

Chapter I

At noon on March ninth, a dump-truck loaded with coarse gray gravel bumped south through a haze of dust and sunlight. The road, narrow and pot-holed, seemed to cut the visible universe into halves: life on one hand, death on the other. To the right were vistas, areas and masses of verdure, in a thousand sunlit shades of green: feather-green date palms, sea-green tamarisk, truck gardens, plots of emerald alfalfa. To the left spread the desert, hot and dreary, sprinkled with black flints.

Noel Hutson drove the truck, a fair-skinned young man with mouse-brown hair, a rather dandified mustache, a tolerant happy-go-lucky expression. Beside him, leaning forward on the edge of the seat, sat Habdid el Kazim, square-faced, narrow-eyed, thick-set and powerful. A curious thin beak of a nose protruded from otherwise flat features; black stubble blurred the lower half of his face. He wore a homespun brown djellaba with the hood thrown back, and at his hip hung a dagger, with a silver-inlaid handle in a silver scabbard shaped like a fish-hook.

The two men had been riding together for fourteen hours, accepting each other's presence with neither hostility nor cordiality. Habdid el Kazim spoke a hundred words of English; Noel Hutson knew a single word of Arabic: *la*, which meant 'no'. Neither knew the other's name.

The road presently swung into the palm grove. After a mile Habdid el Kazim jerked up his hand: "Slow." He looked up

and down the road: no vehicles in sight. He pointed. "Turn through there."

Noel twisted the steering wheel. The truck lurched into the shallow roadside ditch, groaned up the hummock opposite, scraped between a pair of palm trees. El Kazim indicated a track leading off across a carpet of rank salt grass. In low gear they rumbled through the grove, past irrigation ditches, low walls of adobe brick, thickets of tamarisk. Palms of random size and character rose over them, some tall and lordly, others squat, with great unruly heads; most erect, a few twisted and leaning.

El Kazim sat rigid on the edge of the seat. Once, when the wheels slid in mud, Noel gunned the motor: el Kazim made an urgent motion. "The French." His face split in a nervous grin, showing a row of gold teeth. He pointed through the trees. "Two kilometers, no more. Soldiers."

Noel thereafter drove as quietly as possible. The trees thinned; ahead appeared a typical kasbah of the region, a village behind walls thirty feet high, with corner watchtowers, a heavy timber gate. El Kazim motioned Noel to a halt and jumped to the ground. Beside the track stood a sentry; the two conferred. The sentry spoke into an army-type field telephone, listened, gave a signal to proceed. El Kazim climbed back into the cab, jabbed his forefinger toward the kasbah. "We must go fast."

Noel worked the balky gearshift: compound-low, low, second; the Diesel roared and chattered. El Kazim fluttered his fingers nervously. "Fast, fast." Noel thrust his foot down on the accelerator; the truck roared along the road. The timber gate opened, the truck entered a large compound, the gate swung shut.

Noel brought the truck to a smart halt, switched off the

engine. He opened the door, stepped out on the running-board. Sunlight stung his damp skin. Three- and four-story mud dwellings, similar to the pueblos of Arizona, surrounded the courtyard—masses of rectangular blocks and planes, penetrated by tunnel-like passages. A caravan had either just arrived or was about to leave: across the courtyard stood a dozen camels, with nearby a heap of saddles, panniers, ropes and straps. An odor of urine, decay, wet straw and smoke of smouldering fires filled the courtyard. Noel pursed his lips in distaste, eased back into the shade of the cab.

A number of men and boys wearing ragged smocks approached to stare in fascination. Noel grinned, gave them a debonair salute. They stared as before, making no response. Noel climbed up into the driver's seat, and ignored them.

Habdid el Kazim, crossing the courtyard, had curtly embraced a hard-faced man wearing a smart gray djellaba and a red fez: urban clothes, as incongruous to the kasbah as Noel's sun-tans. The man in the gray djellaba was slender and fine-boned, taller than the stocky Habdid, but with the same curious thin wedge of a nose, like a parrot's beak. Another man, short, fat, wearing a nondescript uniform, joined them; the three spoke earnestly. The short fat man jerked his head toward one of the larger buildings, discussing someone not in evidence. Both Habdid el Kazim and the man in the gray djellaba shook their heads decisively, and the short fat man nodded in vindication, as if his side of an argument had been upheld.

