

Goodwin Harold Leland

**The Egyptian Cat Mystery:
A Rick Brant Science-
Adventure Story**



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CHAPTER I

The Winston Plan

The date was December twenty-third. The time along the Greenwich meridian, from which all world times are measured, was 8:15 P.M. At widely scattered points around the globe, four voices were raised simultaneously.

Even an experienced observer could not have found a connection between the four voices and what they were saying, yet each voice started actions that would soon be interwoven into a single pattern – a pattern of danger, adventure, and mystery that would culminate in sudden violence within sight of one of the seven wonders of the world.

In Chicago, it was 2:15 in the afternoon. At the edge of the city a man spoke into the telephone in the office of a small plastics factory. "The cat is ready," he said.

In Paris, a phone rang. The man who answered noted in the log that his overseas call had gone through at exactly 9:15 p.m. He picked up the phone and spoke crisply. "*Monsieur l'Inspecteur? ... Bien.* This is Interpol. We have a relay for you from the United States. Monsieur, this will please you – and it most certainly will amaze you. Message begins..."

In Cairo, the time was 10:15 P.M. A famous Egyptian astronomer walked into his office and called to his associate. "Hakim! Good news. He can come. Now we can find out what that accursed hydrogen-line impulse means."

On Spindrift Island, off the coast of New Jersey, it was 3:15 in the afternoon. The island was quiet under a blanket of snow. The long, gray laboratory buildings, where so many dramatic scientific developments had taken place, were deserted. Only in the homes of the scientists was there activity, and all of it was in preparation for Christmas.

In the big main house on the seaward side of the island, Dr. Hartson Brant, director of the world-famous Spindrift Scientific Foundation, walked to the foot of the stairs and called to his son.

"Rick, can you come to the library in five minutes? Bring Scotty with you."

Rick Brant, a tall boy with light-brown hair and eyes, paused in his gift wrapping long enough to call an affirmative to his father, then he made sure Don Scott, whose room was next door, had heard the summons.

Scotty had. He came through the connecting door. "What's up?"

"Don't know. Maybe Dad has some Christmas chores for us to do."

Scotty, a big, husky boy with black hair and brown eyes, was an ex-Marine who had originally joined the Spindrift group as a guard during the adventure of *The Rocket's Shadow*. Since then, he and Rick had become the closest of friends, and the Brants had accepted him as a full-fledged member of the family.

"I'm willing, whatever it is," Scotty told Rick. "I'm so full of Yuletide spirit I may bust a seam from sheer joy."

Rick grinned. He felt exactly the same way. He continued wrapping the present for his sister Barbara, a pretty girl a year his junior. Barby had a definite talent for sketching and painting and Rick had bought her a complete artist's kit, hoping it would encourage her natural skill.

"She'll be tickled pink," Scotty remarked. "Come on. Let's go down."

"Go ahead. I'll be right with you." Rick finished taping on a spray of evergreen, then he carefully put the present out of sight under his workbench. Barby's lively curiosity was subdued at Christmas time, but it was better not to take chances. He surveyed the bench to see if he had left anything out. Usually it was cluttered with apparatus, tools, and parts, because Rick was an inveterate experimenter, but it was clear now, in preparation for the holiday.

He walked down the corridor to the stairs, smiling to himself. Christmas at Spindrift was fun. The entire scientific staff and their families joined in, first in cutting their own trees from the stand of spruce at the back side of the island, then in decorating the big tree in the Brant library. On Christmas Eve there was a Yule log to be brought in and presents to be exchanged, although the Brants waited until morning to open their gifts to each other.

Hartson Brant and Scotty were waiting in the library, standing before the great fireplace in which logs crackled merrily. Seated in the leather chair next to the Christmas tree was Parnell Winston, one of the leading staff scientists.

Winston was a big man, with jet-black curly hair and great bushy eyebrows that hid merry blue eyes. He was an expert in cybernetics, the science of electronic computer design, and his contributions to the theory of computer operations, and to advanced electronic control systems, were known to scientists around the world. Winston had originally joined the staff to supervise the design and construction of a "thinking machine," the Tractosaur.

Hartson Brant, an older version of his son, greeted the boy. "Come in, Rick. Parnell, the floor is yours."

Winston motioned the boys to chairs. "Sit down. I called this meeting to make a proposal. But first, how are your bank balances? Fat or thin?"

Rick considered. Most of his income, including his small salary as a laboratory assistant, went into his education fund. However, the salary he had earned for working at the Nevada rocket base during *The Scarlet Lake Mystery* had been put into his "ready" fund. "I'm in good shape," he said, and Scotty echoed him.

"Fine. Now, the Egyptian Astronomical Society has just finished constructing a new radio telescope. It's a first-rate instrument from which we expect great things. Your father and I were in at its birth, so to speak. We consulted on the initial designs during a meeting of the International Astronomical Union."

Rick knew that was one of the many world-wide private scientific organizations operating under the International Council of Scientific Unions. He also knew of the growing importance of radio astronomy, but he hadn't known the Egyptians were in on it.

"Apparently some unusual trouble developed during the tuning of the instrument," Winston went on. "Earlier this afternoon I had a phone call from Cairo, and a request to help our Egyptian colleagues iron out the bugs. I accepted."

Rick sat upright in his chair. Winston going to Cairo? How did this concern Scotty and him?

"My proposal is this," Winston concluded. "The Egyptians are short of technicians and we may need help. I'll leave the day after Christmas, returning within ten days. If you two can pay half your expenses, and help me half the time, I'll take you with me."

Both boys jumped to their feet. Rick looked anxiously at his father.

Hartson Brant smiled. "According to Parnell's schedule, you'll be back just in time for school at the end of the holidays. *If* you want to go, of course."

Rick let out a wild yell of exuberance that brought his sister Barby running to the library. She looked at the group with wide eyes. "Rick! Was that you?"

