

THE VEILED RAIDERS

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY, No. 20

BY JOHN BLAINE

Science and adventure prove to be an explosive mixture for a Spindrift Foundation scientific expedition to the southern fringes of the Sahara Desert . Rick Brant, his pal Scotty, and Dr. Tony Briotti are in Africa on a dual mission: to investigate a remote archaeological site north of Nigeria , and to help conduct a worldwide communications satellite demonstration, using the new technique of modulated laser beams.

Starting with a warning from a friendly Hausa trader in the ancient city of Kano that trouble lies ahead, Rick, Scotty, and Tony Briotti are plunged into a dangerous situation as the unwilling guests of the Emir of Kernel. Captured from the Emir by a roving band of veiled Tuaregs, the Spindrifters must overcome incredible obstacles to regain freedom and carry out their scientific missions.

The fascinating background of West Africa , plus a cast of intriguing characters, make this adventure one of the most exciting stories in the popular Rick Brant Science-Adventure series.

CHAPTER I

The Hausa Trader

Talata Dankali, whose name roughly translated into English was “Tuesday Potatoes,” squatted on his mat in the shadow of an acacia tree. His *agbada*, a flowing robe of mouse gray, blended with the deepening twilight. Under a flat, green turban the color of the acacia leaves, his face was the same soft black as bituminous coal. Although he lived in the tradition of his clan, the Hausa traders, enjoying life to the full and getting immense satisfaction out of a session of sharp bargaining, he was now very serious.

He stared at the two who squatted on the mat before him. Every day for five days they had come to his tent in the ancient city of Kano, Nigeria, and bargained with him for many things. They had bought stick paintings, Nigerian knives and swords, animals cunningly fashioned from rawhide, a “talking drum” that still reeked of the smoke of many village camp-fires. They knew how to bargain, which was unusual among Americans, and especially boys of their ages.

Perhaps he had made a bit more profit than he might have made from a Yoruba or an Ibo in Lagos, but he knew that was due to their generosity of spirit. They would not bargain a man down to the last centimeter of his profit. What’s more, unlike some foreigners, they did not unknowingly insult him by speaking pidgin English. They had pride, these two, and as a prideful man of a prideful tribe the Hausa trader appreciated it.

The Hausa man liked these two, and he was distressed. He had just learned of their destination, and he knew it meant trouble for them. He had heard tales from other Hausa traders.

“It is better if you do not go to the Kernel region,” Talata Dankali said at last.

The younger of the two boys, Rick Brant, leaned forward. Rick had sensed from the Hausa trader’s sudden silence that announcement of their destination had upset him. “Why? What’s wrong with going to Kernel?”

“It is not a good place. Why must you go there?”

The elder of the two boys, Don Scott, nicknamed Scotty, explained, “You have seen the man with us—Dr. Briotti? He is a scientist, an archaeologist. He is going to look at an ancient site to see if it is worth exploring. We are going to help him.”

The Hausa man nodded. “A dig. There are many such. I understand this. But it is better if you dig somewhere else. I would be glad to tell you of ancient places where no *bature* has ever been.” The term meant, equally, “whiteman” and “stranger.”

“But why is the Kernel region bad?” Rick inquired.

“Who can say for sure? Everyone knows it is a bad place for strangers. Men go there and do not come back.”

“Hausa men?” Scotty asked.

“Everyone knows the Hausa traders come and go with the wind. They are like the harmattan.” The trader pointed upward to where the high, dust-laden wind from the Sahara Desert blew southward, obscuring the stars. “I could go to Kereke and be safe. But not you.”

“Are you sure?” Rick demanded.

“Only Allah is sure.” The Hausa trader rose to his feet, a tall figure in the dimness. “Now it is dark, and time for me to break my fast. See me if you return and I will welcome you. If you need help and a Hausa trader is near, say to him that you are the friend of Talata Dankali and that I ask his help for you.”

The boys shook hands with the trader, who was suddenly his smiling self once more. “Maybe I am wrong, eh?”

“Enshallah,” Rick murmured.

The Hausa man chuckled. “You know the Arab phrase, eh? It is almost the same in Hausa. ‘If God wills it.’ *Sai wata rana, Matures*. And now I say goodbye, white men.”

The boys watched as he strode away into the darkness, heading for the old walled city. It was the holy month of Ramadan in Nigeria, as elsewhere in Islam, the Muslim world, and the Hausa man had fasted all day without even water passing his lips. Now, after sunset, he could eat and drink with others of the Faithful. While the Southern and Western provinces of Nigeria were either Christian or pagan, the Northern section was almost entirely Muslim. The religion of Islam had been brought in by the conquering Fulanis in the fifteenth century, and the native Hausa people had been converted.

Rick Brant watched the Hausa man go, his face thoughtful. One of the first things he had learned about Nigeria was the reputation of the Hausa traders. They were a legend in West Africa, ranging north to Timbuktu, northwest to Senegal, and eastward to Fort Lamy. The legend said they were honest men, warriors as well as traders. They roamed like gypsies, buying and selling as they went, a combination of walking department stores, tourist shops—where there were tourists—and town criers. If anyone knew what went on in West Africa, it was the Hausa traders. Now one of them, Talata Dankali, had warned the boys against going to their first destination, the Kereke region just south of the great Sahara Desert.

As the son of Hartson Brant, Director of the Spindrift Scientific Foundation, Rick Brant had been on many expeditions with his pal Scotty. He had been warned before, and always the warning had been warranted. Still, why should anyone want to harm an archaeological expedition? Dr. Anthony Briotti of the Spindrift staff had been retained by the Institute of Africa Studies to report on a new archaeological find in the Kereke region. If a major “dig” was warranted, based on Tony’s report, the Institute would undertake it. If his report was negative, it would be crossed off as a future possibility.

Scotty asked whimsically, “Do you suppose Tony is jinxed?”

Rick grinned. “More likely, he’d say we were the ones who put the Jonah on him.” They had been on two previous expeditions with the young archaeologist, resulting in dramatic adventures both times—the adventures of *The Golden Skull* and *The Wailing Octopus*. It was Tony Briotti’s firm conviction that the boys were what he called “adventure prone,” attracting adventures as some people attract accidents.

Three Fulani-Hausas strode by on their way to the old walled city. The boys watched them pass, interested as always in the people and customs of the places they visited. When traveling in non-European countries, the boys were used to finding themselves the tallest human beings in sight. Rick

was tall and slim, while Scotty was of equal height and built like a heavyweight, whereas most non-European races were of smaller stature. But the Fulanis were even taller than the boys and looked taller than they were because of an arrow-straight, proud carriage. The boys had also been surprised to find that while their skins were true ebony, their features were not in the least Negroid.

Tony had explained that the origins of the Fulanis were shrouded in the mists of time. Originally they might have been a Semitic or Europoid people, and there was some evidence their original homeland had been Persia, but no one really knew. They had mingled with the native Hausa people, also tall and straight-featured, until few pure Fulanis were left- although they were still the ruling class of the north.

In any case, Rick thought they were a dignified and handsome people. He wondered what Tony would think of their local story that the Kernel region was dangerous. Hadn't Talata Dankali, who was a pure Hausa, said that "everyone knew" it was dangerous?

The Central Hotel was in the modern section of Kano, across the road from the acacia grove where the Hausa trader had set up shop. The boys crossed the road and walked up the winding drive to the main building, eyes on the ground as they went. They had not yet seen one, but a local American had warned them that two of Africa's deadliest snakes, the green mamba and the cobra, could be found in the shrubbery and grass of Kano.

Tony Briotti, who looked more like a tanned athlete than an archaeologist, was waiting for them in the main dining room.

"Been shopping?" he asked.

"We've been tapping the local moccasin telegraph," Rick explained. "Our Hausa trader friend says the Kernel region is dangerous, and we shouldn't go"

To his surprise, Tony took the warning seriously.

"I suppose it may be. It's not a well-known or populated part of Africa. I'm not even sure what country it's in. I don't suppose anyone really knows, because the boundaries aren't that definite. But I don't know what we can do, except go and see."

"I wish I had my rifle with me," Scotty said.

"So do I. But getting a gun permit by mail is difficult, and I didn't think your rifle would be needed."

"Could we buy one and get a permit locally?" Rick asked.

"I suppose we could. Let's try in the morning. There will be time before the big celebration. Then we can see the parade and leave."

It was the end of the fast of Ramadan and tomorrow was the K'aramar Salla, Kano's biggest holiday, an event they didn't intend to miss.

Tony changed the subject. "Winston called from Lagos. I assured him everything was fine and on schedule. He's having a few problems getting the station set up, but nothing serious. He'll be ready on time. I gave him your regards."

Rick nodded his thanks. The expedition was only half the reason for the Nigerian trip. Parnell Winston's

project was the other half. Winston was in Lagos, setting up a communications satellite station. There had been other such stations in Lagos, starting with the ship *Kingsport*, which had served as the African terminal for the synchronous orbit satellite Syncom. The communications relay was 22,300 miles in space, where its velocity in orbit just matched the turning of the earth, causing it to remain over the Atlantic, visible from both Africa and America.

Winston's portable station, however, was the first to use a modulated laser beam instead of a radio beam as the communications link. The laser method had been proven in the United States, and now it was time to carry it to the world under the auspices of Intercomsat, the International Communications Satellite Group. The laser Comsat link, which Winston and others in the Spindrift group had helped to develop, had one big advantage—small units could be carried into remote places, needing only adequate power supplies. That meant the remote places of earth could participate in the international satellite communications network—and the boys were one of the teams scheduled to prove it.

In one month, during which specially equipped satellites would be launched into synchronous orbits over the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, a worldwide demonstration would take place. Every continent would talk to another. The Prime Minister of Nigeria would hold a phone conversation with the Prime Minister of Canada. Through a European ground station, notables of Europe would talk with notables of Asia and the Americas.

From Sokoto, Nigeria, the Sultan of Sokoto, religious leader of the principal Muslim sect of the area, would talk via the Atlantic and Pacific satellites—with a bounce to America in between—to the Sultan of Sulu, religious leader of the Moros of the Sulu Sea. That was the boys' project. Their portable laser was in a heavy case in their room, and would be carried on the expedition and thence to Sokoto on a trailer hauled by their jeep. Winston, in Lagos, would give them the settings. They would check the circuit with a university scientific team now en route to the island of Jolo, then turn the phone over to the Sultan for thirty seconds of conversation over halfway around the world.

Rick and Scotty had trained with Winston for weeks. They could tear down and rebuild the equipment in the dark, and operate it more surely than they tuned in the TV in the library of the big Brant house on Spindrift Island, New Jersey. They were excited, of course, but proud, too. Never before had they been put on their own to conduct an important element of a scientific demonstration.

They ordered dinner and settled down to a first course of assorted fresh tropical fruits. Scotty spooned a luscious bite of mango into his mouth, then made a face. "Gritty," he said. "The dust that falls out of the harmattan gets into everything."

Rick looked at him thoughtfully. He muttered, "Let's hope the dust is the worst Africa has to offer on this trip!"

CHAPTER II

Under the Baobab Trees

The scene was out of a Hollywood extravaganza, needing only a small band of heroes fighting off a

bloodthirsty horde to make it ideal fare for the late TV movie. There were over a thousand Fulani and Hausa nobles on richly caparisoned, prancing horses. The riders carried ornamented swords with ornate daggers at their waists. Their flowing robes and turbans were the colors of the rainbow, with the holy green of Islam dominating, for many of these nobles bore the title of Hadji , one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca .

The vast parade of horsemen had gathered outside the palace of the Emir of Kano, and with the Emir at their head had made a stately procession through the centuries-old streets of the walled city of Kano , and into the great field before the beautiful green-domed Kano mosque. Then, with wild screams and waving swords, they charged!

Rick, Scotty, and Tony worked cameras as fast as they could shoot, catching shot after shot of the plunging mounts, the wild riders, and the watching crowd. All three Spindrifters had stood up in their jeep to shoot pictures over the heads of the mob. Finally the charging horses were pulled up, with much neighing and prancing, and the Emir dismounted to enter the mosque. The parade was over.

Rick Brant sank back in his seat and began to reload his camera. What a scene! All it had needed was a few Foreign Legionnaires meeting the charge, for the entire atmosphere of the parade, costumes worn by the riders-which were colorful, elaborate versions of their everyday dress-and the long swords and keen daggers were typical of the desert tribes of the Sahara.

Like most Americans, Africa had meant rain forests and dense bush to Rick. There were jungles, to be sure, but much closer to the coast. In Northern Nigeria the country was arid, semidesert . It was savanna land, good mostly for grazing and dry-land crops. The Sahara Desert was not far to the north, and the Fulanis and Hausa were not far removed from the desert peoples.

The Spindrifters had not yet seen the coastal lands. An Air Force cargo jet had deposited them, complete with jeep and trailer, at the modern Kano airport after a trip directly across the Atlantic with only a brief stop at Robertsfield, Liberia . Five days had been occupied in completing local arrangements with Tony's contact, where only a day had been planned. But nothing moved on schedule in this part of the world, and the boys had been left with plenty of time for sightseeing and bargaining with Talata Dankali.

"Shall we go?" Tony asked. "The show is over."

Scotty was in the driver's seat. For answer, he started the motor and moved slowly through the crowd. A group of children ran alongside as the jeep moved, chanting, "*Dash, bature!* Dash, dash!"

Dash was a useful word. It meant variously a bribe, a tip, a gift, a bonus, or simply a handout-the sense in which the children were using it. It could be either a verb or a noun. "Give me *dash, bature.* " Or, as the Hausa trader had used it in making a gift to each of them after a pleasant hour of bargaining, "I *dash* you these bowls."

The crowd thinned, and Scotty speeded up a bit on the blacktop road and turned north along the great city wall. The Kano wall was from forty to fifty feet high, and about as thick. Once the entire city had been within it, but with years of peace it had gradually moved beyond the original limits until modern Kano was completely outside the wall. In its time, it had been an effective barricade against the wild desert tribes from the north.

Rick settled back and got comfortable in the rear seat. It would be a long ride. He turned and made sure the trailer was following smoothly. It contained their camp gear, food and water supplies, extra clothing, and a .30 caliber rifle Tony had purchased for Scotty that morning with the help of his Nigerian contact

who had managed to cut a bit of red tape to speed things up.

The boys were contented. There was nothing they liked better than new sights and sounds, and there were plenty of those in Nigeria. Besides, they had two projects, Tony's and their own. Tony's part of the expedition should take about ten days, eight for travel and two to conduct an investigation of the new site. There was plenty of slack, and if Tony needed three or four days, it would not crowd them.

Scotty turned onto the main route and headed northeast, the highway paralleling the railroad line. They would follow the railroad line to where it ended at Nguru, then head north to the Nigerian border. Somewhere north of Matsena, perhaps in Nigeria or perhaps in the country of Niger, was the Kernel region. The map marked the area as unsurveyed.

They left Kano behind and followed the highway into the open savanna, thinly dotted with neem trees, acacia, and an occasional baobab. Every time Rick saw a baobab he grinned. They were big trees in girth and in height, but they had an unfinished look, like a small child's drawing of a tree. There were few branches, and those were short and thin in comparison with the trunk. The leaves were silly little clusters of fuzz that would probably shape up into something more natural looking later, when the growing season began.

Now and then the jeep roared past a cluster of beehive huts, often surrounded by a thorn *boma*, or a wall. Tony said these were family villages, often occupied by a man and his wives—the Muslim faith allowed four—and his children and their children. They passed Nigerians walking along the road, or cultivating patches of yams and cassava. Always there was a friendly smile, an upraised clenched fist, and a welcome yell of “*bature!*”

The first time Rick had seen the raised fist he had interpreted it as a threatening gesture, but this was not the case. It was a welcome, a relic of the days when the fist had gripped a spear, held aloft in salute. Those days were not long past, either, Rick reminded himself.

There was little traffic on the road. Once a British Land Rover passed, and they saw a few dilapidated trucks, called “mammy wagons” locally. Then, as they went through the little village of Ringim, the road became dirt, and the falling dust from the high-blowing harmattan wind was suddenly augmented by a rolling cloud from under their wheels.

It was a little over a hundred miles from Kano to Nguru, and the three were dust-covered and weary after nearly four hours of driving. The lone gas station bore a familiar American commercial symbol, the Flying Red Horse, and while the jeep was being filled with gas, they took advantage of the station facilities to wash off the dust of the road and to drink two bottles of Fanta apiece.

Rick and Scotty had already tasted the local soft drink—only to find that the name Fanta appeared on the bottle in company with a more familiar legend in small print. Fanta was a product of the export division of the company that produced their favorite American beverage: Coke.

Tony Briotti glanced at his watch. “There's a rest house here. Had enough?”

Rick shook his head. “The schedule calls for reaching Matsena. Let's buy another few bottles of Fanta and break out the sandwiches to eat on the way. We can camp beyond Matsena as we planned. There are still nearly four hours of daylight left.”

“I'm with Rick,” Scotty agreed. “Unless you're too tired.”

“Not me,” Tony said. “I thought you might be. I should have known better. Let’s get going.”

It was about forty miles from Nguru to Matsena, and they made it in about ninety minutes, passed through the town, and took the road shown on Tony’s map. The road was little more than a caravan track, an impression heightened by an actual caravan of camels laden with wood coming in from somewhere around Lake Chad. Their speed was slowed drastically by the road condition, which resembled no road on which they had traveled before. They were nearing the fringes of the desert now, and the scrub growth of the savanna country had given way to an increasing number of rocks, most of which seemed to lay in the jeep’s path.

“We’ve had enough,” Tony announced after an hour of rough travel. “Keep an eye open for a place to camp.”

It was another hour before they spotted a likely location, a cluster of four great baobab trees. There was no water nearby. It would have to be a dry camp, made even drier by the dust of the harmattan.

The baobabs were in a hollow that would protect them from the wind. It grew chilly in the sub-Sahara at night, even this close to the equator. The three got busy. Tony pulled then: tent from the trailer and started to set it up, a one-man operation with the new model, while Rick unloaded the kerosene pressure stove and put water for coffee on to boil. Scotty moved around collecting bits of wood from the baobab trees and dried bushes for a small campfire. They didn’t need a fire for cooking, but as Scotty said, “How can you have a proper camp with no fire?”

The sun set in a blaze of dark-red glory through the dust of the harmattan while they worked. Scotty got his fire going while Rick opened a can of soup to go with the remaining sandwiches the Central Hotel had packed. Tony spread then: sleeping bags and lighted a kerosene lantern to supplement the firelight in the growing darkness.

“Soup’s ready!” Rick called.

They settled down to eat. Rick looked at the contented faces of his companions and felt fine. First camp was always an important event in a trip like this, and everything was going well. They were on schedule. Tomorrow would see them traversing some really barren country. He wondered where they would camp twenty-four hours from now.

Scotty suddenly hissed, “Don’t move!” He looked straight ahead with a fixed stare.

Rick and Tony froze.

There was a sharp command from behind Rick and a rifle bullet smashed into the fire. “Up hands!” a voice called.

Six hands shot into the air. Whoever it was had sneaked up quietly and now had the drop on them. Rick turned slowly and carefully, hands high.

Eight rifles were trained on them from the top of the rise, and a tall man in flowing robes and a red turban was striding down the rise toward them, a gleaming long sword in his hand.

CHAPTER III

The Emir's Guest Room

The jeep lurched, bounced, then slid sideways for a breathtaking moment while Rick fought for balance. It was a nerve-racking and muscle-wrenching process, trying to keep balanced, because he was blindfolded, with wrists lashed to the tubular frame of the jeep seat.

In a way, he thought grimly, the extreme discomfort of the trip was a help. It kept him too busy to worry, or to let his anger mount to the screaming point. He wondered how Scotty and Tony were making out. They were with him, Tony in front and Scotty at his side in the rear seat while a wild tribesman drove, but the crashing, bumping, skidding progress of the jeep made conversation difficult if not impossible.

Last night, prodded by rifles, they had been herded into their tent to sleep under guard, then roused at dawn and lashed into their own jeep. No discussion had taken place. The red-turbaned leader spoke in grunts, communicating by gestures with his long sword—just like one Rick had bought from the Hausa trader as a souvenir.

The jeep rolled on interminably, while Rick suffered intense discomfort with gritted teeth. He was black and blue, he thought, from shoulder to ankle where sudden lurches had thrown him against the jeep and seat frames. The jeep was not a luxury wagon under the best of road conditions, and on the nonexistent road they were traveling it was an iron cage in which he bounced back and forth.

There was a shouted command and the vehicle turned, slid, and came to a stop. Rick felt hands loosening his bonds, then the blindfold was pulled from his eyes. He blinked at the sudden glare of the bright sun, and squinted until his vision adjusted. They had come to a stop in a hollow among more baobab trees.

The red-turbaned leader motioned them to climb down, and as Rick gathered his bruised bones and muscles for the effort, Scotty, beside him, got to his feet with a suppressed groan and stepped to the ground. Rick followed, and reached out a hand to Tony.

One of the desert horsemen had already started a fire from the scraps of wood under the trees by the time the Spindrift trio had recovered sufficiently to move a bit more freely.

The leader motioned to the trailer. "I guess he's giving us permission to get wood and water," Tony said.

Rick was willing. He was hungry and thirsty. He led the way to the trailer and opened the food box, while Scotty reached an exploring hand under their bedrolls.

The leader saw the movement. He grinned broadly and patted his saddle. Rick saw the stock of Scotty's rifle projecting from the leader's saddle sheath.

"He thinks of everything," Scotty said bitterly.

"You'll get it back," Rick replied with more assurance than he felt. Red Turban had searched them thoroughly. Their pockets had been emptied and their wrist watches had been taken. "Come on. Let's

break out some chow,” Rick urged.

“I suggest corned-beef sandwiches,” Tony said. “Quick, simple, and nourishing. I don’t feel like struggling with anything more complicated.”

Rick and Scotty agreed, and in a few moments they were munching thick slabs of corned beef between slices of coarse Nigerian bread.

“I’ve been trying to keep track of our direction by the feel of the sun,” Scotty said between bites. “It doesn’t work. We’ve changed direction so many times I’ve lost count. Did either of you do any better?”

Rick and Tony shook their heads. “The sun tells me it’s about noontime,” Tony said, “but I have no clues about the direction in which we’ve been traveling, except that the vegetation is even sparser than it was yesterday. That could mean we’ve been going north, or northwest, or northeast.”

“Where are they taking us, and why?” Rick asked.

There was, of course, no answer to that. A short distance away the tribesmen sat around the fire, drinking hot tea and chewing on some kind of cold meat that was probably mutton or goat. The desert people had their rifles handy and kept an eye on the three Americans.

Rick counted the group, then exclaimed, “Two short!”

“They may be on guard duty,” Scotty suggested. “We can’t see from this hollow.”

“Or they may have gone ahead to our destination,” Tony said, then added, “Whatever that destination may be.”

Lunch was over. The leader motioned them back into the jeep again, and rifles covered them as the leader personally lashed their hands into place and then replaced the blindfolds. There was a brief wait before the sound of horses’ hooves, then the jeep roared into life and the ordeal started again.