Noel watched without interest. Habdid el Kazim hardly seemed a romantic figure; the kasbah was no more than a smelly little village. Thirteen more trips—unless Arthur Upshaw rented another truck, or hired another driver.

Unlikely, thought Noel. If it weren't for the money. . . He slumped back against the leatherette cushion, drummed his fingers on the black rim of the steering wheel. Not too much money, in view of what Upshaw would be making. Well, he had had the experience, and that was what counted.

Across the courtyard the three men had reached a decision. The fat little soldier marched forward. He barked orders, clapped his hands. Men and boys swarmed up into the bed of the truck. Noel descended to the ground, leaned against the hot front fender to watch. The gravel was brushed aside; wooden cases strapped with metal bands were tilted up on end, slid to the ground. At once they were attacked and broken open. The little officer bellowed in anger, herded his crew back to work.

The truck was presently free of its cargo. There were ten crates containing two thousand Mauser pistols, each in a cardboard box complete with trilingual instruction booklet, flask of oil and bristle brush; twenty-four crates of submachine guns, sealed in transparent plastic sacks, six to the crate; thirty cases of nine-millimeter ammunition.

Now, in spite of the officer's expostulations, the group fell on the crates like wolves tearing at a carcass. Noel's interest became revulsion. He shifted his gaze, reassuring himself with reasonable and well-tried assertions. If I don't earn the easy money, someone else will. If the French have a right to weapons, so do the Algerians. He leaned nonchalantly on the fender, cleaning his fingernails with a straw.

The tribesmen swarmed around the crates. They waved aloft the pistols, shouting and calling to each other, tucking one and sometimes two into their ragged garments. The fat man in the army uniform stalked forward and back, calling

futile orders which no one heeded. Noel watched the scene with amused detachment: none of his business, he merely drove the truck. He examined his fingernails, which were now clean. His detachment wore thin. He darted a frowning glance across the courtyard. In Tangier a truckload of weapons was a romantic abstraction, symbolic of adventure and excitement. Some day, in circles far removed, he could hark idly back to "the time I worked running guns out of Tangier. Drove south through Morocco, back of the Atlas, out to a little desert fort on the Algerian border . . ." But now the guns were visible, ugly and black, ready to be discharged into the bodies of young Frenchmen. Noel turned away. Thirteen more loads? Not for me. He climbed sourly back into the cab, displeased with himself, anxious to depart.

Something had changed. The babble in the courtyard quieted. Noel looked around. A tall old man in a white djellaba had appeared. He wore a white turban; a jeweled dagger hung at his waist. His eyes were bright gray, his features lean and austere. He gazed at the plundered crates, called out wrathfully. The babble in the courtyard died completely. The sheikh—such he evidently was—spoke again, holding up his clenched fist. Sullenly, with foot-dragging reluctance, the tribesmen sidled close to the crates. Furtive hands went into garments, came out holding pistols. The short man in the uniform busily stowed the guns back into the crates; the men and boys of the kasbah backed away, glum with disappointment.

The patriarch watched grimly. He gave another order; Habdid el Kazim and the man in the gray djellaba turned about sharply. The little soldier stared in new annoyance.

The patriarch was obeyed. Men went into the building,

brought forth four cardboard cartons, which they carried to the rear of the truck. The round-faced man in uniform ran forward, protesting. The patriarch made a small gesture; the soldier's voice broke off in mid-sentence. Two men climbed up into the bed of the truck; the cartons were handed up.

Noel jumped out of the cab, stepped up on the frame, looked back into the bed. The cartons, according to the red and blue label, contained soap powder. Soap? Disconcerting. Awkward. Highly awkward. Noel called across the courtyard to the sheikh. "What's this? I don't know anything about this stuff."

