

# L. RON HUBBARD



## *The Black Sultan*

GALAXY  
P R E S E N T S

## CHAPTER ONE

### *El Zidan*

THEIR medals were clinking, their rowels spun on the upward-curving pavement, their scarlet breeches put to shame the tropical brilliance of the Moroccan town. Encased in shining leather were their revolvers, gold lanyards attached. They had stopped now, looking at me.

It was hard to sit there at a sidewalk table and idly spin a glass between thumb and forefinger—as hard as trying to keep an agonized finger on a hot stove.

The taller of the two unfastened his holster flap and stabbed a knowing glance at his companion. They were Legion officers on leave, but they knew their duty to Morocco, to France.

How easy it would have been for me to drag the .45 from against my ribs and give it to them. But something of the fatality of the situation was with me. Although I did not consciously realize it, I was at a crossroads of life and three factors were bearing down upon me, converging. To crush me between them, quite probably.

Evidently, the taller of the two saw the threat in my eyes. He called out, “*Americain!* I, Captain Nicolle, order you to stand up and come here.”

He needn’t have announced himself. I remembered him from a past visit to this place, just as he knew me—however vaguely.

It was useless to disobey. The eight-thousand-mile trek was over. Eddie Moran was through. France had caught up with me.

As I started to rise, a hail came from across the street: “Hey! Hey! Hey! Eddie Moran! Wait for me!”

Two men were coming down a twisty flight of stairs. I recognized the first as Godfrey Harrison, United States vice-consul. His companion was unknown to me—and that was strange, since he looked important and I should have known him as I knew the country. I experienced a wish to meet him.

The stranger was tall and brawny. White silk djellaba flowing about him like a whirlpool of cream, red turban wound aslant above a large, lean face, he came down the steps with an easy stride which made you think of kings.

Once more I was about to obey Nicolle’s command when I heard the grunt of camels behind me. A caravan was swinging down the narrow street, filling it to overflowing. Townspeople scurried out of the way, hugging the walls to allow the caravan passage.

I heaved a sigh of relief. The caravan would pass between me and the officers and that would give me all the time I required. Smiling, I looked up at the desert riders who swung toward me in a blaze of color.

They must belong to some great man, I thought, judging by their military bearing and the excellence of their equipment. Once more I was baffled as to identity. Things had changed since I had last been here. Things had grown much more complicated, too.

Once more I thought I could save my bacon. The French had put me down as a highly dangerous gentleman. They classed me in the same breath with revolutionists, gunfighters, smugglers, and anything else they thought was vile.

In saving myself from them before, I had been forced to shoot my way out—I don't know how often. In trying to nail me down, they had forced me to become what they thought I was.

In that second, the Moroccan sunlight became bright again. I forgot about the French and about Godfrey Harrison. I felt as though someone had exploded an AVB rifle grenade in my chest.

Just a pair of eyes, infinitely cool, infinitely deep, looking at me quite impersonally from behind a veil. Just a few strands of gold escaping from the jeweled headpiece. Just a girl mounted on a swaying camel. But I'll never forget how she looked when I saw her then, that first time.

*"Americain!"* bawled *Capitaine* Nicolle. "Put up—"

As swift as striking snakes, hands darted for gun boots. A scimitar flashed like silver lightning and the barbs lunged forward—straight toward Godfrey Harrison!

I thought for an instant that I would see a dead vice-consul. It was inevitable. It had happened too fast. And I was as surprised as the others when the .45 Colt came away from my ribs and started to jar my palm.

A scimitar was coming down. As well as I could, I spotted the base of the djellaba hood and fired. The man reared up straight. The sword clanged against the pavement and the Berber came tumbling out of his saddle limply.

The other Berber whirled about, trying to level his Snider. He caught a bullet in his teeth and I saw the sick roll of his eyes as he began to slide down.

I was aware, standing wreathed in my own powder smoke, that the girl was staring at me, not at the dead men. Camel boys tugged at their halters and the caravan plunged down the curving street.

A hawk-faced rider paused, saw me raise the gun, and thought better of valor. He was lost in the welter of dust which rose from escaping hoofs.

The two French officers were still there, pressed back against a wall like life-size toy soldiers. I suppose they thought they were next.

Godfrey Harrison swabbed at the sweatband of his pith helmet and tottered across to me.