Rick’s wrists were lacerated from the binding cord, and they began to swell. He could feel the pulses pounding in both arms, and concentrated on counting his heartbeats while balancing as best he could against the leaping jeep. Once there was another pause. Because of the strong fumes, he could tell that the jeep was being gassed up. The trailer had carried two jerry cans of gas.

The pounding began again. He estimated from his pulse count that they had been traveling for nearly two hours before the gas stop. He gave up the count. It served only to remind him of the pain in his wrists. He clenched his jaws and swayed to the jeep’s motion. If only he could see, it wouldn’t be so bad. But the blindfolds were clearly to keep them from knowing the direction in which they were traveling, or from identifying landmarks. He wondered what would happen if the party met other travelers, and decided that was unlikely. From the movements of the jeep it was clear that they were not on any well-traveled road.

The torture went on endlessly. He could do nothing but bear it as best he could, sometimes biting his lips to keep from crying out. He knew that Scotty and Tony were going through the same torture, and he refused to add to their misery by letting out groans and yells—even though it was hard to suppress them.

At last the ordeal ended. When his wrist cords were cut—because the flesh had swollen so much the cords couldn’t be untied—he could only sit slumped in the jeep seat, unable to move. The blindfold was removed and he just closed his eyes against the light

Rough hands plucked him from the seat and his feet touched the ground. He tried to stand and couldn't. He fell to a kneeling position, half-unconscious. Water cascaded over him, and the shock brought him back to full sense. He struggled to his feet, holding onto the jeep and saw that Tony also was clutching the jeep for support. On the other side of the vehicle, Scotty pressed water from his hair and tried to grin.

Rick glanced around through half-closed eyes. They were in the wall-enclosed yard of a substantial building of stone and red clay. More than a score of small children, some in single garments and some in none at all, watched from the shelter of a thatched porch. Red Turban's men leaned on their guns, in obvious amusement at the condition of the three. Across the yard came an imposing figure in gleaming white robe and white turban. It was hard to tell because of the shapeless robe, but the man probably weighed over three hundred pounds. He wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses, and carried a gold-headed cane.

The man looked them over in silence for a moment, then spoke in excellent English. "Welcome, white men. My master, the Emir of Kernel, bids me to see that you are cared for."

"The best way to care for us," Tony Briotti said harshly, "is to turn us loose and let us take our jeep and trailer out of here."

The man smiled frostily. "I regret that is not possible. It would be a reflection on our hospitality."

"Why did these men capture us?" Rick demanded.

"Capture you? Oh, no. You entered the southern boundary of the Emir's lands, and he insists that all who enter become his guests. Gupia!" -hemotioned at Red Turban-"simply wanted to be sure you did not refuse to be entertained."

"Rifles make it hard to refuse," Scotty retorted.

"Precisely. They will also make it hard for you to resist our hospitality. Come with me and you shall have a bath and a change of clothes, after which the Emir may consent to see you."

The promise of a bath melted any impulse to resist.

Time enough after they were rested and cleaned up. Rick found strength to follow the majordomo into the cool interior of the big building.

From the sun's position Rick knew it was late afternoon. By the time they finished bathing in a huge sunken pool made of Arabic tiles, it was dark. A servant arrived and lighted candles. Another brought their clothing bags. The three changed, feeling cleaner, but no less bruised and exhausted.

The majordomo, who had said that his name was Elijah, came for them. "The Emir has consented to see you."

"Big of him," Scotty muttered.

They were led to a huge chamber dimly lighted by candles. A tall, lean figure was sprawled on a heap of cushions while kneeling women waved away mosquitoes and other night insects. Flanking the pile of cushions were two white-robed, turbaned guards who held .45 automatics. It was not too dark to see that the hammers were in full-cock position.

“The Emir regrets it is not convenient for him to converse with you in English,” Elijah stated. “It would be courteous for you to make obeisance before the master.”

“Nonsense!” Tony snapped.

Scotty snorted.

Rick opened his mouth to join their sentiments and a sharp blow in the back sent him sprawling headlong. Scotty and Tony slammed to the earthen floor next to him. Rick turned to see the three guards who had sent them flying with blows from rifle butts. His back hurt so he had to clench his teeth to keep from letting out a groan.

“I knew you would not refuse to prostrate yourselves,” Elijah said smoothly. “You may now rise.”

The three did so, but not without some difficulty.

The Emir sat upright and surveyed them in much the same way that he might have examined three spavined, moth-eaten camels. He spoke briefly in Hausa.

Elijah translated. “My master asks me to say that he looks forward to a long and useful visit.”

“Tell your master,” Scotty grated, “that I look forward to the day when I find out if my hands will meet when locked around his throat.”

Elijah shook his head. “It is well you did not say that directly to my master. Since you said it to me, I will let the matter drop because you are doubtless hungry and tired. My master regrets he cannot dine with you. And now, you will back away, bowing as you go.”

“Do it,” Tony said abruptly.

The boys did so, and Rick knew Scotty was seething inwardly, too.

When they were in the corridor, following Elijah to another room, Hick asked Tony, “Why did you give in?”

“Because we’ve been beaten enough. Bowing was only a small blow to our pride, much better than another blow to our backs. It wouldn’t be good for one of us to end up helpless with a serious injury.”

Rick knew that Tony’s reasoning made sense, but he didn’t like the idea of kowtowing.

Elijah watched them eat, but took nothing himself. Nor would he answer questions. “What is written,” he said, “is written. Time will answer all questions. Now eat, and I will take you to the Emir’s guest quarters for the night.”

The food was distasteful. There was lamb, so highly spiced it burned the mouth like flame, and chicken so tough that Scotty, the irrepressible, was moved to say: “I know where they got this bird. They chased him down from Algeria and caught up with him just as he died of old age and hardening of the arteries.”

Lamb and chicken were washed down with lukewarm water, and at last the dismal meal ended. Elijah, the three guards following, led them to a flight of stairs. Servants brought extra candles.

They went down stairs which were cut from rock, then into a room filled with boxes, through a door, and into a long corridor. Along the corridor were heavy doors made of timbers. The doors opened inward, and each had a barred window cut into it.

Elijah paused before a cubicle. "Your guest room," he stated. "Please to enter."

Rick said to himself, "This is a prison. But what have we done to be put into a dungeon like this?"

The room had stone walls, except on the door side where the wall had been made of heavy stones put together to form a massive kind of masonry. It was barren, except for a jug of water, a bucket, and their sleeping bags.

"I hope you have a good rest," Elijah said politely, and closed the door on them, leaving only a single candle burning for light. They heard a heavy bolt slide and knew they were locked in.

Tony called, "Just a moment! I demand to know why we're locked up like this, and when we are to be let loose."

Elijah peered in through the barred window. "My master enjoys having guests. He would not like to see you leave until you have remained awhile. How long will that be? Who knows? But be at peace. Allah will decide."

CHAPTER IV

One Hundred Kilos of Peanuts

The three stared at each other in the dim light of the single candle, then the two boys focused on Tony.

"What's your guess?" Scotty asked. "What's this all about?"

Tony shook his head. "I'm as much in the dark as anyone. These people aren't typical Hausa-Fulanis like those of Kano, except for the Emir and Elijah, who are clearly Fulanis. There's nothing in their cultural pattern that calls for kidnapping strangers—at least not now. Of course there was a time when slavery was a way of life."

"Maybe the Emir is longing for the good old days and plans to bring them back with us as a beginning," Rick observed wryly.

"Just how long ago was slavery the custom?" Scotty asked.

Tony shrugged. "Officially, it stopped when the British occupied Nigeria around 1800. Actually, it

continued for some time. There are stories in the Nigerian press even today, not often, but every once in a while, about some person being held in slavery. Of course I wouldn't take such tales too seriously. Nigeria is really one of the most progressive countries in Africa."

"Are we in Nigeria?" Rick queried.

"Probably not. I got a brief look at the sun as it set, and it seemed to be farther south than it was last night. Of course it may have been an illusion. If we could see the North Star and estimate our latitude, I'd be able to say more accurately."

"We don't know how far we traveled," Scotty mused. "It seemed like a million miles. Probably it was closer to a hundred."

Tony disagreed. "More than that, I'd say. We were on the road nearly nine hours, and our average speed was probably somewhere around twenty miles an hour. We may have been carried nearly two hundred miles."

"We were supposedly picked up as we crossed the Emir's southern boundary," Rick recalled. "He must own quite a territory."

"Several thousand square miles wouldn't be unreasonable," Tony pointed out. "The Emirs governed the equivalent of large city-states before the British came. Then, following the British pattern of ruling through the existing machinery, the Emirs continued to rule the same lands under the British governors. After independence, the Emirs continued to exercise political influence. What I'm wondering is: Is our host a genuine, recognized Emir or is he a self-styled potentate who is running an essentially outlaw kingdom?"

"Unless we can get out of here," Scotty said practically, "it won't make much difference."

"Nothing we can do tonight, anyway," Tony said wearily. "Let's turn in. We all need rest to recover from the beating we took. Tomorrow we can start to plan."

The sleeping bags were comfortable, even on the hard-packed dirt floor. Rick's bruises protested for only a short time before he drifted off into the borderland between sleep and waking.

There was no way of telling what time zone they were in, but if they were on Kano time, and if it was about nine thirty in the evening, then it would be around five thirty in the afternoon on Spindrift Island. In his half-sleeping condition Rick saw vividly two slim, attractive girls emerging from the cool waters of the Atlantic. His sister Barby and their island neighbor, Jan Miller, had been scuba diving off Pirate's Cove. Rick saw them load their gear into the cart he had made from an old wagon, and haul it up past the long, low laboratory buildings of the Spindrift Foundation. His father came out of the lab and joined the girls.

The trio walked past Rick's plane, the Sky Wagon, and along the orchard to the big house. It was close to dinnertime.

Rick's dream deepened and changed as he fell fast asleep, and when he awoke, stiff and sore, to the first light of pale morning through a high slit he had not noticed the night before, he could not have said what his dreams were about.

He sat up with a groan and massaged a particularly bad bruise on one thigh. Next to him Scotty stirred, opened his eyes, then closed them again, sighing. Tony turned over and muttered to himself.

“Morning has come,” Rick announced unnecessarily.

“I wish it hadn’t,” Scotty groaned.

“At least not so soon,” Tony amended. “There’s no reason to get up until they rouse us out. I’m staying in this bag until called.”

Scotty got up, stretching cautiously. He began a careful investigation of their cell in the dim light. Rick watched from the warmth of his sleeping bag. Nights were cold in this sub-Saharan region. With cloudless skies, heat radiated off rapidly during the night, and was absorbed with equal rapidity during the day. The result was blistering days-100 degrees in the shade was not unusual-and chilly nights, often near fifty or even lower.

“Door hinges on the outside,” Scotty reported. “The door is too massive to break down. I saw last night that it’s held by a big iron bolt that runs between iron straps. There isn’t much of a crack, either. The door is a tight fit. No chance of working the bolt back from this side. That leaves the walls.”

“And we might as well leave them alone,” Tony finished. “We’re underground, except for a foot or so at the top-at least that’s my conclusion from what I saw last night and can see now. The wall in which the door is set could only be moved with crowbars and sledge hammers.”

Scotty continued his inch-by-inch inspection of the cell while Rick and Tony watched. Finally the husky ex-Marine gave up and stretched out on his sleeping bag.

“I’d find this a lot more bearable,” Scotty said, “if I knew what it was all about.”

Rick heard the creak of a door in the distance and held up his hand. “Wait a minute. Someone may be coming.”

Someone was. Red Turban pulled back the bolt and swung the door open. He was not alone. Two rifles at ready backed him up. He motioned the three to leave the cell and follow him. They did, the rifles at their backs.

The Spindrift trio blinked in the sunlight of the courtyard. The harmattan was not blowing today and the sky was a clear, pale blue. The sun was already above the horizon, a fiery ball blasting heat energy at them in a ceaseless wave.

Red Turban led them to an old-fashioned pump and motioned to them to use it. They did so, splashing water with the pleasure of men too-long deprived of it. The next move was to a corner of the courtyard where two dozen native men in assorted dress ranging from old dungarees to flowing *agbada* squatted in the shade of the wall, waiting. Red Turban motioned them to seats with the others. The three hunkered down like experienced hands and waited in silence.

Presently six women appeared from the house, carrying trays. It was breakfast time. The morning menu consisted of cassava paste, inedibly seasoned with peppers, and the welcome blessing of fruit. There were papayas, called papaws locally, with oranges and bananas.

The fruit was refreshing, and filling. The three ate well, then waited for the next move. It was a trip to the pump for a drink, then back to the wall again to hunker down and wait.

Elijah came forth, and with him was a man who looked like an Arab, complete with burnoose. Cold eyes stared at the three from a face seamed and leathered by the desert sun. The eyes were gray, the color scarcely darker than the whites. The man carried a long bullwhip coiled in his hand.

“This is Hamid,” Elijah stated without preliminaries. “He is the overseer. You will work for him, along with these others. He speaks no English, nor any other European language, so it will be useless to argue with him. Do precisely as you are directed and you will have no trouble. If you do not perform well, Hamid knows how to be persuasive.”

“I demand to know the meaning of this,” Tony said coldly. “First we are made prisoners and brought here, and now we are to be put to work. What is all this?”

“This is the Emir’s land. He needs strong men to work for him. It is your good fortune to be chosen. Now, follow me. Since mercy is the Emir’s wish, I will explain what Hamid expects of you. But I will explain only once.”

A gesture of Tony’s hand told the boys to be quiet. They fell into line behind Elijah, while the overseer commanded the others to follow. The guards brought up the rear.

Elijah led the procession out of the yard and into a vast field dominated by two great pyramids. As they got closer, Rick saw that the pyramids were made of fiber bags stacked with mathematical precision in such a way that their contents could air.

Next to the pyramids were piles of empty sacks. Elijah pointed to them. “These sacks are to be filled with groundnuts. Each is to contain exactly one hundred kilos. When you have filled a sack, you will put it in the place Hamid directs, then go fill another. There are scales on which the sacks are to be weighed. If you work well, you will be fed well. If you do not work well, Hamid carries the punishment with him. And now good day to you. I will see this evening how well you have worked.”

There was nothing to say in reply. It was all too fantastic. To be captured, and put to work as field hands!

Rick asked dazedly, “How much is one hundred kilos? I forget.”

“About 2.2 pounds per kilo. So a hundred kilos is about 220 pounds,” Tony replied.

Elijah turned back. “I neglected to tell you this: The three of you will work together, and you will fill and stack at least one bag each hour. You will work each day for no more and no less than ten hours.”

“What are groundnuts?” Scotty asked.

For answer, Tony stooped and pulled a nut from the nearest ground vine and held it up.

“Peanuts,” Rick exclaimed. “Peanuts!”

Scotty groaned. “Ten sacks at one hundred kilos each. More than a ton of peanuts a day.”

Rick shook his head. “The only cheerful thing I can think of is that I like elephants, and a ton of peanuts should keep a lot of them happy.”

Hamid’s bullwhip sang through the air and snapped like a pistol shot. He motioned to the sacks, and the

gesture said, "Get busy."

The first day had begun.

CHAPTER V

The Emir Hones a Grudge

The groundnuts, Rick thought, were well named. They grew on the ground. They grew flat on the ground. They grew on tangled vines on the ground. It took him and the others something less than two hours to swear vengeance on all peanuts. They vowed that every peanut they possessed from then on would be fed to squirrels and elephants.

The vines tangled their feet, and bending to pick the nuts from the stubborn vines soon started their backs to aching. To kneel meant kneeling on the ever-present vines, which was like kneeling on a length of cord.

It was grueling, backbreaking labor and they hated it. But when the boys flagged, Tony urged them to better efforts. "We have a quota," he said. "Be realistic. You saw Hamid's eyes. He would no more hesitate to use that lash on us than he would on a steer. In fact, he'd probably prefer it."

"He'd better not use that lash," Scotty said flatly.

"If he does," Tony told him firmly, "we will take it with no attempt to retaliate. The reason is obvious. We're slaves-field hands. If you go for his throat, the guards will have no hesitation in shooting. If you survive, you may be sorry because of the unpleasanties these people can think up."

"But we're not going to put up with this!" Rick exploded.

"You're right. We're not. But the time has not yet come. We have to plan. Now pick nuts. Let's meet that quota."

They met it, but just barely, even by resuming work while the others rested after lunch. When Hamid gave the signal to return to the main compound, they were so exhausted that walking was difficult, and they were stooped like old men. Rick's back muscles were like hot wires, and he could tell that Scotty and Tony were in no better shape. All three prided themselves on keeping fit, but picking groundnuts called into play many muscles not subject to such abuse under any normal condition.

Dinner was not edible. It was meat and fish, so saturated in hot peppers and spices that the lips turned numb after a few nibbles. They drank quantities of water, then shambled to their cell and were locked in for the night.

The second day of picking groundnuts was worse. During the midday pause they counted. Only four bags. That meant six during the afternoon. Rick didn't voice his doubt that they could make it.

The harmattan was not blowing, and the sun was a burning disk that drew the water from their bodies, parched their throats, and made their unprotected heads throb. The other workers picked and sacked peanuts methodically, working like machines. They were used to the work, and inured to the blazing sun. They drank only at mealtimes, while Tony and the boys had to make frequent trips to the goatskin water bag.

Hamid thought they spent too much time and used too much water in the trips to the bag. Once he waved Rick away, but the boy pointed to his parched throat and the Arab allowed him to drink. Hamid was a son of the desert, and used to little water. He couldn't understand that people accustomed to as much as they wanted would soon grow dehydrated if their normal quantity was cut off too abruptly.

Scotty was the unfortunate one when Hamid finally lost patience. Rick looked up in time to see the Arab's lash whistle down in a sharp cut across the boy's back as he bent to drink. Rick held his breath, then poised to run to Scotty's side. He had seen Scotty explode for far less, and when the ex-Marine lost his temper, there was sudden and violent action.

Beside Rick, Tony tensed, ready to jump in if Scotty reacted. But Rick was never prouder of his friend. He saw Scotty take a deep breath, then stand upright, turn, and walk toward them without a word or gesture to Hamid.

When Scotty arrived his face was chalk white under the tan and he had bit his lips until a trickle of blood ran down his chin, but he was under control.

"I'm proud of you," Tony said gently. "Let's see your back."

Scotty turned wordlessly. The whip had cut a slash through his shirt and a shorter tear in his T-shirt, but the skin was unbroken, fortunately. A swelling welt a foot long showed where the lash had connected. It continued to swell as they examined it.

"There's nothing you can do," Scotty said through clenched teeth. "Let's pick nuts. We want to make that quota-that bullwhip is no fun."

They made the quota, but Rick and Tony refused to let Scotty help lift the one-hundred-kilo bags. Together, they wrestled them into place and apparently succeeded in pleasing Hamid because he took no action against them.

At dinnertime Tony demanded to see Elijah by repeating his name until the guard sent one of the workers to the big house. When the majordomo appeared, Tony said briskly, "Hamid lashed this boy. We want ointment for him, and we want it now."

Elijah smiled. "I did not think you were in a position to demand anything."

Mild Tony Briotti, who was often lost in contemplation of some antiquity and who never raised his voice, smiled back, and even Rick shuddered at the deadly quality of that smile. "I wouldn't want you to make a mistake," Tony said gently. "We are under the guns of your guard, and our lives are forfeit if your Emir so decides. But we are patient, and we never forget. There will come a time when you are close to us and our patience ends. Then you will die, very suddenly and unpleasantly. We may die a moment later, but you, being dead, will not care."

It was Elijah who lost the battle of eyes. He gave an unconvincing chuckle. "You would not be so foolish." The tone of his voice told Rick the majordomo knew they were capable of being exactly that

foolish if pushed hard enough. "But we are not unpleasant people," Elijah continued, "and we do not wish to cause unnecessary pain. After all, it is to our advantage to have you in good condition to work. I will see that you get the medication you need."

"Thank you," Tony said, and turned away.

Scotty grinned as the majordomo made a dignified exit. He shook his head in admiration. "You weren't kidding, either."

"No," Tony agreed. "I wasn't kidding."

Perhaps their palates were getting used to the fiery food, because they managed to swallow a few bites of the meat and eat a fair quantity of the rice. During supper a jar of ointment and some clean cloths arrived, along with one of Scotty's own shirts to replace the one torn by the lash.

Rick awoke once during the night and applied more of the ointment to Scotty's back. The boy groaned in his sleep but never moved. That told Rick more than anything else that his pal was in poor shape, because Scotty was the type who awakens instantly, in full possession of his faculties. But when morning came Scotty insisted he was able to work. He stripped and Rick poured water over his back, noting that the swelling had subsided and only an angry red line remained. More ointment was applied, then the three took their toothbrushes from their pockets along with combs and soap, and finished their cleanup. Their toilet kits-plastic zippered bags-had arrived with breakfast and they were grateful. Apparently Elijah had become thoughtful after Tony's forceful warning.

It was during breakfast that they really began to plan for escape. The key, all agreed, was water. Without it, no plan was practical.

Hamid was late, and they leaned against the gate to the groundnut fields and talked over various plans, all impractical. They had no water containers. Locating some that could be acquired was an essential first step.

"We're learning to get along on lowered water rations," Tony remarked. He played idly with a loose spike in the gate. "I wonder what the minimum per man per day would be after we've been here for a while."

"A quart?" Scotty guessed.

"Possibly. Especially if we traveled by night and laid up under cover by day."

"How do we get out of our cell?" Rick asked practically.

Tony's fingers stopped playing with the spike. He bent swiftly and examined it, then straightened up again. "Tonight when we eat, take positions right here. This spike is loose enough to work out. It could be the answer to that question."

Hamid arrived and the group trooped to the groundnut fields. The dreadful work started again, but it was easier than on the two previous days. They were getting used to it. But a new problem in meeting their quota developed. The groundnut crop was almost harvested, and it was necessary to cover more ground to collect a sackful of nuts.

Thenoon break brought the water boy and the rations boy with a handful of peppered rice, a chunk of

fish preserved in pepper, and a banana apiece. It also brought the Emir.

Scotty whispered, "If he comes close, rush him. We can use him as a hostage."

The plan died a-borning. As the Emir walked toward them, guards flanked him, their rifles pointed at the three.

The Emir stopped and looked the Americans over as though inspecting a trio of prize steers. They returned the stares with interest and didn't particularly like what they saw.

"You seem to be bearing up very well," the Emir said in flawless English. "However, it is no more than I expected."

"I thought you spoke no English!" Tony snapped.

"Did anyone say that? I think not. Elijah merely regretted I could not speak to you in your language. The reason I could not was because my anger choked me. Now, after hearing of your hard if unwilling work on my behalf, I am in a better humor."

"Why are you keeping us prisoner?" Rick demanded.

"Prisoners? You are not prisoners. You are free to go at any time."

Scotty pointed to the guards. "Then why have rifles been held on us at all times and why lock us in at night?"

"The rifles are an elementary precaution. For the sake of my people I must be protected against you. You are locked in at night for your own protection, since it is possible one of my people would take revenge on you for the insult that I suffered at your hands."