No one heeded him. Habdid el Kazim and the man in the gray djellaba both were voicing vehement objections. The sheikh listened impassively. When they had finished he spoke a curt sentence. The discussion was closed. Habdid el Kazim and the man in the gray djellaba abruptly turned away, walked out into the courtyard. They spoke together for several minutes, glowering toward the sheikh. Habdid el Kazim threw up his hands in fatalistic acceptance of the situation. He patted the man in the gray djellaba on the cheek, strode across the courtyard to the truck. He climbed in the cab. "We go now, back to Tangier."

Noel jerked his head toward the rear of the cab. "What are we carrying?"

Habdid el Kazim turned his head, inspected Noel as if seeing him for the first time. Noel forced himself to meet the glitter of the eyes. Habdid el Kazim settled himself in the seat, made a circling motion with his hand. "Turn the truck."

Grumbling under his breath Noel started the motor, backed up with a jerk, cut the truck around in vicious swerves that expressed his frustration. He was anxious to leave the hot and

foul-smelling kasbah. But the four cases of—soap?

The gate swung open; Habbid el Kazim thrust his forefinger ahead. "We go. Fast."

Noel hesitated. It had to be now. Now or never . . . But what could he do? He raced the motor, let it idle, looked angrily sidewise at Habbid el Kazim. "I don't drive unless I know what I'm driving."

Habbid el Kazim looked at him in surly surprise.

"I'm working for Arthur Upshaw," declared Noel. "He said nothing about a return load."

Habbid el Kazim pointed ahead. "We take to Arthur Upshaw. Fast now, until to the trees. The French are close."

Noel irresolutely shifted into low, engaged the clutch. "Faster, faster!" grated el Kazim. From inside his djellaba he pulled one of the Mauser pistols. Out the gate the truck rolled, bouncing and rattling across the open space. El Kazim snapped out the magazine, charged it with cartridges.

They gained the shelter of the palms; el Kazim waved his hand to the sentry, motioned Noel to proceed. "Now, back to Tangier."

Noel shook his head sulkily. "I've been driving all night, I'm tired."

"We must go to Tangier. It is necessary."

Noel jammed down the accelerator; the truck careened through the palms. El Kazim braced himself in the seat, half-grinning, half-scowling, the gold teeth shining through his lips.

Fifty yards short of the intersection el Kazim ordered a halt. He went ahead to look up and down the road. Noel stepped out on the running-board, climbed up on the frame, studied the four cartons. If they were what he thought they

were—but what else could they be? Contraband for the Algerian rebels normally traveled by caravan, safe from French interception; these cartons of 'soap', originating in Egypt, were probably still warm from the camel's back. And, if they were what he thought they were, they represented a great deal of money. El Kazim whistled. Noel looked around. El Kazim beckoned him forward. Noel swung into the cab, shifted into low gear. The truck lurched forward. El Kazim swung aboard; they turned out into the road.

For an hour they drove north. Neither man spoke. The road ran beside the palm groves, then slanted up among red sandstone bluffs, to strike out across the desert. Noel's eyes drooped with fatigue. He blinked resentfully. After driving all night and most of the day, another fourteen hours on the road was out of the question! And the four cartons of 'soap'! They stuck in his mind, pressed on his nerves. Certain things just weren't done. Noel considered himself an adventurer, a man of gallantry and *savoir-faire*. Smuggling, gun-running—such affairs carried a cachet of glamour and dash; he collected escapades of this sort as a high-school girl strings ornaments on her charm bracelet. The cartons labeled 'soap' represented something else again, something sordid and disreputable. Involvement would befoul Noel's ego-image, the blurred synthesis of Errol Flynn and Cary Grant he had worked so carefully to build.

A few miles ahead lay Erfoud, a town with a good hotel. It was only reasonable that they should stop to rest. He would telephone to Arthur Upshaw at Tangier, who could come drive his own blasted truck. Noel cleared his throat. "We're stopping in Erfoud, at the Gîte d'Etape. I've driven enough for one day."

"No, no," said el Kazim shortly. "We must go to Tangier."

"What's the rush?" Noel asked peevishly.

"There is a mistake. The sheikh is old man, he's afraid the French will come. He says we must take the boxes to Tangier. It is a mistake, but now we must do."

