, and touched his cheek in the darkness. Belcombe uttered a low, helpless groan.

"Three years ago! You know, dear, some of these Touareg had flooded over into the Sudan and were making trouble. I was sent to the force driving them back—was sent with a load of grenades and some cylinders of the new NX3 gas. Well, I crashed, and they got me. There was just one slim chance of getting out alive, and I took it. Told 'em that I had come from Bagdad for their benefit, got hold of the chief and outlined things; I was always up on their religion, you know. They brought me here with my load, and I've been an emissary of murder for these devils. The chief wasn't fooled, but the others were; I managed to impose on them with parlor tricks, and one thing or another—"

"But the envelopes?" breathed Coralie. "There's one here, on the floor—"

Belcombe laughed. "Until recently I kept the thing secret, but the chief finally caught on to the hang of it. He took away the last cylinder of gas and managed to fix up his own. The thing is just an envelope, carefully made air-tight except for one opening; by this opening I inject gas from a cylinder, then seal it over. When the envelope is torn open by anyone, the escaping gas is nearly always deadly—just enough of it. Takes a nice hand to do it rightly, my dear; the four red circles, the tribal brand, is only part of the hocus-pocus. These Touareg don't rightly understand; they're superstitious. They've kept me a prisoner—I haven't been outside this room in two years—"

"You poor thing!" said Coralie, and snuggled against his cheek. She perceived that he was on the verge of breakdown; his voice and manner were very shaky. "Get your veil back on, now, and we'll be going. I have a pistol here."

"Impossible. There's always a guard watching the trails, and we'd never get by. Besides, the chief is devilish jealous of me and suspects that I'd make a break. I've tried it twice—"

"So much the better. We can get camels or horses at the pool, if the guard is not posted here in the village. What about those grenades? Have you any here?"

"Yes, all my stuff was brought along; but probably they're spoiled now."

Coralie nodded to herself. She could understand perfectly that this man had been dispirited, broken down, rendered hopeless. With his wits he had fought for life, but the struggle had left him weakened; the long confinement had shattered his old fine spirit. So she thought, not knowing all the truth.

"You need me, evidently," she said calmly. "Get some of those grenades and come along. No talk, now! Is the village guarded?"

"No; the approaches to the upper plateau only—"

"Then we'll get horses, which are faster to get going than mehari. We'll ride over or through the guard, and go. It's simple enough."

In the darkness, a slow laugh broke from Belcombe.

"Yes," he said bitterly, "it's very simple. So simple that I have been here considerably over two years.

"Never mind being nasty," she retorted. "Have you no faith?"

"What I had, I lost long since."

"Then you're a fool. Hurry with those grenades, now. Sure you have 'em?"

“Quite. At times I’ve contemplated pitching them out wholesale at the village—have come near to it, in fact, except that it would not have helped me to escape.”

“Never mind being garrulous,” she said curtly, trying to rouse and spur his spirit. “No more time to waste now. Come on.”

Beneath her short speech, she was horribly anxious. She realized only too well that this was not the laughing, efficient Roger Belcombe she had known in earlier days. How this long captivity had sapped his spirit! She must be the man of the two this night. No doubt something of this same thought went leaping to the brain of Belcombe himself, for when he swung up the trap and she told him not to fumble on the ladder, he uttered a low groan.

“Coralie, ha’ mercy on me! You don’t know all—I’m far gone.”

“You poor sweet thing!” For an instant she hugged his face against her breast in a swift, incredible access of motherliness. Then, pulling apart his veil, she kissed his lips twice.

“Now, down with you!”

He went fumbling down the ladder, and presently she was down after him. They went together to the doorway that opened on the village—the house, like all Touareg dwellings, had three openings.

There was no sound, no light, save the soft tinkle of some stringed instrument drifting from some far house, and the flicker of a candle in one window. The night was cold, starry, clear, and Coralie knew that in an hour or two a glorious hunter’s moon would be swinging up the sky to lade their road with peril. It could not be helped.

“Go ahead,” she said softly, and Belcombe obeyed. Ah, that old, free, nervous stride of his! It was good to see. Clutching her pistol, the girl followed.

The open space before the houses, deep in soft sand, gave back no sound of their steps. Coralie’s swift glances found no leaping light, no fierce yell of discovery, no tumultuous figures piling forth in alarm; the escape was, apparently, ridiculously easy. Yet she was not deceived, for with her lingered those sad and hopeless words: “So simple, that I have been here considerably over two years—”

They sluff-sluffed through the looser untrampled sand toward the pool. This hung like a mirror of black bronze under the trees, shimmering back the starlight; animals loosely strung out, not frightened, but inspecting the arrivals incuriously. Belcombe turned and spoke softly in Arabic, not to startle the beasts.

“Mehari or horse?”

“Horses,” said Coralie with decision. “We must get away instantly.”

“Then they’ll run us down tomorrow—” he objected.

“For tomorrow, trust God!”

“*W’Allah alim!*” he said, bitterly. “Only God knows!”

He sat down on the sand, drew out his knife; there was a sound of ripping cloth. His toughly woven veil and headcloth ran into strips. Bareheaded, he rose, and she saw his profile against the stars; she choked a little sob in her throat, but said nothing. He had changed.

In five minutes Belcombe swung her up to the hollow of a sleek back, and got another beast for himself; holding the cloth-strip reins, tied about the jaws of the horses, they sent the beasts on. No trouble, no discovery, no alarm. It would have been incredible, had not Belcombe known only too well of the guard that was kept on the upper trail.

Coralie, who had carefully conned the descent to the valley floor, led the way up the sloping hillside opposite the village. She attempted no evasion, no concealment, but urged her beast straight on. She could not comprehend the danger. The fact that she had found Roger Belcombe, that he was riding here at her stirrup, filled her world with unrecking delight and happiness, mad exultation. No miracle was impossible, after this!