Rick stared incredulously. "At our hands? We've never seen you before, or heard of you. We have not insulted you."

The Emir waved off the comment with the flip of a well-kept hand. He was a tall man, but he seemed to grow taller and his black eyes blazed at them. "Not you three personally, but your countrymen."

"Americans insulted you, here?" Tony asked.

"Not here. In America. My face was slapped, my honor was spat upon. My hope of Allah's Paradise was lessened. I speak figuratively. What happened was the equivalent of these, and more. It was a deliberate affront to me and to my faith."

The Emir's feelings obviously were intense. Scotty spoke quietly. "Please tell us what happened."

"Yes. Then you will understand that my honor must be satisfied. I am merciful. Instead of putting you to the torture and death, I merely put you to the productive work of which your country boasts."

The Emir brushed away a fly. "I attended a meeting in New York. It was a commercial affair, to discuss better trade arrangements for groundnut oil. The governments were not involved. I represented a number of Emirs in Niger, Nigeria, and the Chad. The host was an American concern by the name of International Vegetable Oils Exchange Corporation. There were representatives of other countries, and

many American firms. After the meeting, I stayed in New York to see the city. The president of the Vegetable Oils Corporation invited me to his home. I was the guest of honor at a very large affair, and I assure you I felt honored. It was what you call a cookout. Is this correct?"

"Food cooked on a charcoal grill? . . . Yes, we call that a cookout," Tony confirmed.

"The food was the famous American national hot dog. My host, Mr. Roger C. McCauley, said it was probably the first time that an Emir-a Hadji who had kissed the Sacred Stone at Mecca -had been served it. He served me personally. The hot dogs were delicious, and I ate several."

The Emir seemed to swell with rage. "When I returned to Nigeria I spoke of it to a friend, a Czech businessman who runs a store in Kano . The horror was clear in his face. When I pressed him, he told me. Your hot dogs are made of pork."

The Spindrifters were aghast. To serve pork to a Muslim was unforgivable. To serve it knowingly to the Emir would be close to criminal.

Rick couldn't believe it. True, hot dogs are usually a mixture of beef and pork, but all-beef hot dogs also are available in most stores.

"It's impossible," he blurted. "No president of an international firm would be so ignorant as to serve pork to a Muslim. Mr. McCauley must have served you beef hot dogs."

The Emir's eyes glinted. "You try to explain it away, do you? I, myself, was incredulous. I knew an American could not be trusted to confirm this, so I went to a German acquaintance in Matsena. Your Mr. McCauley had told me the history of this famous hot dog. Originally it was called the frankfurter-a name you still use-because that particular kind of sausage once came from Frankfurt , in Germany . My German acquaintance readily admitted it. The frankfurt, as he called it, is a mixture of pork and beef."

Tony protested, "That was true, originally. But the Americans have developed all-beef hot dogs. Now you can buy either kind."

"So you say. But does this make sense? Americans put the frankfurt in a long roll, to eat as a sandwich. They did this because they liked the flavor of that kind of sausage. The Americans are not Muslim, and they eat much pork. Hog raising is one of the major industries. Why should they develop a different kind of sausage? I do not believe this." The Emir turned to leave.

"Wait!" Rick said desperately, "You must know that we have a large Jewish population in America . Those who observe the dietary laws cannot eat pork, and beef hot dogs were developed for them. Christian Americans liked them, too, and now they can be bought anywhere."

The Emir chuckled. "I will say this. You are very ingenious at trying to explain it away. But I would expect this of the inventive Americans."

"Even if it were true-and I'm sure it isn't-how can you blame all Americans for the mistake of one?" Tony demanded.

"I would prefer to have Mr. McCauley here," the Emir admitted. "But since he is out of reach, you will do. My honor demands satisfaction, and I must get it in any way I can. I instructed my guards to watch for suitable Americans. Your vehicles and clothes identified you, and my men followed their orders."

“You can’t get away with it,” Scotty informed him. “We know your statement about our not being prisoners was a joke. We’re prisoners even if you set us free, unless you give us our vehicle and supplies, and you won’t do that.”

“No,” the Emir agreed. “I won’t do that.”

“But you can’t get away with it because not even this part of Africa is remote enough to keep visitors from coming by. Sooner or later British or Americans will come.”

“Ah, but you are wrong. My lands cover more than one hundred thousand square kilometers. My seat of government is far from here. This is a corner of Africa that no one claims because it has no value. We are not even sure whether it is in Nigeria, the Chad, or Niger. There is no reason for foreigners to come here. But even if a party should stray this way, my guards are out and you would be hidden in your underground quarters before the party arrived. Who would question the word of an Emir that you had not been seen?”

“You might even capture a few more slaves,” Rick said bitterly.

“Perhaps. But probably I would not. For three *batures* to vanish will cause a little stir, but so many things might have happened to you that the search will not continue long. If two parties vanish, however, there could be trouble. No, I must be satisfied with you.”

“For how long?” Rick was afraid of the answer.

“Who can tell? Only Allah can see the future, and what is written is written. It may be forever.”

CHAPTER VI

Three Calabash Kids

The emir’s words hung over them like the harmattan dust. “It may be forever.” The three were very quiet as they harvested groundnuts, working fast to make their quota for the day. They did not talk much until the dinner hour. As Tony had directed at breakfast, they took up positions at the place with the loose spike, and talked while Tony worked it back and forth idly, as a man does with nothing on his mind but passing the time.

“Water,” Rick said. “That’s the beginning and end. But how do we stock-pile water?”

“Steal a goatskin water bag,” Scotty said helpfully.

“Sure. The only one we’ve seen is under Hamid’s nose all the time, and those beady-eyed guards are always there with their rifles.”

“Protecting the Emir from us,” Tony said with a short chuckle.

Scotty sifted dirt through his fingers. “There must be other goatskin bags around. We’ll have to locate them.”

Rick was about to ask how, when they moved in the same paths every day, always guarded. But the food carriers arrived and it was time to eat. The rice was peppery, but edible. The meat also seemed less spiced than usual. Perhaps their tongues and palates were getting used to it.

“Doesn’t seem as hot tonight,” Tony observed.

“It doesn’t,” Rick agreed. “But if I hadn’t taken a taste I might have thought you were talking about the weather.”

Tony drew in a deep, cooling breath after a mouthful. “The hotness of the food is relative. It’s still plenty spiced up, but maybe a trifle less than last night. Of course I know what you mean, Rick. English is probably the richest language in the world, in terms of flexibility and growth, but it does lack some useful terms. For instance, the difference between the heat of temperature, and the spiciness of food in Spanish. *Color*, and *caliente*, if memory serves.”

“What’s the Spanish word for escape?” Scotty asked.

Rick and Tony laughed at Scotty’s way of getting them back to the most pressing subject.

“The spike is loose enough so I can get it out,” Tony said. “As soon as I’m through eating I’ll put my plate down. You move between me and the guards, and I’ll have it.”

The plates were actually bowls of a light, woody substance. They had been decorated by making designs with a red-hot iron of some kind which scorched patterns into the surface. Rick had seen them in the market at Kano.

They ate slowly, because it was impossible to eat the fiery food rapidly. Tony managed to finish first. He put his bowl on the ground and moved into position while the boys changed their places carefully and casually to screen him.

“I could drink a gallon of water,” Rick said. “It will take that much to kill the glowing coals in my stomach from this chow.”

“I doubt that a gallon will do it,” Scotty replied. “No one looking our way at the moment, Tony.”

Tony joined them. “It’s in my pocket.”

“Great.” Rick grinned. “Now what do we do with it?”

“I’ll show you. Let’s get water, then the guard can escort us to our cell.”

The routine was unvarying. They walked to the pump, washed, brushed their teeth, and drank copiously. The guards remained far enough away so they couldn’t be rushed, but paid little attention. Only when the three indicated readiness did the guards motion them toward the room leading to the underground cells, then fell in behind them.

After the door clanged shut and the bolt rammed home, Tony waited for a while until he was sure no one was in the passageway outside. “Did you notice I was the last one through the door?”

Rick shook his head. "What does that mean?" he asked.

"I had the spike concealed in my hand. As I came in, I managed to drag my hand around the door, past the bolt."

The boys bent over and examined the door in the dim light. They could barely see the mark Tony had made.

The door opened inward. Its massiveness was due in large measure to the planks that crisscrossed it for added strength. In one place, directly behind the bolt, there was only a single thickness of wood, perhaps an inch or slightly more.

"They put the door opening inward to eliminate any possibility of people shoving outward and perhaps tearing off the bolt holder or a hinge," Tony explained. "It's impossible to get enough leverage to do any damage by pulling on it. That's true of most doors."

"Something you learned in archaeology?" Scotty asked with a grin.

"Partly. Also, since I started associating with you two, I've also learned it pays to keep one's eyes open. You never know when a friendly walk will turn out to be the start of chaos."

"Go on, Tony," Rick urged. "What's on your mind?"

"One thing we have plenty of is stone," Tony replied. "I propose that we use some of it to put a point on this spike. We then use the spike to drill through the door behind the bolt. The hole will have to be big enough so the spike can move sideways slightly."

"Then we can use it to slide the door back!" Rick shook the scientist's hand solemnly.

Scotty shook hands, too. "They don't come in here," he added, "so they won't see the hole. That's the big advantage of the door opening inward. Right?"

"Right. One problem is light to see by, if we need it. They haven't given us a candle since that first night."

Rick shook his head. "I wouldn't ask for one. We can operate by feel. After all, this isn't like putting an edge on a surgeon's scalpel. Demanding a candle might make them suspicious."

"Rick's right," Scotty agreed. "Let them think we go to bed exhausted."

"All right. Suppose I start." Tony sat down on his sleeping bag next to the stone wall and began the laborious task of sharpening the stolen spike into a usable tool.

When the archaeologist grew tired, Rick took over, following instructions to try to grind four flat faces into the spike so that four sharp edges would help the drilling. Of course the flat faces had to narrow toward the tip until the tip itself was sharp enough to penetrate the wood.

Rick rubbed and rubbed, pausing every once in a while to make sure the passage was free of listeners, until his arms burned and his hands were sore. Then Scotty took over. He stopped while Rick put a coating of ointment on his back, then began the tedious rubbing. When Rick fell asleep it was to the rhythmic scratching of the spike on the stone.

He awoke in the morning to the same sound. Tony was at it again. Rick got to his feet and hurried to the door. He stood, there, listening, until sounds warned him the guard was coming.

At his signal, Tony hurriedly stowed the spike in his toilet kit. Rick watched, and an idea dawned, but he said nothing about it for the moment.

At breakfast they looked for another loose spike, but found none that could be pulled out without tools. Then, as breakfast ended, Elijah appeared.

“Today you go to different work,” he told them. “The groundnut crop is finished. Now the calabashes must be gathered. They are cut open and dried for use. The cutting must be done with care. Do as the other workers do. Hamid will allow you to watch until you have learned. You will be given knives with which to work, but do not make the mistake of trying to obtain one. Hamid personally will collect them, and count them. Do you understand?”

“What’s a calabash?” Scotty asked.

Elijah looked puzzled. “A calabash is ... well, it is a calabash. Now, no more foolish questions. Go with the group.”

“I still don’t know what a calabash is,” Scotty grumbled.

“We’ll find out,” Rick assured him.

Hamid led the way. As they got closer to the field, Rick saw that it was covered with brown leaves that had once been green. Among the leaves were objects-some round, some elongated, of several sizes.

As they reached the field, he exclaimed, “They’re gourds!”

“Right,” Tony said with a smile. “They’re members of the same family as the pumpkin, the squash, and the gourd. Calabashes are important in the African cultures. Outside the cities, and even within among the poor, they’re the principal source of utensils. The plates we eat from are made from calabashes.”

“Why didn’t you tell us this before?” Rick asked, and wasn’t surprised when Tony gave the classic answer:

“You never asked me.” Tony laughed. “Actually this is the first time the subject has come up.”

Unlike the backbreaking labor of groundnut harvesting, working with the calabashes was rather fun. The vegetables grew in all sizes and shapes, from huge globular ones nearly two feet in diameter to small ones with long necks.

The calabashes were collected and brought to a central point, a sort of drying shed with racks of bamboo along the sides and a palm leaf top. The boys and Tony watched as the other workmen collected knives and proceeded to operate on the pile of gourds.

Big, round ones were given a circular cut around the top, and the upper section put aside to serve later as a lid. The seeds and pulp were scooped out, the odor reminding Rick of cleaning and carving a pumpkin for Halloween at home-and placed carefully in a pile on a sort of wooden boat, where another worker separated the seeds and spread them on boards for drying. Rick realized that was next year’s

seed for more calabashes.

The small, round calabashes were given similar treatment, except that the top was discarded if less than perfect, or put aside to use as a plate if reasonably symmetrical. The small calabashes with long necks were neatly split in two. Each half served as a spoon, Rick knew, because he had seen them in the Kano market—although he hadn't identified the objects as split calabashes until now.

Larger calabashes, with necks large enough to insert a knife and a hook-shaped piece of flat iron, were cut off at the tip, then cleaned, and put aside to dry. They would serve as water bottles, or containers for other fluids.

Rick watched, and an idea for stock-piling water grew and took shape until he could hardly contain it.

Finally the three nodded to Hamid. He handed them short, sharp knives something like a linoleum knife, and they tried their hand at calabash carving. It wasn't as easy as it looked, and when Scotty cut his thumb while slicing a long-necked gourd into two useless pieces, even Hamid chuckled while the workers roared with laughter. The Spindrift trio laughed with them. The good-natured laughter was a sign of their acceptance into the fraternity, and was not to be resented.

An aged man looked at Hamid for permission to show Scotty how to hold his knife properly. Hamid nodded approval and the man demonstrated. The cut thumb was not serious, and Scotty tried again, with success. The workers smiled and nodded.

"We've been accepted into the union," Rick said with a grin. "The Calabash Kids, that's us. And there are more uses in heaven and on earth than thy Calabash philosophy has dreamed of, Horatio."

Even Tony failed to wince at the misquotation of Hamlet. The archaeologist and Scotty bent to their work, suddenly serious, and Rick reached for another calabash, knowing that his message had been received and understood.

CHAPTER VII

The Precious Hoard

Tony and Scotty had seen instantly what Rick had in mind. The calabashes that were cut into water jugs could provide the means for storing water. But Rick, who was nothing if not inventive, had earlier conceived a scheme for obtaining water.

It was not practical to smuggle full calabashes of water into their cell. They had no stoppers, and while they intended to make some of clay, the stoppers couldn't be made in advance. The calabashes were all of different sizes; no two necks had exactly the same diameter. That meant the stoppers had to be made individually, which could only be done in the unobserved quiet of their cells.

Rick explained his plan that night. He held up his toilet kit. It was of fabric-covered plastic, with a zipper closing.

“These are waterproof,” he explained. “We can smuggle the calabashes in here empty, then carry these with us and fill them on the way into the cell at night.”

Scotty shook his head in admiration. “Leave it to Rick. There’s always the Brantish way, isn’t there?”

“Always,” Tony agreed. As they talked, he continued to sharpen the spike against the stone wall. “But give me more detail. How do we smuggle calabashes, and later the toilet kits filled with water?”

Rick rapped Scotty sharply across the belt line, then ducked as his pal retaliated with a swing that was intended to miss. “Did you hear that hollow noise when I banged Scotty’s breadbasket? Even the great eater has lost so much weight that his backbone rubs on his belt buckle. We wear our shirts outside. That leaves plenty of room to tuck even a watermelon under our belts and not bulge.”

“Did you have to mention watermelon?” Scotty said reproachfully. “I could eat two of those Georgia melons myself.”

“Sorry,” Rick apologized. “I only wanted to stir your imagination, not your appetite.”

“Apology accepted,” Scotty said grandly. “Now, a slight detail. How do we cork these bottles?”

“Clay. We collect some in our pockets and mix it with water at night while we’re in here. We plug the bottles and let the clay harden in place. After all, each bottle will only be used once.”

Agreement was unanimous. They had waited long enough to start working on the escape. None of them had doubted that they would escape-or at least try.

Scotty was the first to succeed in capturing a bottle-size calabash. He finished cleaning one, carried it to the bamboo drying rack, and with one smooth motion slipped it under his loose shirt while his free hand adjusted the spacing of those already on the rack. Later, he unobtrusively loosened his belt and pushed the neck of the gourd under it firmly enough so it would not slip out. The bulging part of the gourd nestled into his stomach hollow.

Rick did not see Tony get a calabash. He got his own by cleaning three and only putting two on the drying rack. But when they returned to the compound for dinner, Tony also had a gourd.

“I sat down with four of them, cleaned one and stuffed it under my belt, then cleaned the others and took them to the rack. It’s pretty easy. Who would suspect there were calabash thieves in this civilized part of Africa?”

“Who, indeed?” Rick echoed.

“Wonder if it’s classed as petty or grand larceny,” Scotty mused.

Rick had also managed to scoop up a handful of red soil under the compound wall. He wet it by the simple expedient of “accidentally” soaking his pocket while washing. But the experiment proved to be a failure. Later, in their cell, he worked the soil in his hands, trying to turn it to the consistency of potter’s clay, but it was too sandy.

Scotty, who was taking a turn putting the final touches on the spike, had an idea. “Why don’t we collect a bunch of the smallest calabash tips? The kind that are thrown on the pile with the pulp? We could put

them into the gourds round end first, and maybe fix them in place with a bit of cloth. My torn T-shirt is still in here. I tucked it under the dew cloth of my sleeping bag.”

It was a good idea, and the three agreed to add calabash tips to the loot. Then a thought struck Rick. “Those calabashes we smuggle have a chance to dry out. Is there any danger of them getting soft or rotting down here?”

Tony shook his head. “The humidity can’t be much more than five or six percent. Things just dry up in this climate.”

“Good. There’s one other thing. We ought to start collecting water. Suppose one of us steals another calabash, while two start the water collection? It will take about one and a half zipper bags of water to fill one calabash.”

“Suppose the two with the hollowest stomachs get the water,” Tony suggested. “That would be you and me, Rick. Scotty hasn’t eaten any better than we have, but he started with more muscle tissue than we did, and still has more. So you get another calabash, Scotty.”

“It’s as good as done,” Scotty agreed. “Listen, what’s the capacity of these calabashes, on the average, and how many will it take to get us on the road?”

Tony did the calculating aloud so they could check him on it. “We said a quart per day per man. The calabashes vary, but on the average I’d say they hold a pint and a half. At least those we got today hold about that much. We could try to get larger ones, but it might be risky. These concealed pretty easily. So, two calabashes-no, put it this way: With luck we could make twenty miles a day, and we estimate anywhere from a hundred to two hundred miles back to civilization. I think two hundred may be a little high, so let’s settle on a hundred and eighty as a nice round number for planning purposes. That means . . .”

“Nine days on the road,” Rick finished. “Too much, Tony. Any chance we’d hit water on the way?”

Tony shrugged. “There’s always a chance, and an even better chance that we wouldn’t.”

“But that means a dozen calabashes apiece!” Scotty exclaimed. “If two calabashes hold three pints, it takes four calabashes for one man to last three days, and three times that many to last nine days.”

Rick had been figuring while Scotty talked. “It also means this: Today we got three calabashes. It will take three days to fill them. Meanwhile, we acquire three more. Three more days to fill those, then three more to fill the ones we got in the meantime, and so on. Maybe circumstances are such that we lose a couple of days because the guards get watchful, or something. Anyway, we can figure on two weeks of work to supply one man, and six weeks before we’re ready. Nope. We have to think of something faster.”

“We may have all the time we need,” Tony said mildly, and waited for the reaction. He got it.

“We’re going to be in Sokoto for the experiment!” Rick said flatly. “I don’t know how, yet, but we’re going to.”

“He’s talking for me,” Scotty added.

“And for me,” Tony agreed. “I wondered what your reaction would be. I might have known.”

Scotty tested the point of the spike. “Here. At least this is sharp enough, I think.”

Tony and Rick tried it in turn. It was pointed, with four sharp edges, and enough had been left unhone to use for a grip.

“I think we can persuade Elijah to help us with the water,” Tony stated. “Tomorrow morning I’m going to try. But we’ll also put the first plan into effect, just in case. Now suppose we start on the door. I’ll take first turn. Can either of you see the mark?”

Scotty was already looking. The dim light in the cell was failing altogether, although it was still early twilight outside. “Here it is,” he said, and kept a finger on it.

Tony crouched and measured with his eye. “We’ll check it for alignment in the morning, but I think this is the spot.” He gouged with the tool and a small splinter came out. Then he began the laborious job of turning the rough drill, making the hole they needed.

“What makes you think Elijah will help us?” Rick asked.

“Because we’ve been good boys, have given no trouble, and my request will be a modest one that will cause no suspicion. I’ll rehearse it tonight and be ready to give him a sales talk after breakfast.”

“You’d better sell him,” Scotty said grimly. “Or we may find ourselves cutting loose on short water rations.”

“Speaking of rations,” Rick said, “we can’t go without food for nine days.”

Tony kept working. He spoke over his shoulder.

“I’ve been giving some thought to that. Have you noticed the grapevine near the house?”

Both boys had. “There are no grapes on it,” Scotty reminded him.

“I know. But in many cultures, food wrapped in grape leaves is standard. I suggest we get some of those grape leaves. I’ll toss that one at Elijah, too. Then we’ll save our rice, wrapped in leaves, and on the last couple of days before we take off we’ll save some meat, too.”

“How long will the stuff keep?” Rick asked.

“With the amount of pepper they put in the food, no self-respecting bacterium would even look at it, much less eat it. Seriously, though, the rice will keep better than meat, especially if we let it dry out.”

Silence fell in the cell, except for the steady scraping of the drill. Rick went over their talk again, searching for flaws, and he recalculated the days and amounts of water.

“The reason we travel by night,” he pointed out, “is to escape dehydration by the sun. Of course we dodge patrols by night, too. But by lying up during the day and traveling in the cool of the night, we need less water. My proposal is this: We settle on a pint per day per man. Two calabashes will last three days each, so we need eighteen in all. That’s for a hundred and eighty miles. I think we’ll be luckier than that. I’m willing to bet we hit either water or help within one week.”

“You’ll be betting your life,” Tony warned. “We all will.”

“Will?” Rick asked. “Does that mean you’ll take the gamble?”

“Yes, if there’s no alternative. I agree we can’t stay here for weeks. Besides, we may be put on some work other than calabashes. I doubt that it will take weeks to clean up the entire crop. If I can talk Elijah into giving us a little decent courtesy, we’ll be better off than the minimum Rick just proposed. If not . . .”

“We’ll bet our lives,” Scotty finished.

CHAPTER VIII

Break for Freedom

Tony Briotti was the ultimate in sweet reasonableness when Elijah came in response to his call after breakfast. Tony launched into a song and dance that made Rick’s mouth open in sheer admiration.

Tony explained that they had been cooperative. They had worked well, under a hard taskmaster. The healing welt on Scotty’s back was the only sign of displeasure, and that had resulted from sheer misadventure. The people of the sub-Sahara savanna are used to going for long periods without water, Tony stated. But the American drinks water copiously. He even has water with his meals, unlike the Europeans.