He grinned at her. "It wasn't a wounded buffalo, Sis. Guess what? We're going to Egypt!"

Barby's pert face lengthened. "I don't suppose I can go, too?"

Parnell Winston walked over and ruffled her blond hair. "Not this time, Barby. But I'll make you a promise. The next field expedition under my supervision will include my wife, you, and Jan Miller."

The prospect of an expedition that included Jan, daughter of one of the staff physicists and her dearest friend, cheered Barby at once.

"I don't suppose you could promise to leave Rick and Scotty at home?" she asked.

"Can't promise." Winston chuckled. "We might need them to carry your luggage. Girls can't travel without a dozen suitcases each, I'm told."

The scientist turned to the boys. "Start reading up on the country, and I'll arrange for you to get some additional background by meeting some Egyptians. It happens that an Egyptian physicist is arriving in New York today for a lecture tour of American universities. There's a reception for him tomorrow. We'll drive to New York. You can meet him and some of his countrymen, and we'll go to the consulate to obtain visas. Are your passports and health cards up to date?"

Fortunately, all was in order because the boys had spent a part of the summer in the Sulu Sea region, where they had helped to locate and rescue two staff scientists.

Barby asked wistfully, "Couldn't I meet some real Egyptians, too?"

As Scotty had once said, if Barby ever got wistful while fishing, the fish would knock themselves out trying to climb into the boat to cheer her up. Winston replied quickly, "No reason why not. I'll check with my host, but I'm sure it's all right, so you can plan to come with us."

Rick's eyes met Scotty's. He shrugged. He was glad in one way that his sister could go, because he always hated to have her unhappy about being left behind. On the other hand, Barby was unpredictable. He couldn't be sure of what she might do or say, but he could be certain her curiosity and enthusiasm would stir up something.

If Rick had been enough of a prophet to see all the events his pretty sister's helpfulness at the reception would get him into, he would have handcuffed her to the Christmas tree before ever allowing her off Spindrift Island.

CHAPTER II

The Egyptian Cat

The reception for Dr. Hayret Ahmed was at the home of an Egyptian importer named Mohammed Bartouki. Barby, the boys, and Winston rang the bell of a brownstone house on New York's Upper East Side promptly at noon.

Winston had checked with his host by phone, and his request that he be allowed to bring his young associates to meet Bartouki had been met with enthusiastic pleasure. Mohammed Bartouki had assured the scientist that he would look forward to meeting the young people of Dr. Hartson Brant's household.

The door was opened by a figure right out of *The Arabian Nights*, or so it seemed to the young people. The doorman was a huge Negro dressed in flowing red trousers that tucked in at the ankles. His sandals turned up in points at the front, Persian style. An embroidered vest set off a loose white silk shirt, and on his head was a red fez, shaped like a section of a cone, slightly less in diameter at the top than at the bottom.

"Please come in," he requested. His voice was accented. Rick saw that he had two horizontal hairline scars on each cheek.

The man took their coats, giving Barby a courtly bow. "Dr. Bartouki asks if you will please join him in the salon. It is straight ahead."

As they walked down the carpeted hall Barby gave Winston a smile of sheer delight. "He's right out of a movie," she whispered. "Even to the fez and the scars on his cheeks."

Winston smiled back. "In Egypt a fez is called a *tarboosh*. The scars mean he is a Sudanese, from the country south of Egypt. I agree he's a very picturesque type. I suspect Bartouki dressed him up for effect. It's a common practice."

"What's Bartouki a doctor of?" Rick asked.

"I don't know. Law or something similar, I imagine. He's not a scientist or medical doctor."

Mohammed Bartouki himself came to meet them. He was a round little man, scarcely taller than Barby, with twinkling eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses. He was dressed in an ordinary business suit.

"My dear Dr. Winston, how nice of you to come. And these are your young friends?"

Winston introduced the young people. Rick found his hand captured in a warm, firm grip.

"Welcome, welcome," Bartouki said, beaming. "We will have an opportunity to talk about your trip to my country as soon as these scientists turn the conversation to some matter of science we do not understand." He smiled at Winston. "You see, I know you professional people. The nationality does not matter. Put two of you together and the conversation at once turns to some development a poor merchant cannot possibly comprehend. That is why I am glad you brought Miss Barbara, and Rick and Scotty, as you called them, if I may be so familiar. At least I can talk with them."

Rick could see that Barby was charmed by the little merchant, and he could understand why. Bartouki radiated warmth and enthusiasm.

In a moment the four Spindrifters were being introduced to Dr. Hayret Ahmed and a bewildering assortment of people. Evidently they were all scientists of different nationalities, except for two officers of the United Arab Republic consulate. Rick recognized a few of the names, and found he knew one or two of the Americans.

True to Bartouki's prediction, the talk turned to scientific subjects within minutes. Rick followed the conversation, which was about a new development in the capture and study of free radicals, but only for a few minutes. The scientists were over his head in short order.

Scotty chuckled. "I always thought a free radical was a political bomb thrower out of jail."

"It's a highly energetic chemical particle," Rick said.

"That's nice," Barby said. "Only I'd rather talk with Dr. Bartouki than discuss energetic chemicals."

The merchant arranged things very smoothly. He announced that he would not dream of allowing protocol to interfere with such a fascinating conversation, and put the scientists together at one end of the table. The officers from the consulate, evidently in deference to the distinguished Egyptian scientist, continued to listen closely to the talk, even though Rick was sure they didn't understand a word.

The three young people found themselves free to talk with their host, and the boys at once began firing questions.

Bartouki described Cairo and promised that he would present them with guidebooks to be read on the way over. He told them about things to do in the ancient city, and listed places that were "musts" for tourists. They included the step pyramid at Sakkarah, the Egyptian Museum, the mosque of Sultan Hassan, and the mosque and college of El Azhar, founded in the ninth century.

