

L. RON HUBBARD



False Cargo

GALAXY
PRESENTS

The Toughest Man Alive

SPIKE O'BRIEN'S bull bellow was deceptively hearty, sgratingly cheerful. With one foot planted on the brass rail before the Honolulu bar, with a slopping glass of liquor tottering before his gross face, he roared, "Come on up here, every one of you sons! You're goin' to drink to the toughest man that ever sailed the Pacific. Snap into it, me buckos!"

A Kanaka-Chinese breed moved cautiously away, his black eyes bright with fear of the swaying bulk beside him. Spike O'Brien caught the movement out of the corner of his bloodshot eye. With a jerk of his thick wrist he sent both glass and liquor hurtling into the half-caste's face.

With a scream, the small yellow man clawed at his eyes and stumbled away. Blood was running down into his mouth from a cut jaw.

O'Brien laughed. The sound shattered even the noisy turmoil of the Honolulu dive. Men stopped and stared.

"Come up here, every one of you!" snarled O'Brien with a leer. "Come up here and drink to the toughest man on the Pacific. Spike O'Brien. S-P-I-K-E, Spike. O-B-R-I-E-N, O'Brien. The man who killed Shen Su. The guy who whipped the governor of Borneo. I'll take on any two of you—any three of you. I'll fight the whole damned bunch of you with both hands tied. Come on up here and *drink!*"

The fat barkeep stopped dispensing coolihow and swabbed his greasy forehead. His eyes were pleading with someone, anyone, to do something about this. Men were stumbling up the steps that led to the dock street, deserting the place, trading its external and internal warmth for Honolulu's wet fog.

O'Brien turned around and swept his apparently drink-glazed eyes across the room and its remaining occupants. He was a tremendous bulk of a man, clad in black pea jacket, white-topped cap. His coat swung open and light fell on the brass buckle against his waist.

O'Brien's eyes rested on the far side of the room, went away and came back again. His mouth twitched with annoyance.

A white man sat there, quietly spinning a small glass between thumb and index finger. His hands were narrow and tapering as are those of an artist. His face was the face of a saint. His shoulders were of awesome dimensions, even though he was noticeably slender. O'Brien's annoyed glance rested on the quiet face, seeing only the fine features of a gentleman, completely missing the small light which danced far back in the metallic gray eyes. The face might be that of a saint, but the eyes did not match.

O'Brien did not like either face or fingers. He had ordered all up to the bar for a drink and this man had not answered the call.

"Hey, you!" barked O'Brien. "Come up here, unnerstand? You're going to have a drink with me whether *you* like it or not, see?"

The face showed very little interest. The small sparkling glass went round and round between the slim fingers.

O'Brien lurched away from the bar. The lurch was exaggerated. It took more than a dozen drinks to make Spike O'Brien that drunk. His eyes were suddenly cold, shining with an animal intelligence.

"You'll come up to this bar or I'll drag you up!" promised O'Brien, jolting against the table, spilling the other's glass.

"You annoy me, Mr. O'Brien. And I don't like your face. Get out of here before I change my mind about dirtying my hands on you." In spite of the import of the words, the quiet face did not change or show the slightest interest or emotion. The small lights in the eyes were flaring up steadily.

"You . . . you talk that way to Spike O'Brien?" O'Brien was plainly dumbfounded, aghast. He slapped his hairy hands down on the scarred top of the table and thrust his jaw close to the other's face. "Maybe—" said O'Brien, "maybe you don't know who I am."

"Probably not."

"Well, I'm Spike O'Brien, that's who I am. I'm the man Ring and Talbot brought all the way from China to do a job for 'em. I'm tough, get me? I'd just as soon *kill* you as look at you."

"Please take your face away," said the other mildly. "Your breath is bad. Haven't you any friends to tell you?"

O'Brien rocked back on his heels. His red-rimmed eyes focused on the other's face. His coarse lips moved soundlessly for a moment and then words exploded from them.

"Say, I know you . . . you're Brent Calloway!" he yowled.

The other nodded. "Yes . . . Brent Calloway. What were you saying a moment ago about being the toughest man

on the China Coast? That scar on your jaw looks familiar, O'Brien."

The scarred jaw was jutting. O'Brien rocked on his heels, though he was plainly cold sober. He studied the other's position. A man sitting down makes a good target—he cannot dodge.

O'Brien's hand snapped to his belt. A short Derringer, smaller than the palm of his hand, capable of throwing two .45 slugs in less than two seconds, gleamed an instant under the hanging lantern.

Brent Calloway's fist disappeared under the lapel of his jacket. Flame blasted out from the table's edge. A second ribbon of sparks leaped up to scorch O'Brien's face.

The Derringer dropped with a clatter. A widening stare of surprise spread across O'Brien's coarse, flat features. His hands groped for the table edge. Abruptly he dropped, as though something had cut the string that held him up. The stubby fingers closed twice, and then O'Brien lay still.

Brent Calloway shoved the automatic back into his shoulder holster and glanced up at the entrance. Police might arrive any moment. All men had vanished from the basement dive.

Calloway stood for a moment staring down at the loosely sprawled form. A grimace of distaste passed across his face. Bending over, he thrust a hand into O'Brien's shirt and brought forth a packet of papers wrapped in a strip of oilcloth. Pocketing these, he walked steadily to the door and mounted the steps.

The fog closed in behind him.

♦ F A L S E C A R G O ♦

O'Brien twisted about with a pain-racked grunt, finding just enough energy to shake his fist at the door and mutter, "This time you won't get away with it—not this time, Brent Calloway!"