The three, Tony continued, would work better with water. Now they were helping with the calabashes. Was there any reason why they should not each have a calabash in which to carry the supply of water their poor bodies craved?

Elijah considered. “You are sensible enough to know escape would be impossible with only one calabash apiece?”

Tony assured him that they were indeed sensible. Americans needed at least two quarts a day, and they could not carry that much and walk to freedom.

“Very well, I will allow a calabash each. But see that you continue to cooperate. I will instruct Hamid that you may carry your water with you.”

The boys congratulated Tony solemnly, and went to work behind Hamid with enthusiasm. Once on the job, each selected a calabash of about two-quart capacity and held it up for Hamid to see.

What Hamid did not see was that, one by one, as the chance offered, each of the three Americans split his calabash neatly in two. Since the knives were razor-sharp and the calabashes green, the breaks scarcely showed.

Another important step Hamid did not see took place later. While delivering a calabash to the drying rack, each Spindrifter selected a dried bottle gourd that would just fit into the one to which Elijah had

agreed.

The third step was to steal some of the small calabash tips that could serve as stoppers. This was easy, since who would steal garbage? The calabash tips were of no use, except as fertilizer for the field.

On the way back to the cell, when they stopped for the evening drink and wash-up, each of the three filled his calabash-within-a-calabash with water under the eyes of the guards. Since this was allowed by Elijah, the guards had no objection.

In the quiet of their cell they shook hands all around. "At this rate, we'll be gone in two more days,"

Rick said. "We each have a three-day supply of water at a pint per day right now!"

"It looks good," Scotty admitted. "You two try corking the bottles while I get to work with the drill."

Between them, they had managed to get sixteen calabash tips into their pockets. It wasn't hard to find three that fit perfectly. Another obstacle had been overcome.

While Scotty drilled, Rick and Tony tore his ripped T-shirt into strips and wrapped the split calabashes in them in such a way that the wrappings could be slipped off and on while collecting a dried gourd from the rack. That was because the calabashes would dry quickly, and the shrinking of the fibers would make the cuts clearly visible.

The next morning they soaked the wrapped calabashes at the well. Hamid and the other workers observed this, but offered no comment. All were familiar with the principal of cooling by evaporation and assumed that was why the calabashes were wrapped and soaked. Tony had known this would be the case.

By nightfall there were six full calabashes containing at least eighteen pints of water. Rick thought there were probably between twenty and twenty-four pints, but it was better to estimate conservatively.

Each had saved food, too, by the simple expedient of sliding it into a pocket. The pockets in which the food had been carried were greasy, and in need of washing, but that couldn't be helped.

"We can wash our pockets with soapy water in the morning," Tony said. "But we'll have to be careful to rinse, too. The kind of yellow soap they have here is plenty strong."

"It would make a TV beauty-soap salesman faint in sheer horror," Scotty agreed. "Listen, fellow slaves, the hole in the door is just about through."

Rick and Tony hurried to examine it. Scotty was right. Another hour's work to finish the hole and enlarge it would be enough.

"Tomorrow night!" Rick said excitedly. "What do you say?"

"I say go!" Scotty replied on the echo.

"And so do I!" Tony said. "Now, let's get done with that door."

They took turns, working slowly and carefully. When steel rang against steel, they knew the hole was through and the spike in contact with the bolt. Then they began to turn the hole into a slot in which the

spike could move slightly from side to side. That was necessary in order to work the bolt back.

At last Tony gingerly tried, and felt the bolt give the slightest bit under the urging of the spike.

“Finished,” he said. “Let’s go to bed. We’ll need all the sleep we can get. Keep more food tomorrow, and an eye out for watchers when we snaffle vine leaves and calabashes.”

The warning wasn’t needed. Each of them knew the venture depended on not being caught in the act of hoarding food and water.

Rick suspected that, sooner or later, there would be a routine inspection of their cell. The water was hidden under the sleeping bags, which were partially rolled up during the day. An inspection would find it easily, along with the spike which was kept in Tony’s toilet kit. Of course there was nothing to do but hope. He didn’t think an inspection was likely for some time, because their captors had no reason to suspect an escape plot. They probably were convinced that the soft Americans would never dare to tackle the barren lands.

Rick grinned to himself, and fell asleep.

All went as planned on the following day. Since they were perfectly open about everything they did, except stealing calabashes and tips, the guards were not suspicious. As the three walked past the grapevine en route to the calabash field each took a handful of the big vine leaves, and each popped one into his mouth and began to chew as though the leaves were the finest food imaginable. There were some surprised glances, but they were soon able to stow the leaves deep in a pocket—a wet pocket that had been doused first with soapy, then clear water, while the morning wash was taking place.

By nightfall they had nine bottles of water, each containing at least three pints. Tony and Rick sacrificed their undershirts to the cause of freedom, carefully tearing them into strips and making slings from which the bottles could be hung over their shoulders.

They were outwardly calm, but Rick was jittery inside. They would have only one chance at escape. If they failed, such a close guard would be kept there would be no second chance.

When all was in readiness, they stretched out on the sleeping bags and waited as patiently as they could until darkness fell. Then they waited some more, until Tony estimated two hours must have passed. There had been no talking. What was there to say?

“Now,” Tony whispered.

They loaded pockets with food and rolled up the sleeping bags, then gathered around while Tony slowly and carefully levered the bolt back. The spike slipped on the steel now and then and the whole process took a half-hour. Finally, under Scotty’s urging, the door squeaked open. Scotty slipped through it and was gone into the darkness. Tony and Rick waited. Rick had complete faith in his pal’s ability to scout out the Emir’s stronghold, but he was tense. His ears ached with straining to hear any sound that would indicate Scotty had been seen.

The minutes passed so slowly, it seemed to Rick that at least an hour had gone by. But not more than fifteen minutes had elapsed before Scotty returned, as silently as he had gone.

“All clear,” he reported. “There was only one guard inside the compound. I took care of him. The dogs started to growl, but I guess my scent was familiar because they didn’t bark. I gave them a pocket of rice

just to be safe.”

The nondescript dogs of Africa roamed at will, and each of the Spindrifters had been thoroughly sniffed the first few days and ignored thereafter. Rich wondered how Scotty had taken care of the guard, but didn't take time to ask. The ex-Marine was an expert at unarmed combat and could have used any one of several methods.

They slung the water over their shoulders, tucked sleeping bags under their arms, stuffed toilet kits into pockets, then followed Scotty's lead through the darkness. They emerged into the lesser darkness of the outdoors. The moon was not yet up, and they crossed the compound like three wraiths and paused at the gate. It was closed and barred. Tony and Rick lifted the bar from its hooks and set it carefully to one side. Scotty pulled the gate open with a squeal of hinges that sounded like the wail of a banshee to Rick's sensitive ears, but actually was not audible more than ten yards away.

They slipped through the gate and paused, alert for any sign of an outside guard. Apparently there was none. A comment Elijah had made had led Rick to believe that the Emir depended on distant patrols rather than on heavy guard at the homestead. At least he hoped that was the case.

Once in the clear, they settled down to a steady dogtrot, following a well-worn path to the south. The harmattan was blowing lightly, and the principal stars were visible through the haze. Night navigation would be no problem.

When the moon rose they left the trail, heading in a southwesterly direction. Sooner or later that direction would take them to civilization. Another reason for leaving the trail was that they would need to hole up during the day, and for safety they needed the open savanna.

Rick's legs moved unfalteringly and he held his head high. They were free! He had no doubt they would remain free. They would reach civilization, and they would be back, to collect their equipment.

Rick intended to meet the demonstration deadline. Plenty of time remained. The Sultan of Sokoto would speak to the world on schedule.

CHAPTER IX

The Green Mamba

It was the dry season, and the cattle that normally foraged on the savanna grasses had moved south, following the declining seasonal moisture. Rick had seen the long-horned beasts around Kano. Except for a hump like a zebu, they might have been cattle following the trail from Texas to Kansas. Of course their herders were not cowhands, American style, but stately Fulanis in long robes, usually carrying a Japanese-made transistor radio and listening to programs from the Voice of America transmitters in Liberia.

Rick would have given much to see any such sign of civilization, but the savanna was empty of domestic life. He had expected lions, and other wild beasts, but there were none. They had been pushed back toward Lake Chad, Tony said.

The land was not smooth and unbroken. There were watercourses that ran in flood for brief moments during the rains of the wet season, and occasional rocky outcroppings, some of them occupied by monkeys who scolded sleepily in the growing light of dawn.

The first day, the trio slept in the shelter of a stream bed, in the curve where a great sandstone ledge had altered the stream's course. They kept no watch by day; it was useless. If found, there was nothing they could do without weapons.

The second day, they curled up in the tall grass under a baobab tree. It was one of many trees in this area, all widely separated, but looking like sentinels from horizon to horizon. The grass was plentiful in spots, but bone-dry, unfit even for Fulani cattle without ample water.

Travel by night was not easy. The moon rose later each night, increasing the hours of almost total darkness. They stumbled over hummocks and crashed into brush. Sometimes they had to slow down and pick out each step with care over loose rock. A fall would be disastrous. The stoppers had loosened in the calabashes as they dried, and a fall would mean lost water.

There were animals abroad in the night, harmless ones, foraging for food. The Spindrifters didn't know what they were, because it was impossible to see in the darkness, but Tony thought they were mostly desert foxes and rabbits. There were snakes, too, although Rick knew there were probably fewer than he imagined. Once they had caught a glimpse of a cobra silhouetted against the horizon, just in time to backtrack and give it a wide berth. After that, Rick translated every rustle of the grass into a reptile. His reaction to snakes was a common one. He would have preferred to face a charging rhino any day than one of Africa's many varieties of crawling death.

One by one, as opportunity offered, they outfitted themselves with reasonably stout sticks picked up in thickets or under the baobab trees.

Rick had plenty of time for thought. Besides, concentrating on a problem helped to keep his mind off food and water. They were on short rations; the food was almost gone and the water supply dwindling at the predicted rate.

He reviewed the demonstration in which they were to take part, and went over every step of their own training. He planned a new network of tiny radio transceivers to take the place of the one he and Scotty had made earlier, and which they had dubbed the "Megabuck Network." He mentally designed a new underwater camera case. He wrote amusing letters mentally to two old friends, Chahda Sundararaman, their Hindu companion who lived in Bombay, and Hassan, their former dragoman in Cairo who had become a friend during the adventure of *The Egyptian Cat Mystery*.

But Rick's thoughts often turned to the Emir. The story he had told just couldn't be true. A business executive of R. C. McCauley's stature just wouldn't feed pork to a Muslim. The Emir had eaten the famed American hot dog-and in fact had consumed more than one. Rick was sure they had been beef. He doubted that either a Czech or a German would know about beef hot dogs.

Crazy, Rick thought. A silly misunderstanding had caught three innocent bystanders on the rebound.

Morning dawned on the third day. In the pale light of the pre-sunrise sky they could see that the land was changing. They were moving gradually to a lower altitude, and the savanna was giving way to rocky desert sparsely dotted with brush.

“We’re descending from an upland plateau,” Tony said. “I wish I had studied the topography of Africa more thoroughly. This might be a useful clue.”

Scotty and Rick kept turning their heads. If the Emir’s men were about, they intended to see them first, rather than be seen first. They could take cover and hide until the men passed-if they kept alert.

The harmattan was not blowing and the sky was crystal clear, not a cloud in sight. Only an intensification of light to the east told them the sun was about to rise.

“We’d better hunt our hole for the day,” Tony said. “There seems to be a gully of some sort a quarter mile ahead. Let’s steer for it.”

Rick saw that the ground seemed to drop away. He followed Tony, meanwhile keeping his head swiveling until his neck ached.

Tony had a good eye. There was a gully, and in it were tumbled rocks and some brush that would offer excellent shelter for the day. Their principal problem was keeping in the shade, out of the rays of the dehydrating sun.

The gully was about fifteen feet deep. Tony led the way into it and the boys relaxed a little. They could not be seen unless a searching party looked down at them from the run.

There was a particularly fine bush of some kind, still green, indicating deep roots that reached subsurface moisture far below. Rick was attracted to it. There were few green things in this part of Africa .

“Let’s get in the shelter of that bush,” he suggested, and led the way.

The leaves were shaped much like those of a dogwood tree, but were much sparser, and of a more yellowish green. The bush stems were thick, and probably pithy for the storage of water. Rick looked more closely, and saw one of the stems move.

Even as Rick’s muscles tensed to leap back, a round, green streak lashed forward with fantastic speed and struck one of the calabashes hanging from his shoulder.

Mamba!

The snake drew back into a sinuous S and lashed forward again, but Rick had not waited. He had left the ground in a backward leap that sent him crashing into Tony. The two of them rolled in a tumbled heap to the bottom of the gully.

Tony had seen the reptile. He joined Rick in rolling frantically away, the two of them entangled like wrestlers.

The mamba had struck twice, futilely, and it was angry. It flowed from the bush in pursuit of the two, a slender, vivid, deadly, living whip. Within a heartbeat, it was within striking distance, flashing back in the fatal S and lunging forward.

Scotty’s stick flailed in a great, one-arm swing that intercepted the lightning strike and flung the snake back. It landed in a writhing coil of green, its back broken from the combined force of the swing and its own striking velocity. Even so, it tried again. The broken creature came forward with astonishing speed, and reached striking distance. This time Scotty was the target.

The mamba arched into its deadly S and the broken back betrayed it. The strike fell short, and as the vicious head went down Scotty struck again, and again, and again.

Rick and Tony got to their feet and found their sticks, but it wasn't necessary. The mamba was in its death throes, its head crushed.

Reaction hit Rick. He just stood there and shook like a palsied old man. Tony sat down on an outcropping of rock and closed his eyes. Under the deep tan his face was ashen.

Scotty put his arm around Rick's shoulders. "I saw it hit you. Where?"

"The calabash," Rick said weakly. "I think it aimed for my face, but I was a shade too far away."

"Sit down," Scotty commanded, and pushed him to a seat next to Tony. The ex-Marine examined the broken calabash hanging from Rick's shoulder and shook his head. The scraping mark of the mamba's short fangs was clear, and there was a trace of venom sinking rapidly into the dry surface of the gourd.

Scotty walked to where the two had fallen and picked up the remains of the other calabashes each had carried. In the broken shards were small puddles of water, which he poured carefully into the one gourd that was still mostly whole, only its neck snapped off. Then he made both Rick and Tony drink.

Rick felt better. He looked over to where the mamba lay in a loose coil that still twitched, and a shudder racked him. "That beast was out to kill," he stated.

Tony nodded. "There are few aggressive snakes in the world, thank Heaven, but the mamba is one. They have even been known to pursue and strike a man on horseback. I've heard of a case where a mamba chased a jeep. The driver had to hit nearly fifty miles an hour before he drew away far enough for safety."

"How could one of those reach a man on horseback?" Scotty asked unbelievably.

"They grow to ten feet and perhaps more, and they can strike while standing almost on the last fifth of their tails. That one was nearly eight feet long, I'd say."

The scientist rose. "One other thing. Mambas often travel in pairs, male and female. I don't want to be around if this one's mate is nearby. Let's get out of here,"

Scotty looked ruefully at the broken calabashes. "Another thing. We're now short of water. I suggest we travel until the sun is high, because if we don't reach civilization before what I'm carrying gives out, we're in trouble. With a capital T!"

CHAPTER X

Defeat

A pint of water a day had never been adequate for the Spindrifters, although they had held rigidly to that amount. It might have been enough had they lain quietly in a cool place, conserving their body moisture, but they had set a fast pace, and their daytime camps had not been cool-there were no cool places in that country; there were only some places not as hot as others because they were out of direct sun.

The striking mamba had resulted in the loss of all the water carried by Tony and Rick, except for the few drops Scotty had salvaged. That was two-thirds of their supply, since they had divided the load evenly.

On Tony's warning that the deadly snakes traveled in pairs, they put distance between them and the gully where the mamba had struck. They stopped under a baobab tree only when the sun's heat warned them that dehydration-the steady loss of essential moisture from their bodies-might weaken them so much that travel would not be possible.

"How long can we last?" Rick asked. He was still shaky from the encounter with the mamba, and the sun had made his head ache.

Scotty had already estimated the quantity of water remaining. "Six pints. That's two apiece."

"Two days at most," Tony said wearily. "And I'm including today. We've already had a drink, but we need more right now. Let's all have a mouthful, Scotty."

Rick waited for his turn, eyes on the calabash. "We must be losing some of the water by evaporation," he said.

Tony licked his lips and passed the gourd to Rick. "Of course we are. I'd say that calabash has about three-fourths of the original content, maybe less."

"So we don't actually have six pints?"

Scotty held up the remaining calabash. "We do. These were the largest, and they must have held two quarts apiece. This one still has at least three pints in it."

That was tomorrow's supply, Rick thought. And after that, what?

"There must be water underground," Rick observed. "The trees are green. They get moisture from somewhere."

Tony agreed. "They do. But they're very deep-rooted, and they're tapping moisture, not water. If we could drill a well we might strike water, but unless you can conjure up some drilling equipment, we're out of luck."

"If I had the energy," Scotty said, "I'd do a Navaho rain dance."

Rick grinned. "If I thought it would help, I'd join you." He cradled his head on his arm and made himself as comfortable as possible. Back home at Spindrift there was water aplenty, drawn from deep wells, so deep that they carried not a trace of ocean salt. In addition, there was a pipeline that ran from the Whiteside water system to the island, passing under the tidal flats that separated Spindrift from the mainland. He had never really appreciated the luxury of turning a faucet and having clear, cool, pure water cascade into a glass.

A sudden thought struck him. Once, during the days before leaving for Egypt, Parnell Winston had promised Jan Miller and Barby that he would take them on his very next field trip—the one Rick was on now. Winston was ready to carry out his promise, but one thing had interfered. The Brants and Millers had refused to let the girls take time off from school.

Rick was grateful. Had it worked out otherwise, his sister and Jan might have been with them. He shuddered at the thought of the two girls facing the barren lands of West Africa without water.

Finally he fell asleep, as did Tony and Scotty. The sun drilled through the inadequate shade and elevated their skin temperatures. Their bodies responded, adjusting the temperature by pouring moisture into the battle. The moisture evaporated almost instantly in the dry air, to be replaced by more moisture from their dwindling reservoirs. The process would continue until there was no more moisture to evaporate and cool their skins, until their temperatures went up, their body chemistry failed, and fever and delirium marked their last moments.

The sun set, and the unequal battle slowed. The three awoke and sat up, groggily, unrefreshed. The battle had drained strength from them even as they slept.

There was no food with which to break their fast. Rick's attempt to find some moisture and nourishment in grass stalks only resulted in his mouth feeling drier than ever.

A mouthful of water each, and they started on the trek toward the southwest once more. They were too tired even to scan the horizon with their customary care, and except for Scotty's sharp eyes would not have seen the horsemen in time.

"Down!" Scotty snapped. The three dropped to the cracked ground amongst a series of termite mounds.

Lifting his head cautiously, Rick saw six riders silhouetted against the darkening sky. He watched as the horses picked their way with care over the ground in the fading light. Fortunately, the riders were west of them, but traveling toward the north.

When the group had disappeared over the northern horizon, the three rose and continued on their way.

"I wonder if they were the Emir's men," Rick said.

Tony shrugged. "We have to assume they were. We're surely not out of his territory yet."

"Wonder when we will be," Scotty remarked.

Rick was beginning to doubt that they would ever leave the Emir's territory, but he didn't voice his thought. This was no time to cast doubt on the probable success of their venture.

As full darkness set in, they reached a rugged area of stony ground and rocks, a patch of true desert such as they had seen from time to time during the trip. It slowed them down to a bare crawl, feeling each step with care in the moonless night. They were keenly aware of the penalty a twisted ankle or even a bad bruise would bring. It could mean death for all three.

After an hour of travel they stopped, and barely wet their lips from the diminishing supply. Then, a half-hour later, they had to rest again.

None of them felt like talking. Rick raised his face to the stars that were dim in the growing dust. The

harmattan had started to blow again. They were north of the equator, and the constellations were the familiar ones. The North Star, Polaris, was much lower than he was used to, but that was because they were somewhere between 10 and 15 degrees north of the equator. If they had time and equipment to make a simple sight, it would be easy to get their precise latitude.

At Spindrift, Polaris would be at its usual angle of slightly more than 40 degrees above the horizon. But Orion, which was just setting from his vantage point, would be just rising over New Jersey .

Rick wondered when he would see his family and friends again, and then the vagrant thought crept in that he might not see them at all. He shook it off. "Let's get going," he said. "The Cape of Good Hope is due south, and we won't reach it if we don't hurry."

Scotty was so tired he didn't recognize the wry joke at first. "Who's going to the Cape of Good Hope ? Oh, I get it. A funny."

"An unfunny funny," Rick said.

Tony chuckled. "Maybe we're not as badly off as I thought we were if bum jokes can still crop up. Onward, brave desert bums. And watch the footing."

They had been going steadily downhill at a very gradual angle for more than a day. When the first pale light of coming day illumined the barren landscape, they saw that the descent was over. Behind them, the land rose in a slow but perceptible climb. Ahead was flatland. It stretched to the horizon, broken only occasionally by a lone baobab tree. Even the grass was stunted, a mere stubble of brown.

Rick's heart turned over. How could they cross that endless stretch? Except for the few trees, which were hopelessly inadequate as shielding from the sun, there was no place to hole up for the day. He turned and looked back the way they had come. He knew now why the walking had been easier for the past hour. The unbroken plain simply rose up the faint slope. The closest area of rock in which they might have found shelter was an hour behind them. In the condition they were in, retracing their steps was impossible.

"If the horsemen show up, we're caught," Scotty said grimly. "We'd be visible for miles, even stretched out flat."

"That doesn't seem to matter much any more," Tony replied. "Come on. Let's head for that nearest baobab before the sun comes up."

Walking wasn't easy, even though it was on the level. The low, dead grass was in clumps, hard as cobblestones. Reasonable speed was possible only by choosing clumps on which to step. Their progress toward the tree was uneven, clearly showing the condition to which the journey had brought them.

Finally they sank down under the tree, grateful for the chance to get off their aching feet.

"How much water?" Tony asked.

"One calabash. A little more than half full. There may be a quart left."

Tony's cheeks were sunken, and his rapidly growing beard was black against the pallor that showed through the tan. His eyes were bloodshot, the pupils contracted sharply against the growing light. There were new lines around his eyes and mouth.

The scientist was still alert enough to realize that Rick was studying his face, and he grinned. “Noticing a few changes, Rick? You should see your own face.”

Scotty grinned, too. “Do I look as bad as you two?”

Rick examined his pal’s face. “I don’t know how I look, but you two are candidates for the medical examiner. If you weren’t grinning, I wouldn’t be sure you were still alive.”

Tony stared at the distant horizon. “You know, the Emir isn’t a bad sort, really. He gives us water, and food that’s decent by local standards.”

“What are you driving at?” Rick asked sharply.

“The Emir is the nearest potentate capable of giving help to the lonely traveler. I think it’s time we asked for aid and assistance.”

The two boys looked at each other.