Then came rude awakening. A voice from above spat forth at them; dark shapes of men thronged the trail ahead. Belcombe made response, in that strange Berber tongue of these folk, and for a moment Coralie thought the path would clear. Then, in the starlight, they saw the bare head of the man from Bagdad. One shrill yell clipped out, and a tall Touareg leaped up with a flash of steel.

Coralie pistoled him.

Yells resounded; the horses plunged; bullets whistled. From the road ahead of them vomited a blinding concussion—a grenade that Belcombe hurled. Coralie shot again and again; somehow she controlled her frantic horse, forced him ahead. The road was clear now, and in five minutes they were galloping side by side along the winding desert trail, where only patches of camel-scrub broke the sandy waste. Gone was the village, gone the valley and the tumult; gone was everything; here were only the desert, and peace, and the white stars.

“Feel better?” asked Coralie after a time.

“Wait for the moon,” he responded grimly.

She laughed, and pointed to the blur of light on the horizon.

“It’s coming!”

“Do you know where you’re going? Which way headed?”

“*W’Allah alim*—only God knows!” she returned the ever-present Arab ejaculation at him. “Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful! Is not the fate of man written on his forehead?”

She was to remember those words later, and the deep, half-throttled groan which escaped the man; but as yet she scarcely remarked the sound.

They brought down the horses to the swift hand-gallop that could cover untiring miles—not the gallop of desert fiction, but the steady pacing of the real desert horse. The moon came up, a golden disk that imperceptibly became smaller in mounting, and donned a silvery sheen. An hour passed, and another.

“I brought a water-skin,” said Belcombe. “May I have a cigarette, if you have one? It’s against the custom of the Touareg to smoke—especially a holy man.”

They drew up together and plodded along in a walk, smoking, taking a gulp of water from the skin about Belcombe’s waist. She blessed his forethought in bringing it.

“With this moon, they’ll be on the trail now,” said Belcombe. “Those devils can track, I can tell you! Follow a spoor at a gallop.”

“*W’Allah alim!*” said she, and laughed.

It was only half an hour later that her horse put foot in hole and plunged down with a broken leg.

Captain Maignan, whose Bourbon blood ran still gallantly in sun-dried veins, lighted a cigarette and listened to the report of his scouts, sitting his gaunt mehari with easy grace. The two score men behind him, half of them Touareg, all of them members of the camel-corps which scoured the desert for France, waited immobile, high-strung. The scouts delivered a brief report.

“The firing came from a gully a mile to the left. We could see nothing, for the wadi was a deep one. The rifles, by the after-echo, are Mausers.”

Maignan called up his stalwart, bronzed noncoms and commanded:

“Spread out. Surround. Advance.”

A ripple of excitement passed through the waiting men. Mausers meant Itessan Touareg; these orders meant fight—they were free to fight, in their own fashion!

Sometimes the French are very wise.

The spindle-legged beasts stalked over the daybreak sands, ungainly, awkward, yet eating up the desert as only blooded mehari can. The swaying riders, half in Touareg veils, half in uniforms, spread out in a great crescent. The morning sunlight struck down at them blindingly, insufferably, intolerantly.

“*Y’Allah!*”

The yell shrilled up, was repeated, the great beasts hurtled forward at redoubled speed, swinging at the spot indicated by the scouts. From the wadi ahead scrambled some veiled figures on foot, then some plunging mehari, then a horse or two. A rifle spoke faintly; a rippling crash broke the morning as a volley thundered. With one wild, fierce yell the riders were into the wadi, plunging across it, firing after those who fled before them. The rifles ripped and crackled, then grew fainter as the mehari mounted the farther bank and raced on. The scream of a dying man died off in a gulp of agony.

Maignan, left alone on the scene, slipped from his saddle and ran forward. Among a cluster of boulders, behind a dead horse, he saw the figure of Coralie Smith, in her hand a grenade. She lowered it to the sand and stood smiling at him, bareheaded, the morning sunlight wiping weariness and pallor from her face.

“Thank the good God, mademoiselle!” he cried out, overjoyed, kissing her hand repeatedly. “I was afraid—afraid! When the detachment came, I brought them along at once. If you had only waited a few hours—”

“If I had waited those few hours,” said Coralie, “my errand would have failed.”

Maignan started, glanced around. Behind the dead horse, in the shadow of a boulder, he saw the figure of a man, one arm ripped naked and rudely bandaged. Now this man moved, struggled, opened his eyes and sat up.

“Who is he?” demanded Captain Maignan, meeting vivid gray eyes and starting in surprise.

“Flight Commander Roger Bel—”

A sudden exclamation burst from Maignan, checked the words on the girl’s lips. She too turned to look at Belcombe, who was rising. He came erect, holding on to the boulder, smiling bitterly at them. The French officer swallowed hard, then saluted.

“Monsieur,” he stammered, “Monsieur—”

Coralie was staring, astounded and horrified. It was her first sight of Roger since he had fallen to a Touareg bullet at the dawn. She had held them off, had been too busy with her automatic and the grenades to do more than hastily bandage his arm and leave him. Now her eyes widened.

Across his forehead were branded four small red circles in a line—the brand of the Itessan clan.

“You see it, eh?” Belcombe spoke slowly. “They put their accursed brand on me. You’d better go on, Coralie—leave me here. I’m a branded man.”

She darted forward as he swayed, caught him, held his cheek against her own.
“You darling!” she cried, tears dimming her eyes. Captain Maignan, being a gallant man,
turned his back, took out a cigarette, worked his flint-and-steel lighter for a spark.
“A woman always has a reason,” he said to himself, rather mournfully. “I knew it.”

[The end of *The Four Red Circles* by Henry Bedford-Jones]