"Of course you will see a great deal of the Sphinx and the pyramids at Giza, since our new radio telescope is nearby. But most of all, you must see El Mouski."

"What is that?" Rick asked.

"It is the Cairo bazaar. There are several sections, known as *sooks*. They have names like Khan El Khalili, Ghooriyeh, Sagha, Sook El Nahassin, and so on, but the principal one is Mouski."

"Spell it for me," Barby pleaded.

Bartouki smiled. "What you ask is difficult. We use a different alphabet, so there is no exact equivalent, only what is called transliteration, which uses phonetics. So the bazaar can be Mouski, Muski, Mosky, Mouskey, or anything else that sounds the same. Even for Giza, where the pyramids are, there are many spellings."

"I wish you'd tell my English teacher that," Barby sighed. "I think my way of spelling is just as good as hers."

Bartouki and the boys laughed sympathetically. The little merchant said, "Whatever the spelling, El Mouski will fascinate you. Many things are made there especially for tourists. Some of the workmanship is excellent, and the prices are very low."

"We haven't had much luck with bazaars that cater to tourists," Scotty replied. "We prefer markets where local people buy, because the things are more authentic."

Bartouki chuckled. "That is wise, in most countries. But consider. The attraction for tourists are things that are clearly Egyptian in origin, no? Such things vanished from all but our museums some years ago. You could not buy a genuine Egyptian tapestry, or a stone carving from a tomb. Such things are beyond price. They are national treasures. But you can buy very attractive and authentic reproductions."

"The people of Cairo wouldn't want reproductions, would they?" Barby asked. "So they have to be made just for tourists."

"And for export," Bartouki added. "I import them myself for a few American shops. After lunch I will show you samples and you will see."

It seemed reasonable to Rick when he thought about it. Genuine Egyptian things simply were not obtainable. "What else is made for tourists?" he queried.

"Many things, of gold, silver, and ivory. There are bags of camel leather that Miss Barbara would enjoy having. There are brass goods of all kinds, and copperware with a partial tin coating called washed tin."

The conversation paused long enough for a few bites of lunch, then Bartouki resumed. "We try to take good care of tourists in the United Arab Republic, both in Egypt and in Syria. For example, we license our guide-interpreters, who are called *dragomen*. There is also a special

police force with no job but aid to tourists. And we are always looking for ways to improve our reproductions to make them more attractive and authentic. I will show you a new design."

By the time luncheon had ended, the talk among the scientists had progressed to the basic theory of what physicists call "the solid state." Even Rick, with his rapidly growing background of scientific knowledge, could understand only fragments of conversation.

"Let them talk over their coffee," Bartouki said. "They are enjoying it. We will retire to my den and I will show you examples from El Mouski."

The samples were everything Bartouki had promised. There were wall hangings, beautifully made of tiny pieces of colored cloth appliqued on a natural-color fabric, bags and pouches of leather, leather hassocks, ivory carvings of ancient Egyptian gods, inlaid boxes and chests, and dozens of both useful and ornamental utensils of brass, copper, washed tin, and ceramics. Barby went into raptures. At every new item she urged Rick to bring her one just like it.

"I'll rent a jet just to carry my luggage," he said, grinning. "You've already ordered a ton, and I get only sixty-six pounds."

Bartouki came to his rescue. "Let me show you a new tourist attraction. It just arrived by messenger this morning."

He went to a cabinet, opened it, and produced a stone cat. It was about ten inches high, in a sitting position with its tail curled around to meet its feet. It was of sandy texture, reddish in color.

"Sandstone?" Rick guessed.

Bartouki smiled. "I hoped you would say that. Here. Examine it."

Rick took the cat. He liked it very much. The design was clean and elegant, stylized after the Egyptian manner. But it wasn't sandstone. It was heavy, but not heavy enough to be sandstone, and the sheen was not that of a mineral. Whatever the material, it had been fashioned in one piece, probably cast in a mold.

"I give up," he said. "What is it?"

"Plastic," Bartouki replied, obviously pleased. "It did not come from Egypt. It was made right here in America. In Chicago, to be exact. It is what you call a prototype."

"But it's Egyptian in design," Barby protested. She took the cat from Rick and examined it.

"Yes, it is clearly an Egyptian cat. The design came from Egypt, but the cat from America. I have been working on this for months with a plastics company. Now I have the model, and the method. We will reproduce these in quantity in Cairo."

"It's pretty heavy for plastic," Rick commented.

"True. We put a piece of lead in the middle of the casting. You see, it looks like stone, and the buyer will expect it to be heavy. So, for psychological reasons, we give it weight – only not so much that it becomes a problem to carry."

"You certainly have it worked out," Scotty said admiringly. "But why a cat? Why not a ... a camel?"

"We have camels of camel leather, brass, and wood. But we do not have a good cat. You see, the cat is important in Egyptian history. There was even a cat goddess of the Upper Nile Kingdom, called Bubaste. In the ancient tombs there are sometimes mummies of cats. Some cat lovers think our land first developed the domestic strain of cat. So we believe tourist cat lovers should have an authentic reproduction of one. This particular cat is a faithful copy of an antique, which I am fortunate to own."

"What will you do with it now?" Barby asked.

"Send it to my associate in Cairo, as soon as possible. I would like to airmail it right away, but you Americans overload the mails at Christmas, so it would be safer to wait. Next week I hope to send it with full instructions, hoping to get production started in time for the big tourist season. I wish it could go sooner. It is needed."

Barby said impulsively, "Rick leaves the day after tomorrow. He could take it for you. Couldn't you, Rick?"

There was no reason to refuse. It was certainly a worthy project, and Bartouki had been generous in answering their questions.

"Be glad to," Rick said.

The merchant's eyes lighted. "It would not be an imposition?"

"Of course not. I can put it right in with my clothes. I have plenty of room."