“You mean we should give up if the horsemen come this way?” Scotty demanded.

“More than that. I think we should signal for help.”

Rick’s impulse was to argue, but he looked at *the* barren land and at the remaining calabash, and knew Tony was talking sense. If they continued on, they would surely run out of water and die within a few miles. Of course, by some miracle, they might hit water just over the horizon, but Rick knew such miracles seldom occurred. They had seen no sign of life, even of birds, except for the winged sentinels that were always present—the vultures, the kites, and the hawks that lazed in the sky so far overhead that they were almost invisible. Water, even water over the horizon, would have meant life of some kind. They hadn’t even seen a snake or a lizard. The mamba was the last sign of living things.

“The Emir will probably kill us, anyway,” Scotty ventured.

“That’s a possibility,” Tony agreed. “Against it, I can only offer certain death if we continue. Also, I see no sense in going on until we simply collapse. We’re still on our feet, but we won’t be in another few hours.”

Rick spoke his mind. “I hate to give in.”

“We’ve never given in before,” Scotty stated.

“True. But have you ever been in a spot like this before? We don’t even know where we are. The nearest caravan track or village may be fifty miles away, or even more. Besides, I’m senior in this party, and I don’t fancy having your deaths on my conscience, even if I join you at the same moment.”

“I was sure we’d hit civilization before this,” Rick said unhappily.

Tony answered shortly, “We didn’t. So I propose we light a fire and try to make a smoke signal. If someone sees it and comes, there’s help, and water— even if it’s the Emir’s guards. If no one comes, we’re exactly where we are now . . . wherever that is.”

Rick drove his fist at the unyielding trunk of the baobab tree. It didn't help, but barked knuckles told him to stop acting foolishly. He knew Tony was right. He yielded as gracefully as he could by asking, "How do we light a fire?"

"By one of the most useful of the old technologies -flint and steel. The spike will provide the steel. I hope we can find something resembling flint."

"No problem," Scotty said. "I've been saving a couple of nice quartz pebbles from a dry wash a ways back. Planned to suck on them, but didn't." Rick knew that was Scotty's way of giving in, too.

Dry tinder was readily available. The baobab tree was hollow, like most of its kind, and there was sawdust left by wood beetles in its base. Twigs and dried grass made a bed for the fire. Scotty managed to boost Rick high enough to get handfuls of the leaves with which to make smoke.

There was a knack to making fire with flint and steel. They took turns striking the pebbles and the spike until their hands were sore and tempers frayed. Finally the sawdust glowed, and Tony lay flat and breathed on it until flame kindled. Rick held a bunch of grass in the tiny flame and it ignited. Within minutes a thin column of smoke mounted into the sky.

Rick was the lightest of the three. Tony and Scotty joined forces to lift him high into the baobab. He climbed unsteadily until he could throw handfuls of leaves down along with dried twigs and branches.

"Enough!" Tony called. "At least for now."

Rick climbed down and dropped the last few feet. Scotty steadied him. Tony fed the fire and the smoke column thickened and climbed higher.

They kept the signal going for an hour before Tony let it die. "If there are no results, we can try again later. If necessary, we can light the whole tree on fire."

"Meanwhile," Rick said wearily, "we rest."

"Exactly."

The three stretched out on the sleeping bags they still carried, and tried to sleep. Rick dozed, and dreamed of a throat so dry that it hurt like a scraped knee.

Lighting the baobab tree on fire wasn't necessary. Beforenoon, horsemen swept down on them, and at their head was an old friend-or enemy: Elijah.

CHAPTER XI

The Highway North

The emir was amused. He sat on his cushions and sucked noisily at a water pipe and contemplated the

three before him. They were in chains, with ancient handcuffs and leg irons grinding rustily with each move.

Rick was half-dead with fatigue, but he kept his eyes on the Emir. Sometime within the next few minutes, when the Emir: tired of playing with them, their fate would be announced.

The boy knew that the Emir was enjoying keeping them in suspense. From the moment that Elijah and the guards had hurled them to the floor in front of the local potentate, the Emir had grinned constantly between sucks at his hubble-bubble pipe.

Ricksquirmed a little to ease his sore thighs. The distance they had traveled so laboriously had been covered between the time of their capture and nightfall, with the three of them seated on horses behind the saddles, holding on to the riders to keep from being bounced off. The wiry desert horses had moved at a steady canter not calculated for a bareback passenger's comfort.

The Emir waved his hand and one of his women attendants carried the pipe away. The Emir's eyes went from one of the miserable trio to another.

"I once saw a herd of baboons," he said. "They had been chased by hunters for four days without water or food. They had to be killed, because all of them were afflicted with a disease that reduced them to skin and bones. When I saw them, they looked better than you do now." Rick, Scotty, and Tony remained silent

"It would perhaps be merciful to put you out of your misery," the Emir mused. "It would also be easier for me. You realize that you have posed me with a difficult problem?"

"You've posed us with one!" Rick snapped.

"True. I may allow one problem to cancel out the other-if I can decide what is to be done with you."

"Why not settle everything by giving us our jeep and turning us loose?" Tony asked acidly.

The Emir turned his palms up and shrugged. "The answer to that has two forks. One is that I am not yet satisfied that the stain on my honor is erased. The other is that you would cause some difficulty for me with reports that you were kidnapped. It is not a very great difficulty, to be sure, because Nigeria, Niger, and Chad probably could not agree on which has jurisdiction here. But it could be somewhat embarrassing for me. No, I cannot agree to let you go."

"So you do plan to hold us as slaves from now on," Scotty said coldly.

"A reasonable assumption. But not here. You have shown more determination than I had expected. If I allow you to continue as before, you might try to escape again. Who knows? You might even succeed."

"With chains on?" Rick demanded.

The Emir smiled. "The chains are only a temporary solution. You must earn your food and water by working, and who can work while chained? Even leg irons would be a handicap. No, the chains must go. A less tangible kind of chain is needed, but one that would be as effective as a ton of iron on each leg. I have that kind of chain. Tomorrow you will feel it."

The Emir gestured, and guards herded the three from the great man's presence, down the stairs, and into

a cell next to the one in which they had been imprisoned earlier. The door slammed shut and the bolt was rammed home.

“Welcome to Casa Calabash,” Scotty said wryly.

Rick managed a grin. “Nothing like a familiar hotel after a long trip. But I thought I’d never get down those stairs in one piece with all this iron on.”

“I wasn’t sure I’d make it, either,” Tony agreed. “At least they put our sleeping bags in with us.”

They managed to unroll the bags and get inside, leg irons and all. Then, as they lay in the darkness, Rick asked the question that had been on his mind. “What do we do now?”

“We don’t give up,” Scotty assured him fiercely.

“No,” Tony echoed. “We can’t give up. But for the present we can only wait and see what the Emir has in mind. Frankly, I’m taking the first deep breath since we were captured, or recaptured, to be accurate. There was an excellent chance the Emir might decide escaping prisoners were troublesome and simply do away with us.”

“He could have,” Rick agreed. “But he thought it was funny.”

Scotty snorted. “Sure. After we built a smoke to let his troops know where we were. If we had managed to escape, he wouldn’t be laughing.”

“I wonder how far we were from safety,” Rick mused.

“Maybe five miles, maybe fifty, or even more,” Tony replied. “It certainly didn’t take them long to carry us back over ground it took days of hard travel to cover.”

Rick thought they had probably wandered from a straight line, zigzagging back and forth, while the horsemen had followed a beeline to the Emir’s stronghold. He didn’t voice the thought. He was tired, and sick with the sense of defeat. He felt low enough to crawl under a peanut vine without disturbing it. What could they do now? If their failure had proved anything, it was the impossibility of walking to civilization and safety. Maybe, by some wild chance or careful plan, they could recover the jeep. First, though, they had to find it. Scotty had failed to spot it, or any place it might be hidden, when he reconnoitered the place before their breakout. Still, it must be somewhere . . . and on that thought, Rick fell asleep.

Had he been even slightly less exhausted, the rattle of chains every time he moved, and the discomfort of hard links under him when he turned over would have kept him from sleeping, but it seemed he had hardly closed his eyes before the guard was shaking him.

He opened his eyes and sat up with a groan. Elijah was in the doorway, obviously impatient.

“Up, quickly! The Emir is waiting.”

“Let him wait,” Scotty retorted.

Elijah shook his head. “If I had my way I would teach you better manners with a dog whip. But you must be in shape to travel. So cease your stupid remarks and get up. Collect your sleeping robes and come with me.”

At the pump, Elijah let them pause long enough to drink deeply and splash water on their faces. Rick savored the water, letting it wash some of the rank taste of exhaustion and defeat from his mouth.

Before the front door, horsemen were assembled, several holding pack horses. There were five empty saddles. The Spindrifters soon found that three were for them. Handicapped by chains, they needed help to mount. It was supplied by the guards, who lashed their feet to the stirrups after removing the leg irons.

Rick counted fifteen armed men in the group. "Looks as though the Emir wants us to be well guarded," he said.

"Maybe the Emir's the one who needs the heavy guard," Scotty said. Then he pointed to a horse that was obviously superior to the rest, a genuine Arab stallion with the long legs and short back that marked the breed. "That must be his mount."

Scotty was right. In a few moments the Emir emerged, looking like the desert prince in an old movie. He swung into the Arabian stallion's saddle with the ease of a skilled rider, then handled the spirited horse with the ease of a ten-goal polo player as he moved alongside the Spindrifters.

"Today we ride," he stated. "It has been some time since I inspected the northernmost part of my kingdom. There is a small village there, at an oasis not marked on any map. You will work there. Between you and Nigeria will be only one place where water can be obtained, and that is right here. Now, are you prepared to bargain?"

"For what?" Tony asked suspiciously.

"For some comfort. It is a hard trip, three days in all. The irons will leave no skin on your wrists if left on. Give me your promise not to try to escape, and I will have them removed."

"Not to escape on the trip, or never to escape?" Rick demanded.

"On the trip. A promise never to escape would be too big a burden."

Scotty asked, "How did you know we would keep a promise?"

The Emir smiled. "I am a judge of men and of horses. Besides, your friend's question confirmed my judgment. Would anyone who puts no value on a promise ask about its duration?"

"We accept," Tony stated. "If you remove the irons, we will not attempt escape."

The Emir looked at Rick and Scotty. "He speaks for all?"

The boys nodded.

"Very well, so be it." He spoke rapidly to Red Turban, who unlocked the unwieldy handcuffs and tossed them to a waiting servant.

"As a matter of curiosity," Tony inquired, "how old are those irons?"

The Emir shrugged. "Who knows? I have them from my father, who had them from my grandfather. They were used to hold slaves during the trip to Lagos where we sold them to your Yankee captains. At

least my grandfather did. Now, let us go. You will follow the leader. My men and I will ride behind.” He grinned. “That is so I can watch you keeping your promise.”

Rick almost grinned back. The Emir trusted them- but only up to a point.

Red Turban took the lead, and the Spindrifters wheeled their mounts to follow. The Emir, Elijah, and the armed guard followed.

Rick’s horse was a docile bay with an easy gait, for which he thanked his lucky stars. He was still sore from yesterday’s ride, and he knew the trip would not be an easy one, even with such a comfortable piece of horseflesh under him. He saw that Scotty and Tony had also been lucky, and decided the three had deliberately been given mounts that could be overtaken by the more spirited animals of the guards-if they were so foolish as to try another escape.

CHAPTER XII

Dawn Raid

By noontime the party had left the savanna far behind and were in the desert itself. There were no sand dunes to make this part of the Sahara picturesque, only endless plains of broken rock-sheets of sandy stone scoured clean by the desert winds. The harmattan still blew high overhead, following some great current of wind in the upper atmosphere, but on the ground there was surprisingly little dust.

The sun beat down relentlessly, tempered only slightly by the dust layer of the harmattan. The Emir watched his captives carefully, and during the early afternoon he gave an order to Elijah, who extracted three woolen strips from a pack. The Emir took them and cantered to the three.

“Take these.” He handed a cloth to each. “Drape them over your heads so they cover the backs of your necks. There are short ropes on your saddle loops. Take one and bind the cloths around your heads. I know you are used to the sun of Kano, but only a fool goes into the desert without covering.”

Thank you,” Tony said, and the boys echoed him.

“It is nothing.” The Emir smiled. “After all, one must take care of his workers.”

“Your command of English is flawless,” Tony told him. “May I ask where you were educated?”

“Certainly. I attended a mission school in Timbuktu, then studied law for a short time at Lagos. I had English professors in both schools. They were kind enough to say I had a good ear.”

Rick was amazed. “How can a man of your background even condone a thing like this, much less be responsible for it?”

The Emir’s good nature vanished. “Only one of the Faithful who has been fed pork could understand this.”

“I still say those were beef hot dogs,” Rick insisted.

“And I would expect you to say it. Hot dogs are frankfurters, are they not? And frankfurters are a type of German sausage made of pork and beef. It is that simple.” With that, the Emir galloped ahead.

Scotty shook his head. “We’ll never convince him until we can hand him a package of beef hot dogs so he can read the label.”

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Tony said mildly. “If you took a poll in America, you’d find plenty of people who didn’t know there were beef hot dogs-including many who eat them. Not everyone reads labels. And, personally, I’ve never seen beef hot dogs overseas, although I’ve seen some versions of the hot dog that were the traditional pork-and-beef combination. You find them in Scandinavia, for example.”

The three adjusted their head coverings and Rick grinned at the appearance of his companions. “Now you look like extras in a Foreign Legion movie.”

“There isn’t a Foreign Legion any more,” Tony reminded him.

“I’m starting a new one right now,” Scotty declared. “Someone has to put these desert types in their place. You two can be the first recruits.”

“Count me in,” Rick said. “If I can be a sergeant.”

“Nothing but generals in my legion,” Scotty replied. “If you want to start at the bottom, you’ll have to be a brigadier general. Tony’s older. He can be a major general.”

There were hills, now-rocky hills of broken stone through which the horses picked their way with care. Once they stopped for ten minutes to water the horses and take a drink themselves, and Rick noticed that at no time did watchful eyes leave them. The Emir was taking no chances.

They crossed the hills into dune country, skirted the high-piled ridges of sand, and then found themselves on a rocky plain once more.

The sun was setting before Red Turban reined back and consulted with the Emir. The Emir nodded, and the party followed the leader into a draw filled with broken boulders. The bottom was pure sand.

They dismounted, and at once three guards came and took their horses. The three stood idly while the desert people erected a tent for the Emir and set about getting dinner.

“To show you that my feelings are quite impersonal,” the Emir told them, “I will invite you to sit with me at dinner. Unless your principles do not allow eating with your captors?”

“The first principle,” Tony replied, “is courtesy. Since you place us in the position of guests with your invitation, we owe you the courtesy of a guest to his host. We accept with pleasure.”

“Thank you. Please come and sit before my tent.”

The dinner was the best they had eaten since being captured. Lamb chunks, skewered and broiled, were supplemented by the huge Nigerian yam—a vegetable which often was two feet long and several inches

thick, with white flesh like a potato, but coarser in texture. The yam had been baked by burying it in the fire. There was hot tea to drink, as much as they wanted.

The Emir conversed easily, and once he admitted, "There are some disadvantages to an education. I find myself hungry for conversation. Elijah is the only one besides myself who has been educated at a university. He is a graduate of the university at Lagos. Tell me. What is the equipment you carried? I have never seen anything like it. At first I thought it was radio equipment, but it is not."

Tony explained the laser project, and the Emir sighed. "A pity. I would have liked to see such a demonstration."

"You can," Rick said boldly. "Turn around and take us back. We'll invite you to watch."

"I wish I could," the Emir said simply.

"Why can't you?" Scotty demanded.

"Because I am the Emir. My people know that an American dishonored me. If I fail to extract a proper revenge they will lose respect for me. It is only by respect that I rule them. They watch my treatment of you with great interest, and even amusement."

"All your people know of this?" Tony asked. "Aren't you afraid the story will leak out and get to the authorities?"

"No. A man who talks too much loses his tongue. Literally. Besides, in this part of the world I am the 'authorities.'"

Later, as they huddled in their sleeping bags on the sand, Rick said thoughtfully, "You know, in other circumstances I could like the Emir. He's pretty bright, and he has a sense of humor."

"I agree," Tony said. "In a way, he's as much a victim of misfortune as we are."

Scotty chuckled. "Love thy enemy. Okay. I'll love him, too. After I've managed to increase his misfortune by about ten times. Good night."

But Rick and Tony were already asleep.

The earth shook under Rick and he stirred uneasily. The night had been cold, and he had drawn the sleeping bag up over his head, which also served to deaden the sound of outside activity. He became conscious of noise, a kind of wild screaming punctuated by heavy slaps. He jerked to full consciousness and pulled the bag away from his head. The muffled slaps became clearer. Gunshots! People were yelling somewhere close by. He blinked his eyes, conscious of an unidentified pounding noise, and turned in time to see a horde of horsemen sweeping down the gully right toward him!

The three had laid their sleeping bags to one side of the gully on a patch of soft sand, and it was this location that saved their lives. Rick let out a yell and tried to get out of the sleeping bag, but realized there was no time. He rolled frantically to the shelter of the rocks at the gully's edge, sleeping bag and all. Scotty and Tony, who had realized their predicament almost at the same moment, rolled and squirmed with him.

They made it, but Tony, who was farthest from the rocks, was scraped by a hoof as a horseman leaped

right over him.

Rick had a confused impression of blue robes and gleaming swords against the pale light of growing dawn. He started to scramble from the confines of the sleeping bag as the horsemen rushed past, but the last two pulled their mounts up in a stop that sent the horses back on their haunches, then the riders whirled back toward the three, pulled up sharply again, and leaped to the ground with broadswords raised.

Rick's heart leaped into his throat. The blue robes towered above them, and blazing eyes peered down from above heavy veils. Veiled swordsmen! One of the two barked a sharp command, and Tony called quickly, "Lie still!"

Rick and Scotty stopped struggling to get out of the bags. One of the veiled men let out a piercing cry, then the two simply stood on guard over the helpless three, swords ready.

Down the gully a fierce fight was raging, the cries of men punctuated by gunshots. From his prone position Rick couldn't see what was happening, but he thought the Emir and his guards were making a stand against the raiders.

Two more horsemen swept up the gully toward them, probably in answer to the veiled man's cry. They dismounted, and a brief conversation ensued, then the two newcomers got ropes from their saddles and advanced.

While the first two kept guard over Rick and Scotty, the two newcomers knelt by Tony. One held a knife at his throat. The second inspected the sleeping bag, then pulled it up around Tony's throat and tied it with rope, securing the scientist inside.

Rick could have cried with frustration. In a moment it was his turn. A needle-pointed dagger pricked his throat while his arms were thrust inside the sleeping bag and it was tied around his neck. To be tied up in a sack like a pig in a poke!

The three were completely helpless. They could move arms and legs inside the bag, but there was no way of getting out. The zipper was held by the tied rope, and couldn't even be reached. A knife in the bag would have allowed them to cut their way out, but there wasn't a knife among the three.

One veiled man remained as guard. The others left their horses and ran toward the fight that apparently was centered around the Emir's tent.

Rick risked raising his head in time to see the Emir, Elijah, and four others smash into the raiders like a flying wedge. A pistol in the Emir's hand blasted one raider out of the way, then the group ran down the gully to where the horses had been staked. The rest of the Emir's men were locked in hand-to-hand combat with the raiders.

The fight ended with astonishing speed. The Emir and his group appeared, mounted, on the upper edge of the gully. Elijah screamed a command. The Emir's men in the gully broke free and ran. Some of them made it. Rick saw one cut down with a whistling sweep of a broadsword. Another staggered and fell as a rifle blasted. Those who reached the horses mounted swiftly and got out as best they could. A few rifleshoots followed them, but the raiders made no attempt at pursuit.

The raiders milled around the wreckage of the Emir's tent. A couple bent over the fallen, apparently seeing whether they were dead or alive. The veiled raider who was guarding the three moved toward the

rest of his gang, keeping an eye cocked in their direction.

No word had been exchanged among the Spindrifters except for Tony's sharp command. Now Scotty asked, "What is this all about?"

"They're Tuaregs," Tony said. "Wild desert tribesmen. Apparently they're still raiding as they used to."

"Raiding for what?" Rick asked.

"We'll soon find out." Tony's voice didn't sound reassuring.

From down the gully, heads were turned in their direction. In a moment several Tuaregs walked toward them, following one who was evidently a leader.

The group inspected the bagged three in silence; then the leader knelt and fingered the material of Scotty's sleeping bag, rolled the boy over, tested the rubberized fabric of the bag's back, rolled him back again and poked at the neck tie that held him securely.

Suddenly the leader started to laugh. The rest of the Tuaregs joined him. They roared with laughter until they had to hold on to each other. The leader sat down and pounded the sand, screaming with laughter.

Rick gritted his teeth. He could see the humor of the situation. Three prisoners, delivered without a struggle, packaged like trussed chickens. From the viewpoint of the raiders, it was probably the most hilarious thing that had ever happened, a tale to be told over the campfires, to be passed from tribe to tribe. It was ridiculous and screamingly funny.

Rick wasn't amused.

CHAPTER XIII

Camp of the Tuaregs

Rick sat on a ledge in front of the cave that had been given to the Spindrifters as sleeping quarters. He was on the verge of exploding. He released some of his anger by pounding two rocks together until his hands hurt and the stones finally split.

Scotty prowled back and forth along the ledge like a caged tiger, in no better shape mentally than Rick. Only Tony Briotti seemed relaxed. He lay stretched out below Rick's feet and munched on dates while watching activity in the Tuareg camp below.

Rick couldn't remember when he had faced such a fantastic series of events. Capture by the Emir's men, escape, recapture, and now capture again by a Tuareg clan. And all the time the clock was ticking away-or, the days were dropping from the calendar. He had reviewed the passing days, marking them off in the dirt before the cave. It was the evening of their fifteenth day since leaving Kano. That meant two weeks remained before the laser demonstration. Somehow, in that brief period, they had to escape from

the Tuaregs, recapture their equipment, and get to Sokoto and set up.

There were a few problems. One, they didn't know where they were. Two, they didn't know where the Emir had put their equipment. Three, they had no weapons. Four, five, and six, they had no water, no food, no transportation.

Rick got tired of counting up the problems. He hurled a rock at a passing lizard and missed.

"If we only had some idea of our location," he said dejectedly, "we might be able to figure out some way of getting back to civilization."

"I've been thinking about it," Tony said. The sweep of his arm took in the mountains around them. The camp to which they had been carried, slung over horses' backs like grain sacks, was in a fertile valley between mountain escarpments. "I'm not very clear on the geography of this part of the world, as I've said before. But I have a blurred vision of the map of Central West Africa in my head, and it tells me we're probably in the foothills of the Tenere Range."

Scotty paused in his pacing. "That's great. Where is this range?"

"In the country of Niger, in the southern part of the Sahara. It also means these Tuaregs are probably one of the clans from around Air."

"But we can't be too far from Nigeria," Rick objected.

"Not as the crow flies. But we're not crows."

"How does it happen we heard nothing about the Tuaregs in Kano if they're prowling this close to Nigeria?"

