

# L. RON HUBBARD



## THE SKY DEVIL

GALAXY  
PRESENTS

## CHAPTER ONE

ONE notch on a gauge, five gallons of gas, one hour's flying time. After that, the Sahara—no water, oceans of shifting sands and no one would either know or care that Vic Kennedy was dead.

But the one notch, the five gallons, remained, and while the engine still bellowed and while the plane bored southeast, Vic Kennedy was content to sit and watch the needle and the unvarying, never-ending panorama of the desert as it unfolded, touched by the ship's shadow.

His shoulder was numb and he was pleased about it. Perhaps it would stay numb until he had to land. It seemed that his shoulder had hurt forever.

He'd never reach Liberia. He had known that he would never reach it. But when he had landed the former Greek premier at Alexandria they had told him to fly on, that the British could do nothing for a Greek rebel; but a premier—well, that was different.

And when he had reached Algiers, the French had given him gas and nothing else, and had told him that he was not wanted there. They had not even bandaged that nagging wound under his shoulder.

They had told him that he might find refuge in Liberia,

that perhaps he could convince the Liberians that they needed a pilot to train an air corps for them.

The old Greek two-seater was hanging on desperately. Wings riddled, a flying wire gone, a knock in the engine where a bullet had scraped an ignition wire . . .

Vic Kennedy's dark-circled gray eyes stared down at the sand ocean of the Algerian Sahara. His ragged khaki shirt flapped in the whipping slipstream, his artillery-booted feet were curiously heavy on the rudders. His left hand was leaden on the stick.

Well, he thought, it had been a good war after all. Even if he had chosen the wrong side, even if he had volunteered to bring the rebel premier to Alexandria. And now it was all over and over forever. The French didn't want him. The British wouldn't let him stay. And a quick execution was awaiting him back there in Greece.

One notch and then when the gas needle dropped through that, he would have to land and take the punishment the desert meted out. No water, no habitations, nothing but sand.

At least it was growing cooler as the sun settled in its own flame. The bucking heat waves were less persistent. Dusk was already creeping in from the east. Perhaps he had better land and get it over with.

At night you didn't have to watch the mirages dance invitingly along the world's rim—like that one to the south. Mirages were too hard on a man. That one to the south consisted of shimmering mountains, a cool blue expanse of water and a cluster of shining buildings.

But they didn't build mosques in the Sahara and they didn't have lakes and that was that. In a moment the illusion would be gone. Not, of course, that Vic Kennedy gave a damn. It was all over for him.

The sun went down a little more and started to spin and burn. The biplane roared onward almost lost between an expanse of sky and sand.

Vic Kennedy turned his tired eyes toward the mirage again. He might as well look at it anyway.

With something like interest he aroused himself from the lethargy and scrutinized that inviting scene. Certainly it should have faded long before this. Perhaps it was real, after all. And if it was—well, did it matter so much where he died?

He banked and placed the city between the top cylinders of the engine. He wouldn't turn on that five-gallon reserve. Not yet. The needle still showed some in the main tank—perhaps four gallons.

Suspiciously, he cut his gun and nosed down through the blue gloom which was settling across the world. By slipping the plane he could look straight ahead at the buildings. Odd that they stayed right there and didn't move at all. It was some trick of light, naturally, but it was interesting.

The city was apparently built on a steep hillside, and from the air the streets looked like steps going up. A minaret raised its lofty star and crescent into the dusk. A palace sprawled in languid magnificence in the exact center of the town. Flat-roofed houses took on a sturdy appearance—too solid for a mirage.

Vic Kennedy's heart began to pound against his ribs. He caught himself up, told himself that he wouldn't be let in for this old desert trick. The shock of reality would be too great.

But the city persisted in getting larger and even more material. The palace domes glittered in the fading day. And there in the street—Vic made himself look very carefully—a troop of horsemen were moving. Even from a thousand feet, Vic could see that they wore veils.

Tuaregs!

He was almost on the point of shooting the gas to the engine when his eye fell on the gauge. Only four gallons and five in reserve—not enough to go anywhere. But Tuaregs, those desert raiders . . .

When he had been a pilot on the Trans African Air Lines he had found out a great deal about Tuaregs. They were a strange people, living by the sword. He had not known that Tuaregs ever settled in one place, but they evidently did.

A wide parade ground offered itself for a landing field, but Vic Kennedy shied away from it. They hadn't spotted his silent wings as yet and if he could land on the outskirts, unnoticed, he might be able to escape with his life.

Drifting through the twilight, wires sibilant, engine muttering as it idled, he scanned the mountainside for another landing field.

A string of battlements rose above the town, gray and sullen. Towers were square silhouettes against the red haze left by the departed sun. The walls followed the flat ridge of the mountain range.

Kennedy banked and looked down upon the structure. A

flat walk had been built some five hundred feet in length, bordered by low shrubs, bisecting a sprawling garden. In this quiet air it would be quite possible to land there, and the consequences might be better than a try at loose sand.

At least he would not be immediately spotted here. In his preoccupation of studying the walk, he failed to notice the twenty-foot walls which ringed the garden.

The plane sideslipped in, leveled out, and the ground rushed up to meet the reaching wheels. The controls loosened and the ship settled with a crunch to run heavily over the gravel. Shrubs brushed the underside of the bottom wing.

He crawled out of the pit, stiff and weary. His khaki shirt made a crackling sound as he moved his right arm. Blood had caked there, leaving a black, brittle patch along his side.

Taking off his helmet and goggles he laid them upon the seat. His tangled brown hair rippled in the evening breeze. From the garden about him came a dozen pleasing scents. From the town below came the cry of the muezzin calling out the sunset prayer.