"Believe me, I will be in your debt. And so will my associate, Ali Moustafa. You will like him. He is a great, jolly man, three times my size. If he had a beard, he would resemble your Santa Claus. And he will insist that you accept some token of his appreciation. I will send the instructions separately, so you need not bother with the technical reports."

"I couldn't accept a gift for such a little thing," Rick protested. He looked at the cat, now in Scotty's hands. It was a handsome little statue.

"Ali Moustafa is a hard man to refuse," Bartouki said. "You should not deprive him of the pleasure of making a gift. But I will not press you. It will be between you and him. You are quite sure it will be no trouble?"

Rick's words would return to haunt him during the days ahead. He said blithely, "No trouble at all."

CHAPTER III

Cairo

The jet descended smoothly over the desert on the approach to Cairo International Airport. Rick leaned toward the window to watch for the first sign of a runway. In the distance he could see the valley of the Nile River, a great green swath which cut through the tan desert wastes.

"Excited?" Scotty asked.

Rick had to grin. "Excited? Why should I be excited? A trip to Egypt is an everyday event for me. Stop asking silly questions and look at the scenery."

"I would," Scotty told him, "only somebody's head is in the way. I won't exactly say it's a fathead, but it's too thick to see through."

"Real subtle. I like the way you give delicate hints." Rick moved back so Scotty could see, and watched as the great plane dropped toward the desert, then touched down and sped along modern runways to the administration building.

Two Egyptians were waiting as Winston and the boys walked down the stairway, and the scientist at once hurried to greet them. Obviously the three were old friends.

Winston introduced the two boys. The older of the two Egyptians was Dr. Abdel Kerama. He was a tall, gray-haired man of distinguished appearance. Rick thought that in traditional desert costume he would look like the head sheik of all the desert tribes. The younger Egyptian was Dr. Hakim Farid, a youthful, clean-cut man with an attractive smile.

Rick knew from Winston's advance briefing that these were the two leading radio astronomers of the United Arab Republic, and that both had international reputations in the field.

The Egyptian scientists made the boys feel at home right away. Dr. Kerama took Scotty and Winston by the arms, and Dr. Farid fell in step with Rick as the group walked toward the administration building.

"We're glad you could come," Farid said in excellent English. "We'll try to make your visit interesting."

Rick thanked him. "I don't know whether we'll be of much use, but we're willing to do anything we're told. All we ask is a little chance to see your country."

"You'll have every chance," Dr. Farid told him. "Before there is any work for you, Parnell will have to do a pretty thorough analysis of data we've collected. It's a problem that has us ... what's the American expression? Buffaloed?"

"That's it," Rick agreed. "What kind of problem is it?"

"It's what you might call very strange behavior on the part of a hydrogen-line impulse we picked up while calibrating our receiver. Are you familiar with radio astronomy?"

"Not very," Rick admitted. "I tried to read some of the current literature when I found we were coming, but most of it is over my head."

"Then I won't bore you with a technical discussion. Briefly, the noise emitted by hydrogen gas in space is very important to us in our analysis of the nature and distribution of matter. This radio noise is, of course, random. Usually when we are examining a hydrogen source we get pretty continuous and regular signals. If we could hear it, there would be a sort of hissing noise. Do you follow me?"

"So far."

"Good. Our problem is that we are picking up impulses. You might even call them signals. They are on the frequency of neutral hydrogen, but it's hard to believe they're natural in origin. We've about concluded that somehow our amplifier system is modulating the incoming hydrogen signal from the antenna. The trouble is, we can't locate the cause."

"Is that why you called Dr. Winston?" Rick asked.

"Yes. He has a reputation for finding bugs in electronic circuits. If he can find this one, we'll be tempted to reward him with a pyramid or something appropriate."

Rick saw the twinkle in Dr. Farid's eyes. "Better not make it a pyramid," he said hastily. "His luggage is limited to sixty-six pounds. They might not let him on the plane with it."

"A happy thought," Dr. Farid said seriously. "You have saved us from possible embarrassment. It would be useless to give him a pyramid when his weight limit is thirty kilos, as we call sixty-six pounds."

Rick chuckled. One reason he so enjoyed his association with scientists was the dry sense of humor most of them seemed to share.

They reached the administration building and started through the formalities of customs and immigration. The Americans had filled out customs forms and currency declarations on the plane, and in only a short time the formalities were over and their admission into the United Arab Republic was official. The customs inspectors hadn't even asked them to open their luggage.

The trip from the airport took over an hour. It led through Heliopolis, City of the Sun, the first capital of a united Egypt. The land had been governed for over a thousand years from Heliopolis. But that, as Dr. Kerama explained, was over four thousand years ago.

Rick was awed. Coming from a new land where a hundred years seemed a very long time, the antiquity of Egypt stirred his imagination. But there was little that seemed ancient in modern Heliopolis. There were attractive, modern apartment houses, new public buildings, and rows of trees carefully trimmed into perfect green cylinders.

The entry into Cairo itself was through rows of tall wooden or brick structures, along streets traveled by everything from the latest European cars to plodding donkey carts. The people were dressed in a variety of costumes, from suits and dresses that would have been suitable in New York, to traditional Arab dress with flowing robes and the cloth headdress that is held in place by a band or roll of fabric around the head, just above the eyes.

The car passed the railroad station and the great statue of Rameses the Second, Pharaoh of Egypt. The Nile came into view, and Farid pointed out the row of hotels on the other side. The Shepherd's and the Nile Hilton flanked the older, Victorian bulk of the Semiramis, where they would stay. They sped across a bridge, entered a plaza full of honking horns and speeding cars, then moved to the comparative quiet of a street along the Nile embankment to the hotel.

Uniformed attendants came running for their bags. The group entered the lobby, and Rick looked around with interest.

The Semiramis was big, with lofty ceilings and chandeliers. The walls were decorated with scrolls and tapestries. The rugs had once been red. There was a kind of eighteenth-century grandeur about it, even though it had turned a little shabby over the years.