Tony answered Rick's question with a shrug. "I did hear of them. Maybe you did, too. They don't call them Tuaregs in Kano, they call them Buzos."

"At least they're not mistreating us," Scotty observed.

"On the contrary," Tony agreed, "they're treating us very well. It's a tradition with the Tuaregs. A slave is to be well cared for. If his master mistreats him, he has the right to demand that he be sold to a kinder master."

"How do you know about the Tuaregs?" Rick asked.

"I don't know a great deal," Tony admitted. "But I remember a few things from a course in comparative anthropology."

"Anything to help us get out of here?" Scotty inquired.

"Possibly. It's hard to tell until we're a bit more familiar with the camp and the local customs."

The camp was composed of domed tents made of goatskins. There were goats everywhere. Rick estimated the number of goats at about forty per tent. They wandered in and out at will—young kids and old billies alike—and all seemed very tame. There were also a number of sheep, smelly creatures with long, matted wool and long tails. There were twelve tents, and each one seemed inhabited by several

people. There were half-naked children, young men with heads shaved except for a ridge of hair like a Huron

Indian, and old men with heads fully shaved. The women, children, and young men did not wear veils. All the grown men did.

At the head of the valley, where it ended in a rocky cul-de-sac, was a pen in which the horses were kept. And at the opposite end of the valley, where it entered a rocky defile leading to freedom, the lushest grass was reserved for a large herd of camels-the wealth of the clan. Some were Maharis, the famed racing camels of the northern Sahara .

"If we could get our hands on three of those racing camels," Rick mused, "we could make a break for it. If we had water."

"If we had ham," Scotty retorted, "we could have ham and eggs. If we had eggs."

"Personally," Tony said, "I'd rather live on a diet of goat's milk, goat cheese, and millet cakes such as we had for lunch and dinner than the hot stuff the Emir fed us. Besides, we may get eggs now and then-ostrich eggs."

Rick studied the camp. The well from which the entire camp's water was drawn was well away from the nearest tent, a simple sanitary precaution. Hanging from a rack near it were goatskin water bags, some full and some empty. In addition, each tent had at least one water bag hung from its frame.

"There's our water," he said. "Now, how about the transportation? Do we go for horses or camels?"

"Camels," Tony replied. "One of those big Maharis can do sixty miles in a day, and even more if pushed."

"They keep the saddles in the tents," Scotty observed. "Besides, who knows how to steer a camel? Do they answer to the reins like horses?"

Tony shook his head. "They usually steer by knee pressure, or by a single nose ring."

Rick looked at him. "How much experience have you had with camels, Tony? I've been carried on one, and I once rode one. That's all."

"I've ridden them quite extensively, but I've never saddled one. That's always been done for me."

"It's horses for us," Rick said flatly. "The camels may be faster, but we know how to handle horses. What we have to do is plan so the camels can't overtake us."

"Let's walk down to the camp," Scotty said abruptly, "I have an idea, but I'm not sure it will work until I can look the place over a little better."

Their cave was one of a series of similar entrances into the mountainside. It was man-made, as were all the others. Originally it had been cut to obtain salt that occurred in thin veins through the sandstone. When the salt vein had petered out, the cave had been converted to living quarters.

But salt was still mined-in fact, that was their new job. They had arrived in camp on the previous night, and had been turned loose. It was clear the Tuaregs did not fear them, or worry about their escaping,

which was reasonable enough, Rick thought, since the entire desert served as a guard. They were fed and shown to their cave, then left for the night.

That morning they had been roused early, given breakfast, and taken to a field where women and children were collecting millet grains. But Tony, in a burst of inspiration, had pointed to the sun, then their heads, and had crumpled to the ground in a convincing charade of what would happen to them if forced to work in the fields. Their apparent owner- the one who had guarded them by himself-thought it over, consulted with others, then led them to the cave. He had shown them that the thin veins of salt, mixed with sand, could be dug out with a tool of ancient iron, and left them to sack it in goatskin bags. They had found out it was salt by tasting it.

Rick had seen cakes of salt, dark brown and shaped like pancakes, in the market at Kano. Now he knew where the cakes came from. The salt "ore" was dissolved in water, and some of the minerals in the sandstone dissolved with it. Then the brine was placed in saucers of red pottery and left to evaporate. The cakes were the result. Mining the veins, a relic of the days when the Sahara had been part of a great ocean, was their part of the salt production line.

At noon their owner had come and led them to the place where the slaves ate. The Spindrifters identified four as Emir's men who had been captured. They knew at least three others had been killed, along with two Tuaregs, and others had been wounded.

The slaves were easily identified because, except for the Spindrifters, they were all black-skinned. The Tuaregs were not. Many of them were blue or hazel-eyed, and they were clearly of Caucasian origin. After the meal, their master had simply pointed to the cave and left them to resume work on their own. This was normal behavior in the Tuareg culture, Tony recalled. A slave accepted his status as a slave, and on the whole, it was not a bad life. Slaves had certain rights and privileges, and under some circumstances, could even own property.

Apparently the slaves were allowed to wander freely around the camp, so Rick and Tony followed as Scotty led the way.

They ambled among the tents, returning the smiles of the children, stopping now and then to pet one of the goats that nuzzled them. They kept sharp eyes open, taking in every visible detail of the camp.

The tents were large enough to accommodate big families, and they saw the interiors were divided into rooms by curtains. The floors were of clean sand. Nearly everything in sight was made of goatskins.

The veiled men seated before the tents stared at them with cool interest, or with indifference. Their master- a tall, gray-eyed man who wore a white head-covering and veil- nodded at them and they nodded back.

Scotty led them through the village to two tents set slightly apart from the rest. Before one of them, an unveiled man with bronzed skin and sharply Semitic features, was seated, cross-legged, punching holes in the edge of a goatskin.

"These must be 'smith' tents," Tony said. "The smiths have a special status with the Tuaregs. They're slaves, but of a distinct caste. They do all the handiwork."

Rick had peered into the tent. "This one makes saddles!" *he* exclaimed. There were six on a sort of saw-horse inside the tent.

Near the tent entrance was a crude workbench, and on its front was a leather apron containing many pockets. Each pocket held a tool.

“Strike up a conversation,” Scotty said swiftly. “Keep his attention.”

Tony squatted before the workman and tried to converse in French, Italian, and German with no success. He tried the few words he knew of Spanish. The man was amiable. He listened closely, but to each question he could only say something in the local dialect, which Tony classified as one of the Berber languages. So far as they knew, no one in the camp spoke any European language.

While Tony tried to make conversation, Rick put himself in a position to shield Scotty. His pal stepped into the tent and right out again, hand in pocket. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

They continued their stroll, not hurrying. The sun was setting rapidly, and soon darkness would fall. It was time to return to their cave.

As they reached it, Scotty disclosed what he had stolen. It was a knife with a blade only an inch long, but it was razor-sharp.

“What’s your idea?” Tony asked.

“We have a knife, we have goatskins, and we have plenty of stones. So we have weapons.”

The light dawned. “Slings!” Rick exclaimed. “That’s great, Scotty! They may not outreach a rifle, but they for sure can outreach one of those two-edged swords!”

CHAPTER XIV

The Salt Mine

The salt mine in which the three worked was one of many caves at the base of the escarpment that rose above the camp. Tony examined some of the empty ones and found drawings on the wall, primitive but unmistakable, of lions, rhinoceroses, and other animals of the African plains.

“Those drawings give you some idea of the age of this salt camp,” Tony said. “It’s obvious they were made when such animals were found in this vicinity. How many centuries ago might that be, I couldn’t even hazard a guess. It may even have been before the pyramids in Egypt were built.”

The scientist wished aloud for the simplest of recording tools—a pencil and a sheet of paper with which to make notes. The discovery obviously excited him. “I’ve heard of similar findings farther north, but nothing about these caves. We may have a new discovery on our hands!”

Rick and Scotty couldn’t share his excitement.

They appreciated the significance of the find, but were too preoccupied with the need for escaping to

devote much thought to antiquities.

The Tuareg boss had furnished them with torches and what Scotty called “a Buzo match,” which consisted of a block of hard wood with a groove in it, and a hard stick. The Tuaregs made fire in the ancient way, by rubbing the stick along the groove until friction built up enough heat to ignite kindling. Tony’s inspection of the drawings was by torchlight, but the torch was needed on the job in the salt cave. The boys finally persuaded the scientist to forget the primitive art temporarily and come to work.

“If we’re ever going to escape,” Rick pointed out, “we have to give the impression that we’re amiable types who don’t need watching. That includes doing enough work to keep the boss happy.”

There was no difference between the other caves and the one in which they worked, except that the thin veins containing salt deposits had been worked out in the others. All of the caves were piled deep in rubble, the “tailings” that had produced no salt. Only in one there were drawings.

By agreement, Rick and Tony got to work digging out salt while Scotty selected the best goatskins and started making slings. The boys had become interested in the ancient weapon when a friend, Steve Ames of the intelligence agency JANIG, had showed them how to make and use one. Both boys had become expert with the weapons-the same kind with which David slew Goliath in the Biblical story.

While Scotty cut the leather thongs, Rick started digging and Tony dumped the salty material into a goatskin sack. Later Tony took over the digging while Rick filled the sack. By then Scotty had cut two thongs a quarter of an inch wide and nearly three feet long. He put them aside and started cutting out a rectangular piece for the pouch, making it about four inches wide and twice as long.

The torch flickered, and Tony lighted another one from the dying flame and propped it up between two chunks of sandstone. Rick picked up the iron tool and took another turn at gouging salt from the cave wall. He was working at one side of the cave’s inner end when a wallop with the tool rang hollowly.

“Hey! Listen!” He hit the wall again, and a piece cracked and fell into a black hole that suddenly appeared. Both Tony and Scotty were at his side now.

“Must be a natural inner cave of some kind,” Rick said, prying to enlarge the opening.

“I doubt it,” Tony replied. “Natural caves don’t commonly occur in this kind of formation. All the others were dug to get salt.”

Rick dug chunks of the soft stone. He made an opening big enough to look through and called for the torch. He thrust it through the hole and it flickered. There was air inside, but it was pretty stale, with little oxygen in it. He thrust his head through to take a look, then let out an involuntary yell. There was a mummy inside, dried lips drawn back from grinning teeth!

Rick stepped back and bumped into Scotty.

“There’s a dead man in there,” he said shakily. “A mummy, sort of. Except that it isn’t wrapped like one.”

“Let me see.” Tony grabbed the torch and thrust it and his head through the hole. He stayed in that position for so long Rick thought he must be unconscious for lack of oxygen and pulled him back. Tony wasn’t unconscious. He protested vigorously. “This is fascinating! Let me go, Rick.”

“Nothing doing,” Rick stated firmly. “If you want to see more, we’re going to enlarge that hole and let some fresh air through. What’s in there?”

“Artifacts of all kinds, and at least two more mummies. It’s a large cave, much larger than most of the ones we’ve seen. It must have been sealed for a thousand years or more. The mummies are completely desiccated, and I saw pots that are surely Persian!”

It took only fifteen minutes of hard work to break a hole big enough to walk through, if bent over. Tony wanted to go in right away, but the boys were firm. They insisted on sacking ore for a while until the inner cave had a chance to ventilate a little.

Finally the three went in. As Tony had said, it was a treasure-trove for an archaeologist, or anthropologist, although there was nothing resembling real treasure at first glance. There were five mummies, completely dried out by centuries of bone-dry desert air. And, Rick pointed out, it was clear how they got there. Tumbled rock, jammed in what had once been the entrance, showed they had been sealed in by a rockfall. Had it been an accident, or had the rock been tumbled deliberately? There wasn’t a single clue.

Scotty said slowly, “They must have died of thirst and starvation.”

“Very probably,” Tony agreed.

Rick looked around at the scene of the ancient tragedy and suddenly felt a little sick. The air still wasn’t good. “I’m going outside,” he said. “I need fresh air.”

He went back through the opening into the salt mine, and walked through the passage to the open air. The brilliant glare of the day made him blink, and he squinted until his eyes adjusted. Below, the camp was quiet in the heat of late morning. A slave emerged from one of the other caves, gave a friendly wave of greeting, then walked along the path in front of the caves. Rick watched him go. The path passed in front of all the caves, then descended gradually to the floor of the valley just beyond the end of the village, quite close to the well.

The slave passed the well, took a full skin of water and slung it on a pole, rigged a second skin to balance the first, and lifted the pole to his shoulder. He walked up the valley to where the horses were penned. He was going to water the stock, Rick decided.

Suddenly he stood up straight, and his eyes scanned the path again. It had been beaten down by centuries of feet, and was nearly six feet wide. He turned. In the opposite direction it ran downhill into the village. But from it branched a less well-traveled path that continued to skirt the lower edge of the cliff, or escarpment, until it wound upward-out of the valley!

Rick turned and ran back into the cave. Scotty was just emerging from the inner cave, carrying the torch. Tony followed, hands full of small pieces of pottery and bronze that was green with age.

“I found a couple of souvenirs,” Scotty said, and held up two identical rings of ancient, green patinated bronze, both coiled into the form of hooded cobras.

“That’s great,” Rick said hurriedly. “But I’ve found something even more important. Listen to this!” He quickly outlined what he had seen, and the plan that had followed naturally from what he described as “the geometry of the situation.”

When he was finished, Scotty clapped him on the shoulder. “The old bean never stops ticking, does it? It will work- *if*.”

“If what?” Rick demanded.

“If we have some kind of a diversion at the right moment.”

Rick thought about it. “You’re right,” he conceded. “Any idea what it could be?”

Scotty shook his head. “We’ll think of something. But your plan means we’ll have to cover up the hole. We don’t want the boss to find it if he comes in here.”

“No,” Tony chimed in, and added, “He’s apt to, unless we’ve done a good morning’s work and have the bags stacked at the entrance.”

No further advice was needed. The three got to work, first piling debris until the hole was covered again, then digging salt from the opposite wall of the cave and sacking it as fast as they could work.

When the boss arrived, they had already filled twice as many bags as on the entire previous day. He beamed at them from above the veil, and said something that was probably complimentary in the Tuareg language.

“We’ve made him happy,” Scotty said with a grin.

“There’s nothing like pleasing the master to make a slave’s road a smooth one.”

“Especially the road to home,” Rick added.

The boss led them to what Scotty called “the chow tent,” then left them to eat lunch with the other slaves.

Lunch, again, was a gourd full of goat’s milk for each, a chunk of goat cheese, and four millet cakes. There were baskets of dates, from which the slaves could help themselves at any time. Rick drank deeply, then observed, “Never thought I’d drink goat’s milk with pleasure.”

“No reason why not,” Tony replied. “It’s rich, nourishing, easy to digest, and the only milk that comes already homogenized. If the goat could manage to package it in a plastic container, he’d-I mean she’d-put the cows out of business.”

The village children had discovered that the three were eating, and gathered around to watch. White men without veils or robes were apparently still a novelty.

Two adults also paused when they saw the children gathered silently watching the three Americans. The veiled men wore cartridge bandoliers crisscrossed over their shoulders and carried old British Enfield rifles that had been oiled and polished with loving care.

Scotty whispered urgently, “Listen! I’m going to attract a crowd, and I hope it includes those two. If I do, crowd them and slip some of those cartridges out of the bandoliers. Four apiece would be perfect.”

One of the children carried a thin bamboo cane about two feet long. Scotty smiled at the youngster and reached out for the stick. He tugged it gently, and the boy yielded. Scotty held up the stick in one hand,

then reached into his pocket and brought out one of the cobra rings. He showed both stick and ring to the children, making a big thing of it, gesturing with both hands.

Rick didn't know what Scotty was doing, but he was alert. He saw the two veiled raiders pause to watch. Rick and Tony got to their feet, and Rick moved quietly to take his place in Scotty's audience.

Scotty slid the stick through his palm until he was grasping it in the middle. Then he held out one end to the stick's owner, who took it. Scotty nodded approval. He took the hand with the ring in it, caught a little girl's hand, and clamped it over the free end of the stick. Both ends of the stick were now held by children, and Scotty still had hold of the middle. With his other hand he showed them the ring again, held between thumb and forefinger.

Rick watched, as fully interested as the children. He still didn't know what Scotty had in mind.

Scotty lowered the ring toward the stick, one, two, three times. Then, suddenly, he snapped the ring down against the stick and let go. There was the ring, spinning freely on the stick!

The children gasped, then let out yells of glee. The little girl took the ring from the stick and studied it, her cute face bewildered. The boy who owned the bamboo cane bent it and tested it, as though disbelieving his own eyes, then he held the stick out to Scotty again.

The slaves had gathered around now, and the two veiled men joined them. Scotty had quite an audience. Rick moved quietly until he was behind the veiled men. Tony went around to take a similar position.

Scotty bowed to the crowd, took the stick from the little boy, and held it up. He handed it to one of the veiled men with a smile. The Tuareg tested it, bending the cane between his hands. He said something in the dialect and handed it back. Scotty took the ring from the little girl, bowed, and handed it to the other veiled man to examine. The slaves pressed in so they could see, too, and pushed Rick against the bandolier of cartridges. It was all he needed.

The veiled man examined the ring, tested it to make sure there was no break in it, and handed it back. Again Scotty slid the bamboo cane through his palm until he gripped the middle, but this time he held it out to the Tuaregs. Each veiled man gripped one end. Scotty held up the ring, brought it down sharply and drew away, leaving the ring spinning on the stick. The audience shouted its pleasure, and the veiled men again examined ring and stick, and shook their heads in bewilderment.

As though addressing them, Scotty said with a smile, "Tony, you have some rings you collected. Let me have them, but be sure there are no duplicates. I'm sure you have the ammo by now, so come on around."

Scotty held up his hand, and beckoned to Tony. The scientist reached into his pocket and produced three rings, simple circles of bronze that had once been carved with delicate designs. Cleaning would probably restore the designs.

Scotty looked around and spotted the smith from whom he had stolen the knife. He beckoned to him, made signs of sewing, then pretended to hold a piece of something in his hand that he couldn't break.

The smith got the message. He walked to his tent and came back with a length of braided linen cord. Scotty tested it. No doubt of it, it was very strong, although quite thin. "Just exactly what I wanted," Scotty said. "You'll see why later."

He approached the veiled men and held out his hand. The veiled men held out theirs. One wore a silver ring. Scotty pointed to it, eyebrows raised in a question. The veiled man slipped it off his finger and handed it to the boy. Scotty bowed his thanks. He folded the linen string in two and pushed the folded end through the ring. Then he took the two loose ends and put them through the looped end and pulled tight. The ring was now tightly held on the string. Holding to the loose ends, Scotty gave the tied ring to its owner to examine. The veiled man did so, testing to be sure the ring was on tight.

Scotty took the three ancient rings from Tony and slipped them over the loose ends, letting them fall against the ring secured to the string. Again Scotty held the assembly out to the veiled man, who tested it. There was no way the ancient rings could get over the silver one.

Letting the rings dangle, Scotty tied the two loose ends in a knot. He drew the smith back so that no one would be behind him, then put the big loop of string around his neck. He held up the rings so everyone could see they were still in place, then drew the string around until the rings dangled down the smith's back, out of sight of the audience.

Scotty held up both hands to show they were empty, then walked behind the smith. He bent, paused for a second, then brought his hands into sight again. The three ancient rings were on his palm. The audience gasped in pleasure, then broke into amused conversation. One of the Tuaregs stepped swiftly to the smith, pulled the cord around, then gazed at the silver ring-still tightly tied.

Scotty grinned. He turned the smith back again, went behind him, and returned to show hands empty. Then he lifted the string from around the smith's neck and held it out. The three ancient rings were back in place on the string!

The audience thought that was the greatest thing since the invention of camel saddles, and let him know it with drawn-out whistles. Scotty bowed graciously, removed the ancient rings, and handed them to Tony; then he untied the silver ring and returned it to its owner with a bow of thanks. He tucked the string in his pocket, turned, and sat down beside his gourd of milk and millet cakes and cheese. Unconcerned, he proceeded to finish his lunch. Rick and Tony joined him. The audience watched for a moment, then dispersed, convinced the show was over.

Rick stared at his pal with undisguised admiration. "Those were some tricks! Where on earth did you learn them?"

"It's nothing," Scotty said modestly. "A friend of mine showed them to me one night when I helped him put on a show. He calls himself 'Derek the Magician.'"

"You must have used both rings in the stick trick, but I didn't see you do it," Rick said. "The second one baffled me completely. How does it work?"

"We magicians," Scotty said loftily, "never tell our secrets. But I'll say this much. Both of them are so easy to do you'd be astonished. And, unless you happen to know I have two identical rings, they're both pretty baffling."

"I'm baffled," Tony admitted. "I'm also baffled about why you wanted cartridges. I got four."

"Same here," Rick added. "And I doubt that they'll miss them. There were gaps in both bandoliers in the back. Only the fronts were full."

"There's a clay pit where the smith gets clay right near the well," Scotty said. "And in the inner cave

there are some small glazed pots about the size of coffee cups. Put the two together with powder inside, and what do you have?”

“Bombs!” Tony exclaimed.

“A diversion,” Rick said. “Boy, there’s nothing like a military education, is there?”

“It comes in handy,” the ex-Marine admitted. “So this afternoon we make two bombs. The cord will serve for fuse after we’ve rolled it in a gunpowder paste and let it dry. We also make slings, and the cord will secure the leather thongs to the pouch. Tonight we can practice in the cave. I think the ceiling is just high enough to let us swing a sling.”

“Also tonight,” Tony said, “we stop by the well and help to fill goatskin water bags, as a gesture of good will and friendship. Apparently they fill the bags at night, and evaporation keeps them cool for morning use. We’ll be so helpful every bag will get filled.”

“And tomorrow night,” Rick concluded, “Escape Plan X goes into operation!”

CHAPTER XV

Plan of Action

There was a happy crowd at the well. While Rick and Tony helped to fill water bags, slaves and children urged Scotty with gestures and incomprehensible talk to show them some tricks.

Scotty obliged, and before long some of the adult Tuaregs came to watch. Rick watched, too, between turns at hauling up the bucket from the well. He was amazed at Scotty’s performance. With only the simplest of equipment, principally the linen cord, he put on an intriguing show.

The dark-haired boy held up the cord, swung it into a loop, and put it around his neck with the two ends dangling down the front of his now-tattered shirt. Then he pulled on the two ends and the cord dropped free. It looked exactly as though he had pulled it right through his neck without leaving a trace. The crowd approved with gasps of astonishment and high-pitched squeals.

Scotty tied an intricate knot in the cord, pulled, and the cord straightened out, unknotted. He snapped the cord like a whip and a knot appeared in the end. He tied two overhand knots in the cord, held it up, and the knots slowly undid themselves and the cord fell limp and straight.

Rick pulled his attention away from Scotty’s performance and counted the goatskin water bags. There were seventeen, all full.

Finally, the little boy with the bamboo cane held it out, and Scotty did the ring trick again. This one was best, the crowd signified. Scotty bowed, tucked the rings and string into his pocket, and returned the cane to the boy. The performance was over.

