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The Bold Dare All

GALAXY
PRE/SE

Defiance to Timba's Ruler

THE sinuous length of the blacksnake whip threshed like a snake in agony upon the blazing coral sand.

Back and forth, back and forth, it left a crazy pattern of arcs and wiped out the prints of naked feet.

Eyes followed the lash, back and forth, as though the whip really was a snake with the powers of hypnotism.

High above the tatterdemalion crowd the spinning sun whipped down its quivers of molten arrows.

Palm fronds drooped in the windless heat. Where the sea plumed up from the outer reef rose lazy, rainbowed steam. Beyond lay the Celebes Sea, a glazed, heat-polished metallic sheet of scorching blue.

Inland loomed the mountains. Festering green tangles spread over the rough and jagged slopes like scum left by a receding tide.

The miserable huts along the shore crouched among the crawling vines, trying to hide their scaly thatch and blistered boards. From the horizon to the peaks, everything was harsh, brutal and ugly.

The men who stood in awful fascination were clad in tatters or not clad at all. Upon their gaunt and wasted features were stamped the hard-living histories of their lives.

Like the bleached bones of the sailing ship which rotted upon the coral sand, these men had been cast up by the sea and the sea did not want them back.

No one wanted them but Schwenk, and Schwenk wanted nothing but their physical abilities. He wanted their hands and their backs and he took them and broke them as he pleased. Schwenk needed them because he needed copra.

The blacksnake whip was still lashing, making a hissing sound as it moved. A hand, copper-plated by the sun, horny with work, battered with fighting, gripped the leather-sewn butt. The nails were dirty; the back of the hand was hairy.

Above the thick forearm clung a sweat-grimed sleeve. The throat of the shirt was ripped back, exposing a long, livid scar which was the handiwork of a certain native who had gone mad.

A native would have to be mad to attack Schwenk. This one was long ago cured of his mental disease. Buried to the ears in sand, honey smeared over his features, he had been abandoned to a tribe of ants who had mandibles sharp enough to go through ironwood.

Everyone was watching that whip. Schwenk's gloating eyes caressed the writhing length, up and down, up and down, measuring it with a blood-freezing expertness born of long, long practice.

Schwenk thrust his black tongue between his broken black teeth and moistened his lipless mouth. The bloated circle of his face lighted up. His flawless blue, bitterly cold killer eyes shifted suddenly to the back of the man.

The native moaned helplessly. His brown eyes were still on that moving lash. His hands were suspended high over his head, wrists lashed together, making his back muscles bulge beneath the chocolate-colored satin of his skin. He shivered.

Schwenk dug his heels into the white sand. He bent his body forward, dragged the lash back to its full ten feet of length.

Sssst! Crack!

Blood burbled up through the torn flesh and glistened in the sunlight.

Sssst! Crack!

The man screamed.

Sssst! Crack!

The crisscross pattern grew more complex and then began to blur. In a matter of seconds chunks of flesh were squared out and turned around and left dangling by small bits of skin.

It was impossible to see any pattern now. Only a dripping, red mass. Flies were swarming in upon it, leaping up and out of the way each time the whip struck, settling back when the lash drew away.

The natives in the crowd were staring and shaking. The two dozen white derelicts looked on unaffected.

But on the edge of the throng stood a man apart. He was not watching the lash. He was watching Schwenk with disdainful eyes, studying the hot satisfaction which blazed upon Schwenk's face at each crack of the whip.

Lee Briscoe had only been on Timba for two months. He had not yet had time to become a ragged scarecrow. He still pipe-clayed his helmet, he still polished his well-cut boots,

he was still particular about the way his khaki breeches and shirts were starched.

The crowd knew nothing about him but they whispered that he was wanted by the law. No man would work for Schwenk of his own free will. Others held that Lee Briscoe had been an Army lieutenant and had murdered a soldier. But not one held the real clue as to why the man had chosen hellhole Timba for a retreat.

Lee Briscoe's eyes were clear and gray. His face was darkly burned. His cheekbones were high and prominent and his jaw was lean and firm. He was built wide at the shoulders and tapered off from there like a boxer.

Schwenk was beginning to sweat at his work, but that did not curtail his enjoyment of it in the least. He was just getting into good form when Lee Briscoe stepped into the clear space behind him and snatched the lash as it swung back.

Lee Briscoe threw the blacksnake thirty feet down toward the water, but he did not watch it go as the others did. He was looking straight at Schwenk.

Schwenk turned slowly. He looked at the tips of Briscoe's boots and then at the crown of Briscoe's helmet. Casually, not in the least excited, Schwenk put his hand on the heavy butt of his belted revolver.

"You got anything to say about it?" said Schwenk, carelessly. "Maybe you just forgot yourself. Maybe somebody told you I liked to be interrupted. That it?"