The formalities of registration were completed, then the Americans went to the cashier and exchanged dollars for Egyptian pounds and coins in units called piastres. They carefully put away their receipts for the exchange, since currency control in the country was strict.

"Go ahead," Winston told the boys. "Farid and Kerama will come with me. I want to start talking over this interesting problem of theirs, and I imagine you want to rest."

Rick did not feel in the least like resting, but made no comment. He and Scotty got into a tiny, ornate elevator cage with walls of gilded-iron lattice. There wasn't room for the porters with their bags; they ran up the stairs while the boys rode with the smiling elevator operator. It wasn't a fast ride.

"Climbing rate, one hundred feet per minute," Scotty said. Rick grinned.

They were let off at the third floor, and weren't in the least surprised to find the porters waiting for them. They followed the men into a room that made them stop short with amazement.

The entrance to the hotel and the lobby had been big, but the room was enormous, spacious, and very tastefully furnished, European style.

"As big as Grand Central Station!" Scotty exclaimed.

Rick echoed, "We'll rattle around in here like a pair of pebbles in a fifty-gallon tank."

The bath was larger than most American hotel rooms, with a twenty-foot ceiling, and the closet would easily have accommodated a king's wardrobe. Rick thought that maybe it had, in times past.

He tipped the porters and closed the door behind them, then motioned to Scotty. "Go on down to the other end of the room and shout. I want to see if I can hear you."

Scotty started to oblige, grinning, then turned and called, "Come look at this view!" He had discovered that the French doors at the front of the room opened onto a tiny balcony that overlooked the Nile.

The great river was only the width of a narrow street away. Sailing gracefully along with brown sail set was a Nile boat. The bridge they had crossed was directly ahead of the boat, and Rick looked for the drawspan through which it would pass. There was none!

"He'll crash right into the bridge!" Rick exclaimed. "Why doesn't he correct his course?"

"Rudder stuck, maybe," Scotty offered. "But why doesn't he drop the sail and try to lose headway?"

They watched helplessly as the boat, fully fifty feet in length, bore down on the bridge. There were many people in sight, and a steady line of cars crossing the bridge, but no one paid the slightest attention.

Scotty grabbed Rick's arm. He started to laugh. "Look at that mast!"

Fascinated, Rick watched as the huge mast dipped slowly backward, triangular sail and all, until it lay nearly flat on the deck. The boat slipped under the bridge with room to spare. On the other side, the mast slowly went up to its normal rakish position again, the sail filled, and wind and current bore the boat steadily down the Nile.

"Not exactly the way we'd do it," Rick said with a grin, "but pretty effective." It was a reminder that they were in a new land, where customs were strange to them.

"You learn something new every day," Scotty agreed. "Let's unpack, then go visit the city."

"Better wait and see what Winston has in mind for us," Rick cautioned. He began to stow his clothing in one of the big dressers. He lifted a shirt, and stared down at the Egyptian cat nestling among his T shirts. "Tell you what, if Winston doesn't need us, let's deliver the cat. We can see some of the city coming and going."

When their clothes were stored, they washed away the grime of travel and Rick called Winston's room.

Hakim Farid answered. "Don't think we've forgotten you," the young radio astronomer said. "But Parnell and Kerama wasted no time in getting down to business. I doubt that you could interrupt long enough to get a sensible answer. Do you have any plans?"

"We have an errand at El Mouski," Rick replied. "Would it be all right for us to go?"

"No reason why not. You'll need a car. I would offer you mine, except that you have no local license. You could take a taxi, but a licensed dragoman would be better. Suppose I suggest one with a car?"

Rick remembered that Bartouki had told them a dragoman was a guide-interpreter. "That would be very good of you," he replied.

"All right. I will send one I know, or a friend of his if he is not available. Wait in your room and he will come for you."

Rick thanked Farid and hung up. He reported the conversation to Scotty.

"First time I've ever had a guide in a city," Scotty said. "Makes me feel important, like visiting royalty or something. Couldn't we just get a map instead?"

"We'd still need a car. Might as well get one with a built-in talking map. Besides, I like the idea. I want to be escorted like a visiting prime minister."

There was a paper laundry bag in the closet. Rick used it to wrap the cat against possible scratches. Scotty took the few moments to get some cards written, to which he signed both their names.

There was a polite knock on the door, and Rick opened it. He gaped at the sight of what was apparently their dragoman. He was a magnificent figure in blue pantaloons and short red jacket. He had an engaging black face marred by three straight hairline scars that ran in a diagonal across his cheeks.

"Have honor to present me," the figure announced formally. "Name of Hassan. To serve you."

"Come in, Hassan," Rick invited. "Are you the dragoman Dr. Farid sent?"

"Is same, *ya sidi*. To serve you."

Rick introduced himself and Scotty. He inspected the guide with interest. Hassan was young, with a friendly white-toothed smile. The scars identified him as Sudanese, but Rick didn't know enough about the markings to tell what part of the Sudan he came from. A different part from Bartouki's servant, though, because the scars were at a different angle, and Hassan had three on each cheek.

Rick's quick imagination could picture the Sudanese in a different setting, with scimitar in hand, guarding the palace of a legendary sultan. It was hard to imagine him in the prosaic role of a guide. Rick resolved to take a picture for Barby's benefit. A blackamoor warrior right out of the tales of Scheherazade! That was how she would see it.

The boys shook hands with the dragoman, and Rick saw that he responded to their obvious friendliness. The costume was an odd one, though. Rick hadn't seen any like it on the street, and he wondered if Hassan wore it for effect, since most of his customers probably were tourists. Later he found that the guess was right.

"Where you like to go?" Hassan asked.

Scotty spoke up. "You know El Mouski?"

Hassan's face split in a wide grin. "Who does not?"

"That'll teach me to ask silly questions," Scotty said ruefully. "Like asking a New Yorker if he ever heard of Central Park."