"There's not all that rush," Noel grumbled. "I'm too tired to drive. And I don't know about taking those packages. What's in them?"

Habdid el Kazim squinted sidewise at him. "It goes to Tangier."

"I'm not driving to Tangier today," said Noel, looking ahead down the road to avoid meeting el Kazim's angry stare. "I'm in charge of this rig, and I'm not trucking any cargo until I know what I've got." The idea, so expressed, infuriated him. They took him for a simple-minded truck driver, an underling! He jammed on the brakes; el Kazim made a hoarse exclamation of annoyance.

"No, we must not stop! The French will come."

"What's in the cartons?"

"It is not for you!" cried el Kazim. "Go on!"

It was a mistake, a misunderstanding. Sobbing and gasping, Noel stared down at the blood-smeared face. It had happened so fast, with such dreadful finality—why had el Kazim brandished the gun? Noel had struck down his arm; with frantic suddenness they were fighting. Noel had thrust his shoulder under el Kazim's chin, banged the sun-darkened temple against the door frame. He twisted at the gun, saw el Kazim's thumb working at the safety, his forefinger squeezing at the trigger. Noel wrenched the barrel down against el Kazim's wrist; el Kazim's fingers loosened, the gun dangled,

then dropped to the seat. Grunting, el Kazim clawed for his dagger; steel whirred free. Before it had been a scuffle; now the issue was life or death.

Noel ground his forearm into el Kazim's neck, held him back against the door, seized the wrist with the dagger. El Kazim rasped through his constricted throat; Noel fought with hysterical strength, too intent to feel fear. El Kazim doubled up his knees, buffeted Noel back. Noel had el Kazim's wrist under his arm; the effect of the kick jerked el Kazim around, down off the seat, where he thrashed arms and legs to recover himself. He lunged, the dagger slashed an inch past Noel's throat. Noel seized the gun by the barrel, beat him on the forehead. Blood squirted down the dark face, between the eyes, down each side of the nose, an awful sight. Noel screamed, struck again and again. He saw el Kazim's eyes staring; they seemed accusing and stern. Noel cried out in agony, struck as hard as he could, to drive away the ghastly sight. The skull broke, the metal sank into something yielding. The head twisted, the mouth wrenched and gaped.

Noel groped open the door, tottered out on the road. He looked down at the bloody gun, at his bloody hands. He flung the gun desperately away, thrust his hands into the sand at the side of the road, rubbed and scrubbed till only a dark dirty stain remained.

Beside him the Diesel engine throbbed and ticked. A car appeared down the road, approached, passed; dark eyes under a white hood flashed incuriously. The car was gone in a pillar of rising brown dust.

Noel took deep breaths. If never before, he must think sensibly. This was adventure, and he didn't like it.

First he must dispose of the corpse. But not here. There

was no concealment; it would be found quickly and the UAR, or FLN—whatever they called themselves—would come for him. He climbed up into the cab. Gingerly moving the sprawled shape out of the way, he shifted into low. The truck moved forward.

Ten minutes later the road zigzagged down through sandstone bluffs toward the floor of the valley. Noel stopped beside a deep gulch, opened the door, pulled the body out. It slid and tumbled through the dust, djellaba flapping, until half-way down it caught against a straggling bush. Noel backed down the slope, thrust with his foot; it rolled almost to the bottom. He kicked fragments of rusty sandstone after, and now it was almost invisible. The sound of a motor in the distance? Noel clawed his way back up to the road, jumped into the cab, drove hurriedly away.

A mile farther on he stopped, scooped sand into the cab, scrubbed and swept until the blood stains were one with the rust and grease of years.

He drove slowly north through the palm grove, fretting over a dozen unsatisfactory plans of action. Police? Flight? Tangier? Casablanca? The cartons gnawed at his nerves; what a relief if he could pitch them off into a ditch. But other considerations intervened: those of his personal safety. He had stumbled into this frightening mess; now he must contrive to evade the consequences.