“My God, Eddie,” he quavered, “that was close! But why, oh why did you do it? You’re in hot water now—bad enough without all that.”

Behind Harrison came the silk-robed gentleman, face impassive. His fingers rested lightly on the tip of his blond beard and I thought I saw a twinkle in his blue eyes.

Deciding they were not to be targets, the two Frenchmen bristled and strode up. *Capitaine* Nicolle was snorting like a winded horse.

“Ah, so that is it!” cried Nicolle. “You destroy the peace of Morocco. You carry dangerous weapons. You attack our citizens without provocation. Now, *American*, we will send you back.”

“Back where?” I demanded.



*The other Berber whirled about, trying to level his Snider.  
He caught a bullet in his teeth and I saw the sick roll  
of his eyes as he began to slide down.*

He pried my fingers off my gun and took it from me. “Back to French Indochina! We know you, so do not pretend. You are that so infamous Edward Moran, enemy of France. Ah, but we have orders concerning you!”

The big tribesman stepped easily forward. “Allow me,” he said in French, “to introduce myself.”

With an insolence only a Frenchman can achieve, they turned their backs upon him and fastened upon my arms.

I planted my boot heels and balked. Godfrey Harrison swabbed anew at his sweatband and sputtered.

“I say,” mourned Godfrey. “You can’t do that, you know. He’s an American citizen and—”

I wonder why it is most of our consuls in faraway spots must affect a British accent.

They paid no attention whatever to Harrison, and his eyes were sad and watery behind the spectacles perched on his thin nose. The officers were putting their backs to the task. My heels were skidding, raising small whirlpools of dust. Berbers stopped and watched, crowding to obtain grandstand seats.

The Legion officers were rumped. They loosed their holds and stepped back straightening their tunics, realizing, doubtless, that a street fight lay far beneath their dignity. After a moment’s deliberation Nicolle drew his stumpy revolver and centered the muzzle on my chest.

“Now march!” he commanded. “We do not have to fuss with you, Moran.”

“Nor I with you,” I replied, dusting my hands and looking at the gun. I hate to be pawed and my temper was rising. “You haven’t any order for my arrest.”

“Ho!” cried the little one, gazing all about him in mock surprise. “He thinks we need an order for his arrest. He thinks such a victim of Madame Guillotine needs warrants and process of law. He thinks—”

“Hah,” echoed the other, “he is crazy. All *Americains* are crazy. He organizes a revolt against France and then escapes, and now—”

“I didn’t organize a revolt!” I protested. “I convoyed three Annamite chiefs up the Magat in a speedboat.” Which was true. I had also helped them drill their little yellow soldiers, but I hoped France would not know that.

“You came,” said the tallest, “on a Trans-African Airliner. You go back by narrow gauge railroad, third class. By that, and in the hold of a smelly tramp. If you manage to arrive alive, you will be executed, but perhaps we should save France that expense.”

The big blond stepped up again. He laid firm hands on the epaulets of the two and gently lifted them apart.

“Pardon my intrusion, gentlemen, but my name is El Zidan.” He said it so quietly you knew that it meant a great deal.

The Frenchmen gaped. The little one made a noise like a throttled crow.

“El Zidan? But El Zidan is—is—You cannot come like this, openly, to town—”

“I am here,” said El Zidan. “That caravan was the property of Abu ’l Hasan, the Black Sultan.” He motioned with a disdainful finger at the two lumps of cloth and blood which lay upon the pavement, attracting flies.

“Those men,” continued El Zidan, “saw me and knew me. They tried to kill me by riding me down. This Eddie Moran saw it in time, and acted quickly, saving my life. Therefore I intercede for him, and should you gentlemen see fit to make an issue of it, I’m afraid that no more horses will be sent to *la belle Légion*. You are the judge.”

The Frenchmen looked too stunned to move, but they managed to salute. Their scarlet pants walked away from there in a military straight line.

Nicolle went about thirty feet and then came back. He shook a finger under my nose and strained his words through his teeth.

“All right, *mon ami*. All right! You have a champion this time. But we have an additional charge against you for killing two men, and carrying concealed weapons. *Monsieur* Moran, I give you twenty-four hours to get out of the town! After that, a Legion patrol will pick you up and throw you in jail awaiting extradition.” He glanced at El Zidan. “Horses or no horses!”