The boys walked downstairs with Hassan, since it was faster than taking the elevator, and went to the alley behind the hotel where he had parked his car.

The car was a small foreign sedan of a make neither boy had ever heard of. Apparently Hassan also used it as a taxi, because the front passenger seat was taken up mostly by a taxi meter.

Rick showed Hassan the address in his notebook. The guide shook his head. "Please, you read."

Rick looked at him with astonishment. A guide who couldn't read? But apparently it was so. "It is the store of Ali Moustafa," he explained.

Hassan shrugged. "I do not know it. But it can be found. *Enshallah*."

Although the boys did not recognize it then, the word was a common expression meaning "If God wills it."

They would learn it, though, and with it other Arabic words, including *zanb*, *dassissa*, and *khatar*— or, in English, crime, intrigue, and danger!

CHAPTER IV

El Mouski

Hassan drove out of the hotel alley into a chaos of horns, pedestrians who flirted with sudden death, wildly maneuvering cars, and donkey carts that always seemed on the verge of being hit by an accelerating truck. It was a normal day in Cairo traffic.

The boys watched with mixed fear and amazement – fear that Hassan would hit someone and amazement that he didn't. Time after time he bore down on a slow-moving Egyptian and Rick's heart leaped into his throat until collision was averted by some miracle or other, usually a wild, record-breaking leap by the pedestrian.

The trip from the airport had been along streets that formed a kind of throughway, but in the city itself, the traffic was the kind that would send an American traffic cop screaming for the riot squad. Here, no one seemed to think anything of it.

The boys relaxed a little as it became clear that Hassan knew what he was doing. His driving was perhaps a shade more careful than that of most drivers. Once, as he sped down a crowded, narrow street at forty miles an hour, horns blasted behind them.

Rick turned, but could see nothing wrong. He asked, "Why all the honking, Hassan?"

"They want we go faster," the dragoman said.

Scotty laughed. "Might as well relax. This is the slow, sleepy pace of the Middle East we used to read about."

Rick laughed with him. He had seen hectic traffic before, but nothing to compare with Cairo. This wasn't traffic. It was some kind of wild contest with no rules and only survival as the winner's prize. "Any number can play," he muttered.

He tried to pay attention to signs, but they were in Arabic script. He saw that modern Cairo was giving way to the older city. The buildings were smaller, more closely spaced. Most were of wood, but a few were obviously of ancient stone. In this part of the city, merchants displayed their wares on the sidewalks in front of cubicle-sized stores.

Then, with a suddenness that threw them forward, Hassan pulled into a parking place, jammed on the brakes, and killed the motor. "We walk now," he told them. "Street too small for car."

Rick could see only narrow alleys. If they were the streets Hassan meant, walking was the only possible means of transportation.

In the square where Hassan had halted were dozens of merchants, some with their wares in carts, others carrying them on their backs. A rug merchant approached and Hassan waved him off. "Come. El Mouski over there." He pointed to a narrow alleyway.

The boys followed, eyes taking in the sights, smells, and noises. Merchants hawked their wares with raucous cries, charcoal braziers smoked under assorted foodstuffs, and the air was redolent with the odors of food, people, and the accumulated living of many centuries.

In the alley were shops, closely packed, some little more than a doorway wide and others of quite respectable size. A few even had glass windows with displays. There were textiles, foodstuffs, tinned copper, brass, leather goods, inlaid work, rugs, shoes of strange designs, clothing, and a variety of antiques.

Hassan stopped before a cubicle crowded with interesting brassware and spoke in Arabic to a dark man with tiny spectacles. Rick thought he heard the name of Ali Moustafa. He waited while the merchant replied at length, with much waving of the hands as he outlined the path to the establishment.

"I know now," Hassan informed them. "We go."

Rick and Scotty fell in step with the guide. In many places the alleys were under roofs or wooden awnings. In other places the buildings were so close together that the three walked in single file. Rick could see that daylight seldom reached the bottom of El Mouski. He moved aside to make room for a donkey which carried huge jars.

Merchants beckoned to the boys, promising low prices and goods of superb quality, but Hassan waved them off. Occasionally a beggar approached, but the boys were surprised by the small number of mendicants.

The path passed from alley to alley, past dozens of shops. Rick saw a few tourists, but the tourist season was still weeks ahead and most of the people were Egyptian.

A little Egyptian boy with a dirty face called, "Yonkees! 'Ello!" The boys returned his cheerful grin.

"This is a good-natured crowd," Rick commented. Many of the dark, Semitic faces greeted them with cordial smiles and a half-salute of welcome.

"Friendly people," Scotty agreed. "How far, Hassan?"

"Two streets. Soon."

The dragoman turned a corner, led them straight ahead for a few hundred steps, then turned a second corner. He pointed. Diagonally across the alley was a large store with display windows. A sign over the door carried the name ALI MOUSTAFA surrounded by Arabic script.

"We'll get rid of the cat, then do some shopping," Rick said. "I'm anxious for a closer look at some of these shops. How about you?"

"Ali Moustafa's seems pretty good to me," Scotty replied. "Look at that stuff." He pointed to leather goods displayed in one window. "It's beautiful. Go on in and deliver kitty while I see what some of these things are."

"I tell you," Hassan offered. "Then I help bargain so prices be low. No bargain, prices too high."

Rick walked in through the open door, his eyes taking in the amazing collection of stuff sold by Ali Moustafa. The store was a big one, especially compared with most in the bazaar, and there were several clerks. The walls were lined with shelves that held copperware, brassware, silver, and inlaid boxes. He saw rolls of tapestries, collections of brass camels and donkeys, and glassed-in cases of jewelry. Crowding the floor space were huge vases of brass or pottery, camel saddles, metal trays on low stands, and huge leather hassocks.

