

# The Story of the Bandit King

## Chapter 1

Harry paused as he reached the edge of the small stream that bubbled and bounced along its own little channel, carved out of the centre of the wide, dry riverbed in which he now stood. When the rains came the river would become a torrent, absolutely impassable. But that would not be for months now, nobody knew how long, the rains seemed to come less and less often to this isolated, forgotten part of the world. The region was not yet dead though, as the lines of palm trees that thronged the banks of the river testified, stretching away as far as the eye could see in either direction. These fabled oases that had assumed legendary, almost mythical, status in lands far away were not nearly so glamorous for those who found themselves among them, for the farmers who collected dates from the branches of their palm trees. Or for travellers who relied on them for their shelter and water, men such as Harry. He looked up and felt against his face the sand that had been carried on the wind for miles from the distant dunes. In front of him he saw, finally, shimmering gently in the desert heat, his destination. Clinging to the side of the tall hill that rose from the sands was the fortress city of Ait Bernarbia. Fortified by high, mud-brick walls and towers the city was adorned with a wealth of crenellations, intricate carvings and other artistic flourishes. In the distance, further up the hill Harry could also see houses that were simply built and not at all decorated. Some even looked as though they had been deserted, their roofs fallen in and their walls crumbling. It looked as though they might be washed completely away when the rains came again. The city was not what it used to be, and it showed. A Berber stronghold constructed as a staging post for the caravans that travelled across the vast open spaces of the Sahara, laden with dates and other luxuries, on the road south to Timbuktu. As international borders shifted, or merely came into existence, the caravans had departed and the city had lost much of its wealth and influence.

Harry's journey had been long and hard. Just a few weeks ago he had been sitting with his friends on the balcony of the Café Continental, overlooking the Djmaa El Fna, the enormous open square at the centre of Marrakech's medina, enjoying a

glass of mint tea and watching the square come to life as it was overcome by the evening. During the day it was little more than a large, dusty wasteland. Devoid of any shade, the daytime sun made the square unbearable, its only occupants the row of stalls, with men selling oranges, clinging precariously to its very edge. As evening fell, however, it came alive. First to emerge were the food stalls. In the centre an open fire, closely attended by a group of watchful young men, supervised by their head chef, and flanked on four sides by narrow tables and benches. The local people descended on the stalls and were quickly followed by the entertainment. A noisy and disordered collection of acrobats, snake charmers, dancing monkeys and storytellers, all jostling for attention, competing to be seen and heard.

It was on one of these evenings, amongst this hustle and bustle in the midst of the Djmaa El Fna that Harry's adventure has begun. Whilst walking across the square on his way to the Café Continental, as he had every evening since arriving, his attention was caught by one of the storytellers in the square. Most of the stories that whispered through the warm evening air, stories of adventure and skulduggery from the tribes of the high Atlas, or cosmopolitan romances from the Arabian east, were still told in Arabic. In the time since the signing of the Treaty of Fes, however, more and more of the storytellers had forsaken the language of their fathers for the language of their newer, and considerably wealthier, masters from France. It was one of these translations that Harry heard floating on the dusty breeze.

“And the bandit king,” the storyteller continued, his face harshly illuminated in the flickering flame of the huge torch jammed into the hard, dry ground beside him. “His camel stumbling under the weight of his plunder arrived at the doors of the ancient walled city on the banks of the desert oasis. His weak knocking was answered by the guards who, in answer to his plea for sanctuary, demanded his booty in return for his life. The bandit king refused and his camel limped slowly off into the desert. Neither he nor his treasure was even seen again.”

The crowd gathered around the storyteller burst into a round of applause as he bowed low before them, his loose black robes dusting the floor in front of him. Each of the audience in turn tossed a few small coins into the cloth bag at the storyteller's feet, before turning away to compare this tall tale with the many others that they'd heard since arriving in this strange land. After a few minutes only Harry remained in front of the storyteller.

“Excuse me sir,” Harry ventured as the storyteller picked his bag up from the floor.

“Yes?” He replied.

“Is that story true, the story of the bandit king?”

“I assure you it is,” the storyteller replied, a glint in his eye, “I know this because one of the guards at the desert fortress, he was my great grandfather.”

“So you’ve been to the desert fortress?” Harry’s eyes were wide with excitement.

“I grew up there,” the storyteller looked down at his feet, “but times are hard there now. It is hard to find a job. So I come to Marrakech, to find work.”

Harry was silent, he had so many questions he wanted to ask, but it seemed inappropriate. When eventually the storyteller turned away from Harry and wrenched his torch from the ground, Harry called out.

“So they never found the treasure?”

The storyteller turned around to face Harry once more. “No. Many have searched and many have failed to return.”

“I’d like to search.” Harry gasped eagerly.

“You wouldn’t,” the storyteller replied, the sadness returning to his voice, “it is a quest that is filled with danger, too much danger for a man like you.”

“Please,” Harry begged, “I have come here in search of adventure, tell me where to look and I’ll take my chances.”