The walls which ringed him in were higher than he had anticipated. But then, perhaps, someone would be living here, and if he remembered his Arabic and his Moslem customs, he might be able to impose upon the inhabitant for bed and food. Allah alone knew what a Tuareg would decide.

He went toward the nearest tower, his artillery boots scuffing the stone and crunching over the gravel. He knew he was far from imposing in his torn and dirty khaki, and that, at best, he could expect a beggar's reception.

What he did not know was that his breadth of shoulders,

slenderness of waist and the sturdy handsomeness of his face branded him as a gentleman. And he had forgotten those worthless bands of gold braid on his epaulets and that his boots had been tailored on Savile Row—a fact which not even dust could hide.

The door which opened into the tower swung back on well-oiled hinges. A flight of curving steps went down into the dim interior.

He proceeded slowly, not wanting to surprise a guard into disastrous action. His eyes became accustomed to the dimness and he could see the silk hangings, the soft rugs, and the piles of colored cushions which were strewn about the room. He felt uncomfortably like a burglar.

He saw the girl the instant she saw him. Their eyes met and clashed in mutual surprise. She looked very small and helpless, holding her head out of the silken pillows. Her eyes were wide and round and gray and her full lips were trembling. Two pearl-like tears overflowed and coursed their slow way down her cheeks.

He felt more like a burglar than ever. Uneasily, he broke their gaze and looked for another exit. Finding none he stared back at the girl. She sat up a little straighter and her mouth tightened.

By the change in her expression, he knew that she was about to call for help. In two quick strides he was beside her. She struggled up and he pressed her back.

In the Arabic he had learned long ago, he said: “Do not call. I mean no harm.”

“Who are you? What right have you to come here? If my father knew of this, he would kill you.”

“Your father?”

“Yes. Troops are outside the gate, on guard. If you are a *jinnī*—”

“A *jinnī*?” He suppressed a smile. It had been long since he had heard that word for evil spirit. The modern Mohammedan had almost forgotten it.

“But no. You can be no *jinnī*.” She looked at his wounded shoulder. “A *jinnī* cannot be hurt.” She drew away from him. “But how did you get here? This palace is guarded. There are no other entrances but one. My father’s troops guard that.”

“It matters not how I came here,” replied Vic, sinking down on a pillow, aware once more that he was very, very tired. “Are you a prisoner?”

“Why, yes. How did you know?”

“You said that this palace was guarded. Why do they keep you here?”

“Because I threatened to run away into the desert. Quick, you had better go the way you came. They will be coming here soon and if they find you with me, they will kill you. Please go.”

“Why did you threaten that?”

“Because I did not want to marry El As’ad.” The tears welled up again. “He is ugly and his legs are twisted. But he is the son of Es Samad and my father has ordered me to marry him.”

“Who is your father and who are you?”



“You do not know? Surely you must be a stranger to this country. You are certainly an *imajeghen*, perhaps even a knight. And I know you must be *Tārgi*, though you speak strangely. Please go. I do not want them to find you here.”

It surprised Kennedy to be mistaken for a Tuareg of the noble class. It was not until he again noticed her gray eyes that he understood. Most of these people had gray or hazel eyes and light skins. They were descendants of the purest Berber stock.

“No,” he said. “I am an American.”

“An Am . . . Amer— I have never heard of that kingdom. Is it far from here?”

“Very far. But you have not told me your name nor who your father is.”

“I am the Lady Dunya and my father is King Zahr of this country. Surely you have heard of him. But please do not speak more. They will come in a moment and they will kill you—and you are too—too graceful a knight to be—”

“But I cannot leave,” said Kennedy. “I have no place to go and I am tired and hungry.”

“I can do nothing for you. Do not stay. When I tried to run away, my father had me sent here to be held for the marriage, and anyone who even speaks with me besides the guard and my own *imghad* will be killed. My father is very angry.”

Kennedy stood up. His arm was hurting again, shooting white lightning through his side. “Send for your *imghad* if you can trust them. I want water and bandage and food. I must have them, for I have come far today. Six hundred miles.”

“But—then you must be an *ifrit* of the *jinn*. Six hundred miles in one day? But a *jinnī* cannot be wounded. How is this?”

“Send for the female slaves.”

“Perhaps I should not trust them, but—” She struck a small gong and the clear, trembling note hung long in the room.

The female slaves came and stood before Kennedy, their eyes wide with surprise and fear.

Lady Dunya’s small voice was crisp. “Bring me food and water and scents. And, if you love me, say nothing of this to anyone.”

They were gone and Kennedy began to tug cautiously at his shirt. The fabric was stuck fast to the wound and when it came free, the ragged gash began to bleed once more.

The water and the food came and with it a black silk tunic and blue veil. Dampening a piece of linen, he bathed the wound, cooling its heat. Winding white cloth tightly about it, he let the girl tie the bandage in place. Then he washed his face and wrists.

As he drew the black silk tunic over his head, he was aware of Dunya’s intent gaze.

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid the women will tell?”

She shook her head. “I was thinking that you must be a man among men. The bullet which struck you went deep. And yet you can move your arm without wincing. You must indeed be a knight of great fame.”

“Of no fame whatever,” replied Kennedy, seating himself before a tray of piled sweetmeats and bread and scented water. He felt odd, wearing a black tunic. More important somehow.

More at peace with himself. And the blue veil which lay on the couch—that was the sign of nobility. Then even the female slaves had thought— It was infinitely good to be considered a somebody again.

He had no more than tasted the food when a scuffling sound came down the curving stairs. Kennedy stood up, leaning a little forward, his gray eyes bright and watchful.