When the three wandered through the village they met friendly smiles on all sides. Even the eyes of the veiled men crinkled, showing that a smile existed under the dirty cloth.

“You can come on all my expeditions,” Tony said. “With entertainment like that, we can get diggers to work at half price.”

“Speaking of diggers,” Scotty replied, “we have to dig a little clay on the way back. Think it will arouse any suspicions?”

“If it does,” Rick suggested, “maybe you can do a trick with a ball of clay. If we’d only known you were a magician, you could have kept us entertained at Spindrif and we wouldn’t have needed to come to Africa.”

They reached the tent of the smith and stared in at the saddles. “How can we get three saddles?” Rick asked. That had been one of his principal worries.

A bareback escape would mean a man-killing ride.

“There must be other saddles around,” Tony said. “Think we’d attract unpleasant attention if we wandered toward the horse pen?”

“Let’s try.” Scotty turned and started back. Rick and Tony followed. The three paused now and then to exchange a smile with a slave or a Tuareg. They reached the end of the tent area and walked to the well, stopping to pull up a bucket of water and drink. Casual glances toward the tents showed no sign of interest in them. The goatskin bags were hanging from the pole racks around the well, and no one was nearby.

“All’s well so far,” Rick said. “Let’s keep going. But move toward that place Scotty spotted, where the smith gets his clay. We can all get a ball of it and toss them back and forth as though playing.”

The clay pit was on the edge of what was probably a stream bed in which no water had run since the last rainy season. The outer surface was dry, but the clay was fairly moist underneath, a sign that water was not far below ground. Of course they already knew that, from examination of the shallow well.

Each took a large handful of the clay, then continued the walk, shaping it as they went. Scotty kept an eye out to the rear, by tossing his ball into the air, then turning to catch it.

They were close to the horse pen, near enough to make out details, when Scotty said softly, “Company coming. Let’s play ball.”

Rick put his clay ball in a pocket and caught the one Scotty tossed. As he turned, he saw two Tuaregs walking toward them. The veiled men were not hurrying, but they weren’t sauntering, either. Apparently they had decided to check up on the trio.

Rick tossed Scotty’s ball to Tony. “Anyone see anything of interest?”

“Guard post,” Scotty replied, and caught the ball as Tony threw it. “Under that acacia tree near the cliff wall. Man there with a rifle. Behind him are a dozen saddles on a rail. Blankets, too, spread out on the grass. Probably drying.”

The Tuaregs drew near. Rick moved toward them to catch the ball, and grinned at the two. He whipped

the heavy ball at Scotty, who caught it, tossed to Tony, who threw it back to Rick.

One of the veiled men held out his hand. Rick walked over, smiling, and dropped the ball in his hand. He was tense inside. Would they consider it a weapon?

The Tuaregs examined it, then the one holding it suddenly tossed it back to Rick. It was an awkward throw, but Rick fielded it and tossed it back, being careful to make it a slow, easy toss. The Tuareg caught it by spearing the air with both hands, fumbling it, then recovering it again. Obviously, ball handling was not a part of the clan's culture.

The Tuaregs examined the ball again. Rick motioned that they were to keep it. The veiled men didn't understand. Rick caught the ball as it was tossed, then walked over and handed it to the nearest man with a bow, and a pointing finger.

This time the two understood. Eyes wrinkled above the veils. Gift accepted, with thanks. The two turned and started back toward the camp, and Rick fell in step. Scotty and Tony followed. When they reached the well, the three turned aside and had another drink. Rick and Tony soaked their balls of clay, making hollows in the balls, filling them with water, then folding the clay over the openings to keep the water inside.

The Tuaregs had gone back to their tents. The Spindrifters turned and took the path to their cave, pausing now and then to wave at someone who greeted them. They had been accepted as slaves of full status in the clan, Rick decided, thanks mostly to Scotty's tricks.

When they reached the cave, their pretense of casualness was discarded and they got busy. There was much to be done. Scotty broke open the cartridges by wedging the conical bullets between two heavy rocks, then bending them until the thin brass of the cartridge necks gave.

Rick prepared the two heavy mugs they had chosen for bombs by kneading his clay ball into plugs, leaving a funnel-shaped hole in the center.

Tony busied himself cutting goatskin ore bags into large squares. Fortunately, there were plenty of bags.

Scotty took out his linen string and soaked two short pieces in the tiny cup of water in Tony's clay ball. To the water he added the contents of two of the cartridges, then kneaded the string until it was saturated with the gunpowder mixture.

"You're getting some clay mixed in, too," Rick observed.

"No matter. It will act as a binder. Got a piece of shirttail you can spare?"

"What for?"

"We need to keep one ball of clay moist with damp cloth. The fuses will dry overnight, and tomorrow morning we can put the final plugs in the clay cups. That will give them until tomorrow night to dry hard."

The gunpowder-and-water mixture had dried to a thick black mud. Scotty put it aside to dry even more while he went to work on the slings. He was making two. Using the pieces of goatskin he had cut that morning, he passed leather thongs through slits in the edges of the pouches, and used the rest of the linen cord to tie them in place, whipping the ties securely.

Tony finished cutting the big pieces of goatskin and started making long strips. He had never used a sling, and there wasn't time to learn. He knew that unlike the rubber-powered modern slingshot, the ancient weapon takes a lot of practice before skill is developed.

As Scotty had predicted, there was room enough in their cave to practice. Rick took a sling, measured by holding it at his waist and letting the pouch drop to his feet, then he tied a loop in one free end and a figure-eight knot in the other.

Scotty and Tony got out of the way. Rick put a piece of stone in the pouch, slipped the loop over his middle finger, and took the knot between thumb and forefinger of the same hand. With his other hand he held the stone in the pouch, slightly higher than waist level,

"Here goes," he said, and let the pouch drop, at the same time starting it on its swing outward, away from his body, then in a high arc in back of his head and down. As the pouch reached the bottom of its swing, he put his weight in the throw, bringing the pouch over his shoulder as though serving a tennis ball. As the pouch came down in front of him, he released the knot held between thumb and forefinger. The rock flew like a bullet and shattered against the back wall of the cave, very close to where he had aimed.

"Haven't lost the touch," Scotty said approvingly. "Now let me try it."

Scotty hadn't lost the touch, either. But he shook his head. "If we're chased, we could probably keep them at a distance for a while with these, but there's only one way I can see they fit into this new plan."

"How?" Rick asked.

"To hurl our bombs. We can get nearly three hundred yards distance with missiles that heavy, which means we can throw them from a pretty safe distance. It will reduce our chances of being seen."

Tony looked up from his cutting. "That sounds good, Scotty. My worry is, how do we get the guards out of the way?"

Scotty shrugged. "First we have to be sure how many guards there are and where they're stationed. So far we've seen only one." He went over and checked his "fuse soup," decided it was thick enough, dunked the lengths of cord for the last time, then hung them to dry from cracks in the rock, wedging their ends in with bits of wood. He spread the residue of powder mixture on a scrap of goatskin and sat down next to Rick. "After dark, I'm going out and count the guards. I can figure a way of getting at them at the same time."

"I'll go with you," Rick offered.

"Thanks, ol' buddy, but I'd better go alone. It's easier for one to move in country like this than two. There isn't much cover."

"Scotty's right," Tony said. "Besides, he's the most skillful at this sort of thing. Now, while we're waiting, let's go over the plan again-in full detail. We can't afford to overlook anything. To begin with, we start by enlarging the opening to the old cave first thing in the morning."

For a few moments they debated the size opening needed, and how long it would take to close it again, then moved on to the remaining steps in the plan.

Rick found a weakness. He asked, "Have you seen any of the Tuaregs smoking? I haven't noticed."

“The boss smokes,” Tony said quickly. “I saw him with a trade cigar. A twist of black tobacco. Why?”

“We need a piece of it, or something like it, for punk. Otherwise, we’ll have to light the bombs from a torch. A cigar would just smolder.”

Scotty chuckled. “Okay. I never thought I’d ever be a smoker, but tomorrow I’ll use a trick to get us a piece of cigar-if the boss has another one.”

“You’d strangle if you tried to smoke,” Rick warned.

“Don’t worry. This will be a comedy gag. If it works, no one will notice that I got away with a piece of cigar. Tony will have to be the victim when we actually use it to light the bombs.”

They reviewed the plan again, made a few slight changes, then shook hands all around. It was the best they could do. Tony and Rick took turns slicing goatskin into long strips while Scotty, sprawled flat, watched from the mouth of the cave. Only when the last candle, torch, and oil light had gone out in camp did he stand and stretch. By then Rick and Tony had finished the cutting and had stored the supplies in a goatskin bag. Their own torch had burned out long ago, and they had finished the job by touch.

“See you in a while,” Scotty said, and melted into the darkness.

Rick and Tony waited. Rick had waited on many other occasions while Scotty reconnoitered. The ex-Marine was like a wraith in the darkness, able to move without sound, using bits of cover anyone with less skill would have avoided as too revealing.

It was at least an hour before Scotty returned. He appeared as silently as he had vanished and joined them in the cave.

“A cinch,” he said. “Guard at the horse pen, guard on the camels, and a guard at each end of the valley. The camel guard is rolled up in his blanket, fast asleep. The horse guard is sitting against the tree, and if he isn’t asleep, he will be. The other two are wide awake. They’re the real guards for the camp. One is a lookout, sitting on the rocks above the horse pen where he can see out over the desert. The other is guarding the defile that leads out of the valley near the camels.”

“Are they in sight of each other?” Rick asked.

“No. That’s the lovely part. None of them can see any of the others.”

Scotty outlined his plan in a few sentences, and Rick and Tony accepted it without question.

“Now,” Tony said, “let’s get some sleep. We’ll go over the plan once more in the morning, and be sure everything is in readiness.”

“Tomorrow night,” Rick stated, “we’ll be sweating it out. But the plan will work. Wait and see!”

CHAPTER XVI

Execute Plan X

Rick counted on his fingers. Bombs ready. The clay seals had dried during the day and the powder-filled mugs were airtight, or nearly so. Bag of goatskin squares and thongs ready. He looked out of the cave mouth and saw that one light remained on in the camp. Another hour at least before they could move.

He resumed counting. Hole in inner cave wall ready, with plenty of stone to close it up again. Food supply stored in inner cave. The food was dates, high in energy. They had filled their pockets each time they passed the chow tent.

There was really only one flaw in the plan. They had not located bridles. It was probably safe to assume that where there were saddles there were also bridles, but they didn't know. If, by some strange Tuareg custom, the bridles were not at the horse pen, they would have to make hackamores of rawhide, and the desert horses might balk.

The plan also ignored the big chance of being discovered, but there was nothing they could do about it. Some of the other caves were slave quarters, too, although most of the slaves lived in the tents with their masters. If one of the cave dwellers suffered from insomnia, he could pose a real problem.

Scotty and Tony were shadowy bulks in the faint starlight. Rick wondered how they could be so calm when he was tense, then decided he probably seemed calm to the others, too.

The lights in camp went out. Time passed, and Rick's tension grew with each passing moment. Now that he thought about it, the plan was pretty complicated. Many things had to work. Their assumptions had to be right, and they really didn't know enough about how the Tuaregs would react to be absolutely sure. For instance, they assumed no one would work the salt cave after they vanished, at least not for a day. But for all they knew, the salt might be needed desperately.

Rick resolutely squelched such thoughts. He stared from the cave mouth at the few stars that were visible through the harmattan wind. No moon until morning, fortunately.

After an interminable time, Scotty whispered, "Let's execute Plan X. Got everything?"

They were ready. Scotty led the way along the path toward the horse pen. Tony followed, with Rick bringing up the rear. The path was hard-packed, and it was easy to be silent.

They passed the camp, staying close to the cliff face. Scotty halted, and led them into a niche. "Stay here," he whispered, and was gone. Rick's ears strained to hear the sounds of struggle, or a cry of alarm from the horse guard. There was none. After an endless time Scotty reappeared and led them to the pen. Not until they were at the pen, well out of earshot of the camp, did he whisper. "The guard was asleep. He's awake now, but not complaining. I stunned him, tied and gagged him, and pulled a goatskin over his head. He's secure."

There were bridles attached to the saddles. Rick breathed a little easier, but inwardly he was still as tight as a guitar string. They worked slowly and carefully. There was no hurry, yet. Give the camp time to settle into deep slumber.

The pen was small, and the horses were used to handling. One by one they caught, bridled, and saddled

six, then wrapped their feet in goatskin squares, hair out, and lashed the skins in place with thongs.

When all was in readiness they dropped the bars of the pen, took three of the saddled horses out, and put the bars up again. Then, with Rick leading two horses and Scotty scouting ahead on foot, they walked slowly to the well and tied half the water bags to the saddles.

Rick was afraid one of the horses would nicker, and was ready to grab the beast's muzzle at the first sound. Now came the ticklish part. They led the horses up the path, fearful of making a noise. But the goatskins muffled the hooves perfectly, and it was a ghostly procession that moved through the darkness.

They reached the salt mine and turned in. Even the faint night glow was gone now, and they moved a foot at a time, Scotty in the lead. Tony and Rick kept a hand on the rump of the horse in front of them to keep from overtaking it in the darkness.

Not until they reached the inner cave was there a flicker of light. Tony had built a tiny fire in an ancient pottery bowl, and it was still glowing. One of the horses snorted at the scent in the cave, but it didn't matter now. They were safe-for the moment.

Rick secured his horse to a block of stone, then leaned against the warm shoulder, shaking with relief. But it was only temporary. Scotty whispered, "Let's go--"

Now it was all to do over again, but they had the confidence of first success. Rack to the pen they went, collected the three remaining saddled horses and the rest of the goatskin water bags. One of the horses started to nicker, but Scotty grabbed the beast's muzzle and whispered soothingly in its ear. In a surprisingly short time they were secure in the inner cave.

The security didn't last long. Tony remained in the cave, while Rick and Scotty parted at the entrance. Scotty headed toward the camel pasture while Rick went back to the horse pen.

Rick's ears were sharpened by the pervading silence. His footsteps sounded loud, but he knew they couldn't be heard more than a yard or two away. He walked on the balls of his feet, moving carefully. One of the horses greeted him with a low whinny. Rick put the bars down, slapped the horses on the rumps, and got them moving. They paused to forage outside the pen and he left them moving slowly, feeding as they went. He hurried back to the cave as rapidly as caution would allow. Scotty had not yet returned. Tony had spaced the horses around the inner cave and had put the water bags against one wall. He was just starting to fill in the entrance to the inner cave when Rick arrived.

Rick helped him stack blocks, leaving only enough of an entrance for the three. They were nearly done when Scotty arrived.

"The camel guard is tied up like a Christmas goose," Scotty reported. "He was sound asleep. He got the same treatment as the horse guard. Ready to smoke that cigar, Tony?"

"No," the scientist said. "I'm not ready, but I'll do it."

Scotty had obtained the cigar, as promised. He had prepared for the trick by cutting an inch off one of the fuses and wrapping it in a piece of cloth torn from his shirt, leaving one end of fuse sticking out. After performing a couple of tricks with another borrowed string and the rings, he had pantomimed borrowing a cigar from the boss, who had obliged.

Under pretext of lighting it from the cooking fire, Scotty had popped the prepared fuse into his mouth

and lighted the end. Pretending to inhale smoke from the cigar, he had blown hard through half-open lips, spewing out an extraordinary amount of smoke, sparks, and bits of burning cloth. The audience had laughed so hard no one noticed that he pocketed the cigar, because he had made a great fuss over drinking a gourd of goat's milk to put out the supposed fire.

By blowing outward very hard, no sparks had touched his flesh, and the cloth, moistened by a mouthful of milk just before the lighting act, had protected him completely. He explained that it was the oldest fire-eater trick in show business.

Now Tony had the cigar, and was actually lighting it. Rick and Scotty each had a bomb, and their slings.

Outside, they could see the shadowy shapes of the horses. The herd had reached the well, within sling range.

Rick took a deep breath. "Let's go," he whispered.

Tony held the cigar, shielded by cupped hands. The boys applied the fuses to the glowing end. The fuses began their slow sputter. The bombs were placed in sling pouches. Rick walked quietly toward the horses, Scotty toward the camels.

Rick kept his eye on the fuse. The timing was ticklish. If he let go too soon, the bomb would break without exploding when it hit the ground. If he held it too long, it would go off in his hand.

He reached the predetermined point, held the sling in throwing position, and kept his eye on the fuse. The sputtering string gave its own light. When it was a bare eighth of an inch from the clay he let the pouch go, and as the rapidly whirling sling came up behind him, he put his entire weight into the throw. Then he turned and hurried back to the cave.

The bomb arched high in the air. For a second the sputtering fuse was visible, then the glow ran into the clay plug. About fifty feet above the ground, the bomb exploded in a brilliant flash. The sound was louder than Rick had expected. Scotty had said it would be loud, because the old cartridges were loaded with fast-burning black gunpowder, of a kind no longer in use.

Over his shoulder Rick glimpsed the horses breaking into a panicky run as clay shards rained among them. He reached the cave, and in the same instant Scotty's bomb went off above the camels.

Scotty was on Rick's heels. The three fugitives hurried into the salt mine and proceeded to get into the inner cave, building up the blocks behind them. If they were truly lucky, no one would look in the cave for the next twenty-four hours. Slightly less lucky, and someone might glance in and not notice that one wall was a little peculiar. If unlucky-they would be trapped like rabbits in a box trap.

Time would tell!

CHAPTER XVII

The Fugitives

Rick, Scotty, and Tony moved cautiously to the mouth of the salt-mine cave and looked out. The camp was quiet. No lights were on anywhere. Scotty slipped from the cave and disappeared into the night. Rick and Tony hurried back to the inner cave and made final preparations for departure. Sleeping bags were rolled up and lashed behind the high pommels of the Tuareg saddles. The thongs lashing the precious water supply were checked.

The horses already had been watered. They would be fed on the trail, when the three passed from desert into grassland. If they didn't reach grassland, the Tuaregs who captured them would have to feed the mounts.

Final checking completed, Rick went back to the cave mouth and waited. The day had been a long one, with only fitful snatches of sleep. Unable to stay quietly in the inner cave, they had stolen out now and then to see what was going on. The bombs, plus stampeding horses and camels, had thrown the camp into an uproar. As they had figured, the speeding shapes in the darkness had caused the guard to assume the escaped slaves had gone by him.

With daylight, the few horses and camels that had stayed within the valley were saddled, and the Tuaregs went out to find the others. Water bags had been filled, and small parties had spread out to overtake the fugitives.

This was the heart of Plan X. Had they made a run for it as soon as the horses were ready, the speedy camels would surely have overtaken them. Now, with nearly all the veiled men out searching, they could literally walk out of camp and take an unlikely route, with a good chance of escaping detection. True, they might meet a search party returning, but it seemed probable that the searchers would continue the hunt for at least two days and perhaps more.

Anyway, Rick thought, he and his companions were committed. It was all or nothing. They would ride day and night, changing horses often, resting the mounts when necessary.

Scotty returned. "The camels they left are in the horse pen with a few horses. Guard there, and one up the valley from him. There was a guard on duty on the way out of the valley, but he won't bother us now. I've taken care of that. All else is quiet. Let's get going."

The goatskin pads were still on the horses' hooves. They led them outside the cave, then each Spin-drifter mounted, leading one horse by a long thong attached to its bridle. The spare horses carried most of the remaining water supplies, but each fugitive had a water bag slung from his saddle horn.

Scotty took the lead. They passed along the cliff front and took the trail leading out of the valley. They had agreed that an alarm would set them running.

As they went by a shelf at the end of the valley, Scotty whispered, "There's the guard. He's probably awake by now, but he won't be able to sound any alarm until his relief arrives and releases him."

Rick looked at the bundle on the rock shelf, a dim figure against the lighter color of the stone. "When does his relief come?"

"Don't know. Probably not for a few hours, and maybe not until morning."

They followed the trail for perhaps two miles, then dismounted and removed the pads from the horses' hooves. Camp was far enough behind so the noise wouldn't matter.

"How long before we get down from the mountains to the desert?" Tony asked. "If I remember correctly, it seemed like about a two-hour ride when they brought us in."

"That's about right," Rick agreed. "Can you see the path clearly enough, Scotty? It's pretty dark."

"I can see it sometimes, but the horse knows the trail, so I give him his head."

They mounted and started off, letting the mounts choose their own speed, a fast walk. The two-hour estimate proved about right, as far as they could tell without their wrist watches. They emerged from a rocky defile to the desert.

The Big Dipper and Polaris, the North Star, were faintly visible through the high dust layer of the harmattan. They took bearings, then struck out in a westerly direction. This was according to plan. The Tuaregs had not blindfolded them, and from the sun's position, they were able to tell that the veiled raiders had followed a course to the northwest to reach the camp. Logically, pursuers would expect them to head southwest when escaping, or at least south.

"Think they can track us?" Rick asked.

"Not on this stuff," Scotty replied. The desert was broken rock, difficult walking for the horses.

The moonrose finally, a pale crescent that shed little light. They plodded on, reached better ground where the sandstone had not broken up into a continuous rock pile, and picked up a little speed.

Daybreak found them in the midst of a seemingly endless plain. They paused, watered the horses very sparingly and drank themselves, then ate a few dates. A change of horses and they continued on, wrapping their heads in the cloths the Emir had provided and which the Tuaregs had returned to them along with toilet kits.

The sun rose and the harmattan ceased. The temperature mounted above 100 degrees in the shade-except that there was no shade.

When the flaming ball was overhead they stopped again, drank, changed mounts, and continued on. There was no other sign of life on the desert.

Sunset brought another stop and they paused to let the horses rest, and tried to doze for an hour or so without success. They were tired, but too tense to relax and sleep.

They mounted again as dusk fell. When Polaris became visible they took bearings and swung to the southwest. With luck, they had gone around the Tuareg search parties.

At first they conversed now and then, but as fatigue set in more acutely they fell silent, only the plodding footsteps of the horses breaking the desert silence. In the middle of the night they paused again, rested the horses and changed mounts, then pressed on.

By morning the character of the landscape was changing. Bits of vegetation appeared, and by mid-morning there was even a baobab tree. Butnoon found them in completely barren desert again.

When the cool of evening replaced the desert heat they stopped for nearly four hours, and each of them managed a little sleep. Because they were so exhausted even the sleeping bags failed to keep out the night chill.

Tony, who took the last watch, roused them when the stars told him it was about two in the morning. They saddled and mounted, shivering in the cold. The horses felt it, too, and worked up their own warmth by increasing the pace.

Aboutnoon , Rick, who was almost asleep in the saddle, was awakened by Scotty's exclamation:

"Dust! Ahead and to the west."

Rick looked up. A tiny pillar of dust rose into the air from something moving several miles away. He asked faintly, "Tuaregs?"

"The dust cloud is moving too fast," Tony answered. "I don't think it's made by horses or camels."

Scotty estimated quickly. "If we cut southeast we can intercept it. If it's a vehicle, it can't be the veiled men, and I doubt if it's the Emir."

The tired horses stirred themselves to a fast canter. Rick turned in the saddle and surveyed the way they had come. They had been going downhill on a very gradual slope, and as he looked, he saw more dust on the horizon.