Through the palms appeared a high biscuit-colored wall which marked the outskirts of Erfoud. He drove beside the wall until he reached a crossroads. He paused, looked first one direction, then the other. The main road to Meknes and Tangier stretched ahead. To the right, through a tall Moorish arch, a street led into the French settlement and business

district. A side road to the left wound through the palms toward an imposing building on a hill a half-mile distant. This was the Gîte d'Etape, a regional staging hotel built in preparation for tourists who so far had avoided this remote corner of Morocco.

Noel rubbed his face. If he tried to drive through to Tangier he'd kill himself. And the cartons. Why should he do Arthur Upshaw's dirty work? At the hotel he would telephone Tangier. Arthur Upshaw could drive south, or Duff. It was their mess, let them take care of it. Noel wrenched the steering wheel, sent the truck lumbering through the palm grove to the hotel.

He parked in a graveled area near the front entrance, took his jacket and zipper bag from behind the seat, descended to the ground.

A page in a red uniform opened plate-glass doors with ceremony. Noel entered a marble lobby of astonishing amplitude. The floor glowed with Berber rugs; leather armchairs surrounded embossed copper cocktail tables. The far corner of the lobby was given to a bar; here a white-coated bartender polished glassware. The desk clerk stood poised behind the marble registration counter. The three men, all apparently French, watched Noel silently. The lobby was otherwise empty.

Noel went to the desk, produced his passport and was assigned a room. With the guidance of the page, he garaged the truck, then went to his room, showered, changed into fresh clothes.

He lay on the bed, dozed, drifted off into uneasy sleep.

The telephone, ringing in short sharp jingles, awakened him. "Yes?" he muttered.

"Do you want dinner, sir?" inquired a heavily accented voice. It was not the desk clerk, who spoke careful, if pedantic, English.

"Yes," said Noel thickly. "Just a minute." He looked at his watch. Seven-thirty. Arthur Upshaw might be at his apartment by now. "I want to make a call to Tangier."

"Very well, sir. What number?"

Noel gave the number. The line hummed, buzzed; ghost-voices whispered. A man spoke: "Hotel Balmoral."

The long-distance operator turned the line over to Noel. "Is Mr. Upshaw in?" Noel asked.

"No, sir."

"Do you know where I can call him?"

"No, sir. Will you leave a message?"

"No," said Noel shortly, and hung up.

He went down to the lobby, which still was empty. Crossing to the bar, he ordered a highball, took it to one of the deep leather chairs, and sat looking across the expanse of barbaric rugs.

Presently he rose to his feet, went to the desk. The clerk, now back on duty, was chewing a toothpick which he hastily discarded. "I want to make a call to Tangier."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk. "Will you take it here?"

Noel looked about him. "Is there a booth?"

"No, sir. Only this desk telephone."

"It'll do." Noel consulted his address book, read a number to the clerk, who went to the switchboard, put the call through.

The clerk watched with covert interest. American, hence rich, yet he drives up in a truck and wears rough workman's clothes. Bizarre! Certainly not a tourist . . . There was a wait.

A far bell rang again and again. The clerk shook his head.
"There is no answer, sir."

"Confound it," muttered Noel. He pondered, flipped to another page in his address book. "Try this number." He read the number to the desk clerk.

The connection was made. The desk clerk shuffled papers with ostentatious disregard for the conversation.

"Hello? This is Noel Hutson. Is Arthur Upshaw available?"

There was a pause.

"Or I'll speak to Duff, if he happens to be there."

Another pause. Noel waited impatiently.

"Damn. Do you know where they are? . . . Well, give Arthur this message, will you? It's urgent, so make sure he gets it. Okay? . . . Good. Tell him I'm resigning. Tell him his friends gave me a shipment I don't plan to haul, for him or for anybody else. Tell him if he wants it to come for it himself."

Pause, while Noel listened.

"I don't like to say, not over the phone. Arthur will know. It's business I don't plan to get involved in."

Bizarre and more bizarre, thought the desk clerk.

Noel was describing his whereabouts to the person at the other end of the wire. ". . . at the Gîte d'Etape. If I don't hear from him I'll throw the stuff in a ditch, and come back to Tangier on the bus."

Pause.

"Right. Also, if you don't see Arthur, will you make sure that Aktouf gets the message? Thanks very much."