The clerks eyed him with interest, then all eyes focused on the package under his arm. For a moment Rick felt a current of tension run through the store, but he dismissed it as imagination. He walked toward the rear counter, trying to identify Ali Moustafa, but none of the clerks fitted the description Bartouki had given.

He addressed his question to the clerk behind the rearmost counter. "Is Mr. Moustafa here?"

The clerk's dark eyes flickered, and his face became expressionless. "Please to be seated. I will get him."

The clerk vanished through a curtained door at the rear of the store, and Rick turned. He was sensitive to impressions, and he was again conscious of the tension. As he turned he saw that all the clerks were watching him, their faces impassive. His eyes went to the front of the store. Scotty was with Hassan in the doorway, discussing some object in the display window.

A voice spoke from behind him. "You wish to see me?"

Rick turned. The newcomer was a tall, well-built Egyptian with glossy black hair and a military mustache. Unblinking black eyes met his gaze, and there was no hint of welcome in them.

"Are you Ali Moustafa?" Rick asked.

The man bowed a quarter of an inch. "At your service," he said.

Rick didn't know what to say. Bartouki had described a huge, jolly fat man, like Santa Claus without a beard. This man was big, but not huge, not fat, and definitely not jolly.

For a moment Rick hesitated, then asked, "Is there another Ali Moustafa in the bazaar?"

The black eyes locked with his. "There is no other. I am the only Ali Moustafa. And you? If you are Mr. Brant from America, I have been expecting you. Bartouki said you would deliver a package. Is it the one under your arm perhaps?"

Rick didn't like this at all. Even if the description had been exaggerated in some respects, this cold conversation was scarcely a cordial welcome. Yet, the man knew about the cat, and about Bartouki. Something was wrong. He wanted to deliver the cat as he had promised, but he had no intention of turning it over to the wrong man.

"I have a package," he returned evenly. "I'm sorry it can't be delivered now. The man who receives it will have to identify himself without question as the proper Ali Moustafa."

The man shrugged. "You came to my shop. The sign tells you who I am. There is no other Ali Moustafa. So, I will accept delivery of the cat, if you please."

Rick shook his head. "Sorry."

The man spoke in Arabic and took a step forward. Sensing movement behind him, Rick whirled.

The clerks were moving to block his way!

Rick reacted with lightning speed. He yelled, "Scotty!"

Scotty sensed the urgency of the call and jumped into the doorway.

Rick lifted the Egyptian cat and rifled a pass through the closing ranks of clerks. Scotty snatched the cat out of the air. Rick followed through with a battering charge that sent a clerk caroming into a stack of copper jars. They went down with a clatter. Another clerk reached out and Rick gave him a straight arm that cleared the way long enough for a jump to the outside.

"Run!" he yelled.

Hassan had been standing with mouth open, astonished at the proceedings. Now, as a clerk charged through the door, the dragoman flung himself sideways in a beautiful body block that sent the clerk back into the store with a crash. Then the three were rounding the corner at top speed, pushing through the people in the street.

From behind them came a shouted command in Arabic. A figure in a long, dirty robe stepped into Scotty's path and grabbed for the cat. The boy tossed a lateral pass to Rick, who tucked the package under his arm. Scotty's hand lashed out and his open palm caught the Arab under the chin. The man lifted inches into the air and his head thudded audibly against a brick wall. He lost all interest in the proceedings.

Hassan led the way like a charging lineman, with Rick in his wake. Scotty fell back a few paces to prevent attack from behind. But in spite of a few yells from the rear, no one else menaced them. The people of the bazaar obviously were curious, but not involved.

Rick had a fleeting thought that a pair of obvious foreigners running at top speed through a department store at home would arouse some curiosity, too. He grinned, in spite of his bewilderment. Then they were at the car. Hassan wheeled the little sedan around in almost its own length and charged through the crowded streets like a miniature juggernaut, heading back to the hotel.

A short time later over *café au lait*, part coffee and part hot milk, the boys and Hassan held a half-angry, half-amused post mortem. There had been no opportunity in the car for real conversation because of the sheer adventure of rocketing through impossible traffic at equally impossible speed. Rick had reported briefly to Scotty, and that was all.

Scotty took a sip from his steaming cup and turned to Hassan. "You ever play football?"

Hassan stumbled over the word. "Footsball? What are footsball?"

"Never mind." Scotty grinned. "The way you took that clerk out, I thought you might have played blocking back for the Green Bay Packers."

The dragoman's bewilderment deepened. Rick came to his rescue. "Football is an American game, Hassan. It is rough. The Green Bay Packers is the name of a famous professional football team."

"One thing is for sure," Scotty offered. "The clerks didn't know football. That flat pass you threw was good for plenty of yardage."

"It made a touchdown," Rick pointed out. He changed the subject. "Look, what went on in that store, anyway? I don't know who the big man was, but he wasn't Ali Moustafa. At least he didn't come close to Bartouki's description."

"Why didn't you give him the cat, anyway?" Scotty asked with a grin. "Afraid a brand-new mystery might end without you getting a piece of it?"

Rick grinned back. "Not a bad idea, now that you mention it. I didn't think of it at the time. The only thing I knew for sure was that I wasn't going to hand over any helpless little pussycat to a guy with eyes like that. He'd mistreat it."

"Uhuh. Only, now what do we do with the cat?"

"Give it to the right Ali Moustafa," Rick said. "There must be a right one somewhere."

Scotty waved his arm in a gesture that took in all of Egypt, half of the Sudan, and most of Libya. "Help yourself. I'll bet there are ten thousand Ali Moustafas around. How do you find the right one?"

Rick didn't try to answer. Instead, he asked Hassan, "Could there be another Ali Moustafa in El Mouski?"

The guide shook his head. "I ask my friend when we stop. He say there is only one, and he tell me how we get there."

Rick's brows furrowed. "Then that must be the shop Bartouki meant. Only where was big, fat, jolly Ali Moustafa? Or could I be wrong about the description?"