"Someone behind us!" he called.

Tony and Scotty turned.

"That's about as much dust as we're making," Scotty said quickly. "Could be Tuaregs. Let's go!"

Rick dug his heels into his horse and the animal responded. The spare horse galloped along behind, water bags bouncing.

A two-mile run brought them to a wide trail marked by camel and horse droppings and even a slight oil slick.

"Caravan trail," Tony announced. "It must be. I'm surprised we haven't crossed one before. The vehicle must be on it."

Scotty looked back at the dust cloud that might be caused by Tuaregs. It hadn't drawn appreciably closer. "We can wait and see."

The faster-moving dust cloud in the west was nearer to them, and in a short time they could see that it was made by a truck of some kind. As the trio drew closer, Rick identified it as a British Army lorry of a kind he had seen around Kano .

Instead of slowing down as it approached, the truck speeded up. It had high board sides in the back, and a single occupant, a black driver who crouched over his wheel and gave the lorry all the gas it would take.

The truck slewed around them so close the horses reared with alarm, then it was gone down the trail.

CHAPTER XVIII

Freedom Road

Before Rick could even let out a yell, the truck's brakes locked and it slid to a stop in a whirling cyclone of dust, then backed up at high speed until the cab was even with them.

A smiling black face looked out and called the Hausa greeting, "Sannu, batures ! I thought you were Buzos until I got close. What you do out here?"

"We're escaping from the Buzos," Tony answered. "Where are we?"

"In the desert east from Timboulaga."

Rick turned and looked at the dust cloud behind them. It was much nearer.

"Could you take us to the nearest town?" Tony asked "We must get transportation to Kano or Sokoto."

The driver considered. "Sokoto nearest. But who knows if there is transportation?" White teeth flashed in a smile. "Not so many taxis for Americans in Niger."

Rick had an inspiration. The comment was that of a well-traveled man. "Are you a Hausa trader?" he asked.

"Who else travels the caravan path alone?"

Rick looked up into the smiling face. "Talata Dan-kali said if we met a Hausa trader we were to say that he asks help for us."

The man let out a high squeal, a typical Hausa expression of astonishment. "Dankali! The potato who was born on Tuesday? You are his friends?"

"Yes," Rick replied. "We traded with him in Kano."

"Then you are my friends. I will take you to Sokoto. I am Alhamis Lango." He peered out the cab window at the approaching dust cloud. "To take you, I must turn around and go back. So the veiled ones who are coming will be able to meet us on the path if we do not hurry. What will you do with the animals?"

"Leave them for the Buzos," Tony replied promptly.

"Then leave them, but bring the water. I have only enough for one. Put the skins in the back. One rides with me. Two in the back. Have you weapons?"

“None.”

“Then hide under the coconuts. We will pass close enough for them to shoot with rifles.”

The water bags were unlashed and tossed into the rear of the truck. Tony climbed into the front and the boys got into the back among sacks of coconuts the trader was bringing inland from the seacoast, and bags and boxes of assorted goods. “Ready!” Scotty yelled.

The lorry turned so fast they had to grab for support, then straightened out on the trail. Alhamis Lango put the accelerator to the floorboard and the ancient vehicle responded like a Grand Prix racer.

The boys watched as the dust cloud marking the veiled men changed direction to intercept them. For a moment or two they estimated relative speeds, then Scotty muttered, “It’s going to be close!”

“They’ll be shooting from camelback,” Rick said, with more reassurance than he felt. “Unsteady platform. Only luck could give them a hit.”

Scotty felt in his pocket and pulled out his sling. “We might be lucky, too. Still got yours?”

“Sure.” Rick produced it. “But what do we use for rocks?”

Scotty pointed to the sacks. “Monkey missiles.”

Coconuts!

Rick let out a whoop of delight, then leaned forward to assure the driver and Tony he hadn’t meant to sound an alarm. He added, “We’ve just bought a sack of coconuts. Going to use them for slingstones.”

Tony had long ago stopped being surprised at any innovation dreamed up by the team of Brant and Scott. He merely said, “Good shooting.”

Rick and Scotty got busy restacking boxes so each would have secure footing on which to stand.

“We’ll have to alternate,” Scotty said. “Otherwise, we’ll bean each other on the backstroke. You start, then duck to reload. We’ll go up and down like pogo sticks.”

The distance closed rapidly. They could see the veiled men clearly now, riding saddles placed ahead of the camels’ humps. The camels were Maharis, and Rick was astonished at their ground-eating pace, even though Tony had said they were fast. The camels seemed to skim over the ground with long strides, like a pacer. They would be a steadier gun platform than he had thought.

The Tuaregs were perhaps a half mile away now, cutting across at a sharp angle to intercept the truck. There were four of them, rifles held ready, veils blowing in the speed of their pursuit.

The distance closed to about two hundred yards, and Rick saw flame blossom from a rifle muzzle. He waited for the impact of the bullet on the truck, but there was none. The rider had missed.

He took a coconut from the bag Scotty had opened, placed it in the sling pouch, and waited.

All four riders shot. All four missed. Rick estimated distance and speed, and let the pouch go. The coconut was as heavy as the bombs had been. He put his weight into the throw and saw the coconut sail

over the riders' heads. He had judged the speed, but not the distance. He ducked and grabbed another coconut, placing it in the sling pouch.

Scotty fired, judged distance correctly, but not the speed. The coconut passed behind the riders.

Rick jumped up again. They were closer, and firing! He thought he heard the pop of a passing bullet, but held steady and swung the sling. Close! The coconut missed the lead camel by a hair. The beast swerved.

Then the Tuaregs were too close for slings. The boys started hurling coconuts like miniature footballs. Now and then a rifle bullet slammed into the truck, and one splintered the board side a foot from Rick's thigh.

Scotty scored a hit on a camel's outstretched neck. The beast leaped violently, unseating its rider. "I aimed for the rider!" Scotty yelled ruefully.

Then Rick got a lucky hit, beaming one of the veiled men and knocking him into the dust. He had aimed for the camel.

The truck had the advantage of speed. It began to pull away, and the Tuaregs fell in behind it, still firing. A coconut exploded from a rifle bullet just as Scotty bent to pick it up. Another slug struck a jute bag and rice began to spill from the hole.

As the distance between the truck and the Tuaregs widened, the boys went back to slings again, taking turns. Rick aimed one at the lead rider's head and hit his mount in the knee. The Mahari folded its knees and pitched the rider over its head. The camels behind it plowed into the fallen mount, and in a brief second the view of struggling camels and veiled riders was obscured in a thickening cloud of dust. They were free!

The boys shook hands solemnly. Rick had a sudden thought. His sister Barby hated to have him give her a wild, kidding answer when she asked a question.

"Barby's going to ask 'What excitement did you have in Africa?' And I'll answer Well, there was the time Scotty and I were chased by Tuaregs. We stopped them by throwing coconuts." He grinned, and Scotty grinned back.

"She won't speak to you for a week," Scotty told him.

Rick doubled up with laughter.

CHAPTER XIX

A Call on the Emir

Four Hausa men sped across the savanna in a borrowed Land Rover with six spare gas cans lashed to

its frame. The sun was setting behind the vehicle and there were still several miles to go.

Rick, his face as black as Alhamis Lango's from a liberal application of stove blacking, drove. The real Hausa man sat beside him, giving directions. They were not on a road of any kind. The trader was taking them a roundabout way that, he assured them, would bypass the Emir's patrols.

Scotty and Tony, their faces jet with polish, were in the back seat. The polish wouldn't have fooled even a young child, because it takes more than color to change faces into convincing replicas of a different race. The coloring of the white of the eye differs, and is not changeable. The set of facial muscles differs from culture to culture and is not easily altered. The three knew all this. Their disguises were intended to deceive only from a distance, or in darkness.

Alhamis Lango had undertaken to guide them to within easy walking distance of the Emir of Kano's house. Beyond that he would not go. His reason was that for a Hausa trader to side with anyone against anyone else would be to bar doors to all Hausa traders. When the Hausas fought, they fought together in a common cause. At other times, they remained strictly neutral. Guiding the Americans was all right. Aiding them was not.

As dusk fell, the Land Rover mounted the crest of a rise and rolled into a valley. Rick reached a grove of neem trees and the Hausa trader said, "We stop here."

Rick braked to a stop and switched off the motor. The four climbed out of the vehicle and stretched. "How far to the Emir's?" Rick asked. "And in what direction?"

Alhamis pointed due east. "There. A little more than two kilometers. We eat now, and by the time we are through, you can start. When you arrive, all should be quiet."

Dinner was sandwiches washed down with Fanta, with a bar of candy for dessert. They finished with a long drink of water-they couldn't seem to get enough water in their bodies to be satisfied for long- then began to check equipment.

The Hausa man had delivered them to Sokoto, where the Sultan had made them welcome, furnished them with new clothes and a decent bed, and listened to their tale. "We must get your equipment back for this demonstration," the aged religious leader agreed. "But how? The Emir's main house where you were enslaved is probably in Niger. To go through diplomatic channels would take weeks, even months. If I could persuade the Emir of Kano -or some other Nigerian Emir to send a force of men with you-it would certainly mean war between that Emir and Kano, and it might even mean war between Nigeria and Niger. At least it would be an international incident."

The three conferred, then Tony spoke for all of them. "Give us a vehicle, weapons, and a guide, and we will get our own equipment back without official involvement."

The Sultan agreed. "That I can do."

The expedition was the result. Under the Hausa robes each of the three had a flashlight, pistol, and knife, and there were carbines for each with extra magazines. They had also prepared a rope ladder with a large steel cargo hook secured to one end. The rest of their equipment was a change of clothes, to black robes and turbans.

It was long after dark when they stopped at the high fence surrounding the Emir's house. They had approached it from the back. Examination through cracks showed no lights on. They were practically

invisible in the black robes and turbans.

Rick put his carbine on the ground and took the rope ladder, holding the hook in position to grip the top of the fence. Scotty and Tony hoisted him high and he secured the hook, letting the ladder unroll. The two let him down and he swung his carbine over his shoulder by its sling. Scotty was already up the ladder. He swung over and dropped. Tony followed. Rick went up the swaying ladder, straddled the top and pulled the ladder after him, reversing it so it hung inside. He went down and joined the other three.

They worked smoothly, according to plan. Rick un-slung his carbine and gripped it, then moved to the left. Tony followed. Scotty went around to the right. They weren't certain where the guard would be.

Rick rounded the house corner and paused. Nothing moved in the darkness. He continued down the side of the house, peered around the corner, and drew back. The guard was sitting at the corner, smoking a pipe.

Rick drew a deep breath, gripped his carbine tightly, stepped swiftly around the corner, then struck with the barrel. The guard pitched forward without a sound. Rick bent over him. He was breathing unsteadily, and starting to stir. The blow had only stunned him. There wasn't time to be merciful. Rick struck again and the man went limp. A quick check of his wrist pulse showed he was only unconscious. By the time he came to they would either be successful or ...

Rick kept moving and saw Scotty as a moving shadow. They moved together to the main door, Tony close behind. It had an old fashioned pull-up latch.

Scotty worked it and the door swing open with a faint squeak.

Inside the house they moved slowly, fearful of knocking something over. Scotty led the way to the Emir's chambers, across his "throne room," to the doors in the rear. There were three. They listened at each one in turn. The third brought sounds of heavy, masculine breathing.

The door was ajar, the bed faintly visible because of a white covering. They moved to it like shadows. Tony took up guard position at the door while the boys bent over the bed.

Within seconds, the Emir of Kernel awoke with a needle-sharp Nigerian dagger pricking his throat and a flashlight beaming into his bulging eyes.

"One move and you're dead," Scotty said briskly.

The Emir's dry lips formed two words: "The Americans."

"That's right," Rick told him. "We've come for you and our equipment. If anyone comes, tell them to make no hostile moves. From now on, at least two pistols will be pointed at you. One wrong move and you die first."

From across a connecting door came a shrill scream. One of the Emir's wives, a light sleeper, had awakened.

Rick covered the Emir with cocked pistol and light. "Remember," he warned. "Tell your people that your life depends on their good behavior."

A guard crashed in through the door and Tony dropped him with a swing of his carbine. Then Elijah

leaped into a butt stroke from Scotty and went down across the guard.

“Yell it out!” Rick snapped. “Quick, if you want to live!”

The Emir shouted in his native dialect, and the screaming and clatter outside stopped as though someone had shut off a radio.

Three pistols and lights covered the Emir. “Get dressed,” Tony ordered. “Where is our jeep and equipment?”

“Suppose I don’t tell you?” the Emir asked dryly.

Tony answered calmly, “Only a fool talks like that to men as desperate as we are, and you’re not a fool. Where is it?”

“In a dry wash a half mile north of here.”

“Lead us to it,” Tony said.

The Emir dressed quickly while the three waited, ready to fire instantly if necessary. Elijah stirred and sat up, rubbing his battered face. He sized up the situation instantly, and spoke to the Emir in the dialect.

“Speak English only,” Rick ordered harshly.

“Very well. I said to my master that he need not fear, that his people would follow and die for him if need be.”

“But he will die first,” Tony stated. “Keep that in mind. Stay away from us or he gets it first. You’ll try to follow us. We don’t mind that, unless you get too close. Is that clear?”

“Quite,” Elijah said dejectedly.

“They will not harm me,” the Emir said coolly, “if we do as they say. The wheel will spin and it will be our turn. Until then, obey them.” He turned to his captors. “Follow me. I will take you to the equipment.”

Tony stepped into the lead and the people outside the door made room for him to pass. Rick and Scotty walked on either side of the Emir, cocked pistols held tightly against his side. Once clear of the house, they moved beyond arm’s reach, but continued to keep him covered. The Emir led them to the gate near the groundnut fields, across the fields, through a grove of acacia and into a shallow gully. The jeep and trailer were there.

“Sit down,” Rick directed. He kept the Emir covered while Scotty checked the equipment on the trailer and Tony tried to start the jeep. It ground painfully a few times, then the engine caught

“Equipment’s all here,” Scotty said. “Only my rifle is missing. I hope everything is still in working order.”

“It better be,” Rick said flatly, “for the Emir’s sake.”

Scotty got into the rear seat of the jeep, flashlight and pistol ready.

“The front seat,” Rick directed the Emir, and kept the pistol on him until he was seated. “Your men

brought us to you in this jeep,” Rick told the Emir. “They lashed us to the seat and blindfolded us. We won’t blindfold you.”

While Scotty held his pistol to the back of the Emir’s head, Rick lashed his wrists to the seat frame. He tested the bonds, then climbed into the back.

Tony turned on the jeep lights and put it into gear. They climbed out of the gully and headed toward the grove where the Hausa trader waited.

Rick was exultant. They had the Emir, but more important, they had the equipment. And the demonstration was still a few days away.

CHAPTER XX

Signal from Sokoto

The laser was mounted on its heavy tripod, looking like a cross between a cannon and a lunch box. From the top of the container a “sunflower” antenna raised its dish to the sky. From the street in front of the Sultan’s ancient mansion where the laser was located, a heavy power cable ran to the pole where the boys had tapped into the Sultan’s power line. An extension from the Sultan’s telephone had been brought into the street, terminating in a mouthpiece-earphone set worn by Scotty.

An interested and colorful crowd surrounded the setup, but at a respectful distance. The Sultan sat in a comfortable chair and watched with interest. Next to him, also comfortably seated, was the Emir of Kernel. Behind the two chairs were the Sultan’s guards, erect and watchful.

Rick Brant, waiting with headset on, turned and grinned at the Emir. “Remember we said you could watch if you turned over our equipment and came with us to Sokoto? We keep our promises.”

The Emir shifted, to ease his weight from a bruise left by the jeep ride. “I remember. However, the circumstances are not quite what I expected.”

Tony Briotti, who was working a camera borrowed from the Sultan, called suddenly, “Watch it!”

Elijah and Red Turban had just appeared at the crowd’s edge! They had followed the Spindrifters to Sokoto.

The Emir called to them in Hausa. Elijah, his bruised face scowling, answered.

“I told them to stand quietly and watch,” the Emir explained. “Violence in the presence of the Sultan would be unthinkable.”

Scotty held up a hand for silence. “Ready. Rick, coordinates coming.”

Rick gripped the handles that would point the laser. Once pointed, the antenna would pick up a radio

beam from the satellite and the whole system would be “slaved” to the beam, automatically following the satellite’s motion.

“Azimuth 281 degrees, eighteen minutes and three seconds,” Scotty called.

Rick repeated the figures, turning the handle that pointed the laser to the northwest. When the marks on the azimuth circle were set properly, he called, “Set on azimuth.”

Scotty spoke to Parnell Winston in Lagos. “Azimuth set.” He listened, then called to Rick, “Elevation 39 degrees, four minutes.”

Rick repeated it, turning the handle that tilted the laser skyward. The beep-beep-beep of the satellite’s radio signal sounded in his earphone and grew louder as he cranked. He adjusted the settings until the sound was at maximum volume, then threw the switch that slaved the laser to the signal. “Locked on and tracking automatically,” he reported.

Scotty threw a switch on the opposite side of the laser. “Switching to laser operation.” He watched the pulse on the face of a miniaturized oscilloscope, then threw a second switch. The radio beep in Rick’s phones cut out.

“Go,” Scotty said.

Rick took a deep breath. “Mobile Unit Five calling Andover. Do you read?”

The answering voice sped from Earth Station One at Andover, Maine, to the satellite hanging 22,300 miles above the Azores and was relayed to Rick. “Your signal is five by five, Mobile Five. You’re coming in like a local call. How are things in Africa?”

“Just fine,” Rick answered with a wry grin.

Scotty was standing by, also plugged into the circuit now, chronometer in hand. He said, “Time check, please.”

“Roger, Mobile Five. In fourteen seconds the bell will signal 1321 hours and thirty seconds Zebra.”

That was twenty-one and a half minutes past one, Greenwich time, and the same minutes and seconds past three in the afternoon, local time. Rick figured quickly. It was past nine in the evening of the following day on the island of Jolo. He watched as Scotty set the chronometer and prepared to start it.

The Andover voice counted, “Five, four, three, two, one, Mark!” The bell came on “Mark,” and Scotty started the chronometer.

It was almost nine minutes before the Sultan was due to speak. Scotty counted up to thirty seconds and gave Andover “Mark” at 1322 Zebra time.

“On the button,” Andover said. “Incidentally, Mobile Five, we have a large group from Spindrift in the observation room listening in. They can’t talk to you, but they can hear you. There are two excited, very pretty girls in the group. Anyone you know?”

The boys chuckled. “Hi, Jan! Hi, Barby!” Rick said, and Scotty echoed him.

“They each blew you a kiss,” Andover said. “Or maybe those were intended for me. . . . Nope. They shook their heads. Guess I’m not lucky. Mobile Five, we will connect you through to Mobile Nine in Jolo in exactly one minute for test.”

“Roger, Andover,” Rick said. Then he said quickly, “Listen, Andover, a special request. While we’re testing with Nine, have someone phone Roger C. McCauley, president of International Vegetable Oils Exchange Corporation in New York. This is urgent. Ask him if he fed pork hot dogs to the Emir of Kernel. I’ll repeat that.” He repeated, then waited.

“Will try, Five. Now stand by for Mark.”

On the dot, Andover gave the go-ahead and Rick checked the circuit with Mobile Unit Nine on the island of Jolo in the Sulu Sea. It was an island he knew from a previous expedition. The Sultan of Sulu was standing by, Mobile Nine said, and the voice traveled from Jolo to the Syncom satellite 22,300 miles above the Central Pacific, to Andover, to the Atlantic satellite, to Rick, with only the faintest background noise. There was a slight delay in response time because of the distance the signal traveled, but not enough to interfere with conversation. Both Sultans had been briefed on the time lag.

When the test was finished, Andover cut in. “Mobile Five, we got Mr. McCauley in his automobile on the way to the office. It was lucky he had a car phone. We taped his answer. Shall we play it now?”

Rick had a hunch. He couldn’t believe the executive had fed pork to the Emir, and he was sure the reply would prove it. “Scotty,” he said swiftly, “give your headset to the Emir.”

Scotty stepped to the Emir’s side and held the earphone to the potentate’s ear.

“Go ahead, Andover,” Rick said.

“This is McCauley,” the voice said. “Who asked?” There was a brief pause. “Tell your African unit that I most certainly did not feed pork to the Emir of Kernel. This is ridiculous! I personally bought beef hot dogs for the party at a Kosher store so there would be no chance of accidentally serving the wrong kind.”

Rick watched the Emir’s face. His eyes opened wide, then closed tight. The Emir slumped in his chair.

“Thanks, Andover,” Rick said. “Thanks a million! You have just saved Muslim-Christian good relations. Mother, Dad, everyone, we’ll tell you the story when we get home.”

“Message received,” Andover said. “The two charmers in the front row look puzzled.”

Rick grinned. “Wait until they hear how we threw coconuts at Tuaregs from the back of a mammy wagon.”

Andover replied after a moment, “The blond one just held a note up to the glass, saying, ‘Wait until we get you home!’” Then, “Stand by, Mobile Five. The talk between the two Sultans will be announced from Washington. You will not hear the announcement. The Sultan at your end will give the initial greeting at precisely 1330 Zebra time. Stand by for a time check.”

While Scotty checked time, Rick moved to where the Sultan and the Emir sat. “You will speak first, sir,” he reported. “Mr. Scott will give you the signal.” He looked at the Emir, who met his eyes.

“What can I say?” the Emir asked. “Who except an American would be expected to know that all-beef

frankfurters were available in America ? I wanted to believe you, but I could not. Is there any way I can make amends?"

Tony Briotti spoke up. "Yes. You can send an emissary to the Tuaregs who took us from you and arrange a truce. Then you can mount an expedition to take us back there. We made an archaeological find that must be properly explored and documented. After that, you can escort us to our original destination in Kernel."

"It will be done," the Emir said.

Rick smiled at Tony; then, at Scotty's signal, took off his headset and placed it on the Sultan's head.

"Ready, Andover," Scotty said. He held up his hand.

Complete silence fell as the seconds ticked away.

Rick was delighted that his family and the Spindrift group had gone to Andover to listen in, and he smiled to himself, imagining Barby's and Jan's reaction to the mysterious hints that meant another adventure.

Scotty's hand dropped.

"In the name of the Prophet, I greet my brother of the True Faith from across the world," the aged Sultan began, "and I pray that Allah will bless his days and his works."

From over halfway around the world, the Sultan of Sulu answered while Scotty monitored and Rick and Tony watched.

Rick lifted his face to the sky. The harmattan was not blowing today, and the sky was crystal clear. A brief trip back to the Tuareg camp, to the Kernel site, and then home. It would be good to eat his mother's cooking, to sleep in his own bed, to look out from the Brant front porch after dinner at the great expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, maybe spinning tall and not-so-tall yarns about Africa to Jan and Barby.

This would happen. But soon after, the lives of Jan, Barby, and Rick would hang on a slender column of fire—a tale to be told in the next Rick Brant Science-Adventure: ROCKET JUMPER.

THE END

THE VEILED RAIDERS

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY, No. 20

BY JOHN BLAINE