Noel hung up the receiver. So much for that. The issues were now resolved. He felt rather pleased with himself.

He sauntered into the dining room. Chandeliers twinkled; glass and silver glittered on crisp table linen. Noel was the solitary diner. Two waiters and a bus boy served him while the head waiter stood a little apart, hands clasped behind his back. Noel seemed to be the only guest in the hotel.

Returning to the lobby he bought an air-letter form at the desk, took it to a chair, and using a late copy of *London Illustrated News* for a pad, wrote:

Dear Dad:

Trouble has caught up with me and I've got to yell for help. It's a long story which I won't go into, except to admit that, as the family has long maintained, I'm a prize dunce, and half a rascal. But only half. I had to back out. There are some things I can't bring myself to do. I've just now put a message through to my boss, told him I'm quitting. More than anything in the world I want to come back home and start a civilized life—anything, so long as it's peaceful and dull. I need a thousand dollars, to settle a few bills and buy a ticket home. I promise you'll never have to worry about me again. Wire the money care of the Lombard Bank at Tangier. I'll collect if and when I get there.

Noel paused in his writing, chewed on the end of his fountain pen. He rose, went to the desk. "What time does the morning bus leave for Tangier?"

"There's nothing direct, sir, you'd have to change at Meknes. The early bus for Meknes leaves at eight."

Noel nodded. "I want to be called at six."

"Very good, sir. Six o'clock."

Noel returned to the chair, resumed his letter.

I just figured a way to copper my bets, and I'm safe as far as Tangier. I may have to do some fast talking — but I won't go into that. I'll see you in a week or so, and give you the whole story.

Noel stopped, thought a moment, then, with a brave flourish of his pen, continued:

Love to Mother, Molly, Darrell and yourself. See you all soon — I hope.

Noel

He folded the letter, sealed and addressed it to: R. M. Hutson, 625 Berry Farm Road, Everton, Pennsylvania. He took it to the desk, dropped it in the mailbox.

He went to his room, locked the door, undressed and went to bed.

His mind raced; sleep was slow in coming. A picture returned again and again to his mind: a stubble-bearded face, the eyes stern and bewildered, blood streaming in a black net over the nose. Then the final crushing blow, the eyes slowly closing, the mouth loose and askew.

Noel moaned softly, covered his head with his hands. "It wasn't my fault," he told himself, "I only did what was right!"

Finally he went to sleep.

At six o'clock in the morning the telephone rang. Noel, already awake and staring at the ceiling, acknowledged the call. With a mumble of glum curses, he swung himself out of bed.

He looked out the window. The morning sunlight was

golden and clear; the palms trembled and swayed in the morning air. All serene.

Noel dressed, assuring himself that the situation, though delicate, was still not critical. A day or two must elapse before the FLN—whoever they were—could know that Habbid el Kazim was missing. In the meantime Noel would have returned to Tangier, have made forwarding arrangements with the Lombard Bank, and be safely out of reach in Málaga or Lisbon.

Nevertheless, descending the broad marble stairs, Noel went furtively, and scrutinized the lobby before showing himself.

The clerk who had been on duty the previous evening bade Noel a punctilious good morning. "Will you have breakfast, sir?"

Noel hesitated. By this time Arthur Upshaw should have received his message. Why had he not called back?

The hell with Arthur Upshaw. "No breakfast; I'm rather in a hurry. May I have my bill?"

The page was not yet on duty; the clerk left his desk to unlock the garage.

The cartons of 'soap' were as Noel had left them. He started the truck, backed out and around, set off down the neat black-top driveway.

The clerk watched the truck disappear through the palms, shaking his head and smiling, then went back into the cool lobby.

Not long afterward his switchboard flashed and buzzed to an incoming call.

The clerk responded. "*Le Gîte d'Etape d'Erfoud.*"

"*Je veux parler avec Monsieur Noel Hutson,*" said a voice. "Mr.

Hutson—is he there?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the clerk. “Mr. Hutson has already checked out, not twenty minutes ago.”

There was a brief silence. Then the voice said, “Thank you very much,” and rang off.