Scotty was definite. "Not a chance. I remember the description the way you do. Either Bartouki didn't know his own partner, or the man you saw was not Ali Moustafa – unless he took off weight and shaved his beard. And changed his disposition in the bargain."

"Which brings us back to the question before the house. What do we do with the Egyptian cat?"

"Give it to Hassan," Scotty suggested with a smile.

The dragoman's pleasant black face assumed an air of great sadness. "Cat's nice," he said. "But no can take. Too much cost for food."

Rick smiled at the joke, then suddenly he realized Hassan was not joking. He was genuinely sad! He took the package from his lap and held it up. "Hassan, what do you think is in here?"

The dragoman shrugged. "You say cat. I believe."

Scotty asked incredulously, "Didn't you think carrying a cat wrapped in paper was pretty strange?"

Hassan smiled apologetically. "Americans many time do thing I not understand."

Rick choked back laughter with a heroic effort and almost strangled. Scotty found a handkerchief and blew his nose violently.

"Pretty strong coffee," Rick managed finally.

Scotty nodded, struggling to keep a straight face. Neither of them wanted to risk hurting the guide's feelings.

"Hassan," Rick said at last, "even American science couldn't keep a live, wide-awake cat quiet in a paper parcel. This cat is a model, a statue. You see?"

For an instant Hassan stared, then he rocked back, his white teeth flashed, and he shouted with laughter. The boys broke down, too, and in a moment the entire patronage of the coffee shop was staring at the three idiots who roared with unrestrained laughter in public. Such behavior in Americans was to be deplored, perhaps, but understandable. But a licensed dragoman ... incredible!

When they had quieted down, Rick summed it up. "Well, Hassan knows what's in the package now, but that's the only new bit of information any of us has. We still don't know exactly what happened in the bazaar, or why. And we don't know what to do with the cat."

He felt the cat through the heavy paper, as though to reassure himself it was there. Suddenly he didn't want to get rid of it quite so urgently, and inwardly he laughed at himself. A mystery was one thing he couldn't ignore.

"I hope I'm wrong," he concluded thoughtfully, "but I have a hunch this little plastic feline is going to be more trouble than the liveliest real cat you ever saw!"

CHAPTER V

Sahara Wells

Hassan arrived during breakfast on the following morning. His colorful costume had given way to European clothes, except for a tarboosh. He wore a topcoat.

At Rick's invitation he joined the boys on the balcony overlooking the Nile, and accepted the offer of coffee. Rick went to the novel push-bell system which had three buttons identified by pictures. One was a porter, another the room maid, and the third a waiter. The little drawings were for the benefit of strangers who knew neither Arabic nor English.

Rick rang for the waiter and ordered more coffee and a cup for the dragoman.

Hassan shed his topcoat and grinned at the boys. "Cat catch mouse last night?"

"No mouse," Scotty replied. "The cat just caught some sleep. And so did we."

Hassan puzzled out the reply, then smiled his appreciation.

Rick thought that the cat hadn't even caught any interest – at least from the scientists. At dinner he and Scotty had described the incident at El Mouski to Winston and the Egyptian scientists. The scientists had only one suggestion, to the effect that perhaps the boys' imaginations had run away with them.

It was obvious that the scientists were far more interested in the problem of the radio telescope than in listening to tales of wild adventure in the bazaar, so the boys let the matter drop. They had excused themselves immediately after dinner and turned in, tired from the long plane trip and the day's excitement.

Rick had gone over the events at the bazaar a dozen times. He had compared notes with Scotty on what Bartouki had told them. Clearly, something was pretty strange about the whole affair. It was simply inconceivable that Bartouki would have given an inaccurate description of Ali Moustafa, so the man in the store had not been Bartouki's partner. Yet, he had known about the cat, and had called Rick by name. Who was he? And where was the real Ali Moustafa? There were no answers, at least for the present. But Rick didn't intend to give up.

He motioned to Hassan's coat. "Is it cold out today?"

"Yes. Good you wear coats when we go out. Later it will be warm, then cool again when sun goes."

The boys had decided to keep Hassan as a guide and driver during their entire stay. The dragoman's services were not expensive, and besides, both of them felt they had found a friend. The way Hassan had pitched in at the bazaar, with no questions asked and their interests obviously at heart, had been a fine example of professional loyalty coupled with a quick mind and fast reflexes.

After breakfast the boys went to the wardrobe and took out the coats they had brought. Rick's was brand new, a Christmas present from his father. It was a short, hip-length woolen coat that could double as a hunting jacket. In addition to the big outer pockets, it had inner game pockets lined with a leatherlike plastic. It was warm, but light. He was thoroughly pleased with it.

Scotty slipped into his own short coat, much like Rick's except for the game pockets. Then the ex-Marine motioned to the Egyptian cat, unwrapped and sitting in elegant repose on the writing desk. "What about Felix?" he asked.

Rick went over and picked up the cat. "We'd better take it along, I guess. It might get lonesome. Or we might run over Ali Moustafa on the way to the project." He slid the cat into an inner pocket. It fit with room to spare.

Scotty asked Hassan, with mock seriousness, "You know Sahara Wells?"

Hassan answered with equal seriousness. "Know Sahara Wells well."

The ride was an interesting one, up the Nile to a bridge different from the one they had crossed en route from the airport, along roads with a palm-shaded center strip, past mosques, stores, and airy, modern apartment houses. There was less traffic than in downtown Cairo, and Hassan went faster.

Scotty muttered, "Fewer close calls today."

Rick winced as the car almost scraped a woman with a basket of fruit balanced on her head. "Fewer, but closer."

The costumes on the street were mixed. There were many people, including women, in Western dress, but there were also many women in cloaks, and men in the traditional Arab *bornoss*, the enveloping robe called a burnoose in English. For the first time, the boys saw several men in blue gowns, and Rick asked Hassan what they were.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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