It was true that Harry had come to Morocco in search of adventure. Throughout his life Harry had sat at home listening intently to the stories of explorers and adventures that his father had read to him from his big broadsheet newspaper. By the time he was old enough to read the broadsheets for himself, the lust for adventure coursed through his veins, names like Rhodes, Livingstone and Park were engraved in his heart and Harry had vowed to follow in their footsteps. That was, indeed, the reason that Harry now found himself in French Morocco. The British colonies in Southern Africa were far better established and were, so it seemed from the newspapers, positively overflowing with hardened adventurers who would wipe the floor with a young upstart like Harry. When the French had signed the Treaty of Fes, just two years ago, this had opened up a whole new region to European explorers, and right on their doorstep (a ticket on the slow boat to Tangier was a fraction of the price of a ticket to the Cape). Whilst it was Sub Saharan Africa that still held the greatest

attraction for adventurous explorers, the Mahgreb was now seeing a steady trickle of fresh faced and eager young Europeans, keen to make a name for themselves.

So it was that Harry eventually wore the storyteller down. For 20 rials the storyteller agreed to give Harry a map, which he quickly sketched on a piece of parchment he pulled from his pocket, to the walled desert city of Ait Bernarbia. On the other side of the parchment, he scrawled a brief note in a language that Harry didn't know.

“When you get there,” the storyteller added as he handed the parchment to Harry, “ask for Sidi El-Glaoui, and show him this note. He will guide you from there.”

Harry pressed the money into the storyteller's hand and thanked him profusely for his help. He handed the storyteller back his torch, which he had held while the map was being drawn, and quickly made for the bright lights of the Café Continental.

## Chapter 2

Cautiously Harry approached the huge, solid, weather-beaten gates that marked the entrance to the desert city of Ait Bernarbia. The gates towered above him, stretching up to a smooth, red, mud brick archway that faded softly into towers on either side. He knocked hesitantly on the door. When there was no answer he knocked again, and this time the left-hand gate swung open with a rusty creek of the hinges. Looking through the door he caught his first glimpse of the city. Two goats turned their heads to see what the commotion was, before they decided that it wasn't actually that interesting and returned to scratching around in the dust behind the shade of a house. A child poked its head out through the doorway of the nearest house, like all the others a simple mud-brick construction, before a shouted voice called it back to the shadows within.

A guard emerged from behind the gates and stood imposingly in front of him. Clad in the traditional robes, in this case red, his face covered and a dagger hanging from his belt he cut an imposing figure when compared to Harry. Harry had also adopted the habit of covering his face to keep out the sand, but his cloth now resembled a dirty rag and looked completely out of place above his shirt and trousers. The guard barked something that Harry didn't understand. He replied using the broken Arabic that he had managed to pick up from his travels this far.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand. Arabic?"

The guard replied, also hesitating, it sounded as though he too was not used to conversing in Arabic. "What is your business?"

"I am here to see Sidi El-Glaoui." Harry replied.

"Wait here," the guard instructed, before closing the door on Harry.

Harry stood nervously in front of the door for what seemed an eternity, memorising every little crack in the vast wooden structure. Eventually the door swung open again.

"Follow me." The guard ordered. Harry didn't question him and followed as the guard strode into the shadows and led him through the narrow streets lined with houses. In many of these Harry noticed faces peering out to catch a glimpse of their new visitor. He knew that if this place was anything like the village in which he lived back in England, he would be the talk of the town in no time.

The house to which the guard led Harry was bigger than the rest, and slightly grander, but still showed the same signs of the decay that was evident throughout the rest of the city. The guard knocked on the tall wooden door and stood back as if awaiting a response. After a few moments a small door in the centre of the main door swung open and the guard gestured for Harry to step inside. The room was cool and dark, the only source of light being three narrow slits in the walls on either side of the room. Harry blinked for a few moments until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. In front of him sat a man, proud and upright, clad in white robes with his face uncovered, on either side of him stood two more guards. Harry stood still at the end of the room, at his feet was an enormous carpet, intricately detailed and beautifully patterned. Harry stood, mesmerised, until eventually the seated man called him forward.

“I am Sidi El-Glaoui,” he stated imperiously, “what is your business?”

“I have been sent with a message for you,” Harry replied, fumbling in his pocket. He pulled out the note, now battered and torn with use, and stepped forward, offering it to the seated man.

Sidi El-Glaoui took the note from Harry and turned it over in his hand, examining the map carefully before turning his attention to the scrawled writing on the other side.

“Where did you get this?” He asked, his eyes narrowing.

“In Marrakech,” Harry gulped, “from a storyteller.”

Sidi El-Glaoui looked thoughtful. “I know the man who wrote it.”

Harry was relieved; the storyteller had been telling the truth.

“I know this man,” Sidi El-Glaoui repeated. He paused and looked at Harry, screwing the note into a small ball in his fist. “This man is a thief, he stole from me.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, feeling sick to his stomach he just stared at the man seated in front of him.

“He was caught stealing from me, but he escaped and fled from the city before he could be punished.” He stopped, and looked at Harry again. “His note says that he knows that he will never be able to repay me for the trouble he has caused, but, by way of an apology, he has sent me a slave.

Harry turned to look over his shoulder. Behind him one of the guards had moved to block the door. His heart sank.