Lee Briscoe's words came slowly, with a drawl. "There isn't any reason to kill him. Finky was a good man."

“He’s a thief,” said Schwenk. “I’ve got five hundred natives on Timba. If they start stealing . . .”

“Finky wouldn’t have stolen anything if you’d feed good rations. He was hungry. All he took was a can of salmon and a half-dozen biscuits. If he’d killed his partner, you wouldn’t have had a word to say. That isn’t justice, Schwenk.”

Schwenk sneered at Briscoe, turned and barked at the men: “He’s taking over the island, boys. Tip your hats to him. I said, tip your hats!”

Uneasily, the two dozen derelicts touched their fingers to their battered helmets and straws.

Schwenk faced Briscoe again, lipless mouth curling into a ghastly grin. “Now is there anything else you want, Briscoe? Maybe a Scotch and soda? WONG! Bring Briscoe a Scotch and soda!”

There came a full minute’s silence and then Wong, opium-drugged, slant-eyed servant to Schwenk, came forth with the order on a tray.

“Drink it up,” said Schwenk, hand on the butt of his gun. “Drink it up, Mr. Briscoe, because that’s the last time you’re ever going to drink anything on this earth. I’m going to murder you, Briscoe. Right here. And murder isn’t pleasant. Here, don’t mind me, drink up!”

Briscoe looked levelly at Schwenk and knew that the man meant every word he said. No man but Schwenk could carry a gun on Timba—except when the natives staged one of their frequent revolts.

Briscoe looked at the lacerated back of the unconscious

Finky. He told himself that it was worth it. He reached for the bottle and poured out a big slug of Scotch. Behind him, the derelicts moved out of the line of fire.

“To your health, Schwenk,” said Briscoe, carelessly, seeming to look only at his glass.

Suddenly the amber fluid sloshed straight out. The alcohol stabbed into Schwenk’s killer eyes.

With a yowl of agony, Schwenk lurched back. Briscoe’s quick fingers plucked the gun from its holster and threw it after the whip.

Clawing at his face, Schwenk screamed a torrent of filthy abuse. In a moment he could see, in another moment he was trying to get his gun.

Briscoe rocked him with a mighty left, followed it with a right.

They went down into a swirl of sand, gouging, yelling, fighting with nails and boots and teeth.

A hoarse whistle raised the echoes of the jagged hills. The derelicts faced seaward and stared at the small steamer which was poking its nose into the lagoon.

It was one of Schwenk’s six ships which served the better part of the Flores Sea, carrying freight, sometimes passengers, but chiefly copra.

Schwenk heard it, and although his mouth was full of sand and Briscoe’s fist, he roared to his men for help.

They dared not refuse, those derelicts. They pulled Briscoe off and held him struggling while Schwenk retrieved his gun. They supposed of course that Schwenk would shoot

Briscoe immediately and have done with it. Instead, Schwenk holstered his weapon, spat out sand and said:

“Well, well, Mr. Briscoe. So you’re a fighter, are you? We’ll have to see some more about this later. Right now, let him go. Mr. Briscoe, you have the doubtlessly honorable privilege of being the first man under me who ever dared question my authority. That is very unique. If such a man were to behave himself, perhaps I could better use him. How about it?”

“You want my word or something of the sort?” said Briscoe.

“Your word?” shouted Schwenk with a laugh. “What good is that? I have a gun. That’s enough for me. I’ll break you, Briscoe, and I’ll enjoy myself doing it. Shooting is too easy. Let him go.”

The steamer was pulling alongside the wharf. On the bridge, gnarled and evil Captain Gunarson was yelling for somebody to catch his monkey fists. The crowd shuffled down to the sheet-iron warehouse and stood gaping up at the steamer deck.

Schwenk stopped in mid-pace and looked at the people on the deck. He let out a joyous curse, straightened his shirt, adjusted his helmet and permitted himself what he thought was a winning smile.

Briscoe had also stopped to stare.

There were a few native women on the island, of course. Some of the men had been fortunate enough to have had their wives brought into captivity with them.

But never before in the history of Timba had a white woman touched those harsh shores.

Briscoe frowned and looked uneasily at Schwenk's hurrying back. Briscoe looked up at the deck of the schooner again.

No, his eyes weren't lying to him. A girl was standing amid a tumble of baggage upon the deck. Coolly beautiful, in her turn she was looking at the motley crowd.

Briscoe felt something happen inside his chest.

She was dressed in the crispest white imaginable. She had a sweet, interesting face. She had a frank pair of eyes, utterly unafraid.

Beside her stood an elderly man, well dressed but somehow weak.

The man waved to Schwenk and Schwenk waved back. But Schwenk was staring only at the woman.

The gangway was down. The girl was coming carefully off. Schwenk was there to take her arm.

"Briscoe!" yelled Schwenk. "Take the lady's bags up to the house."

Briscoe was looking straight into the girl's eyes. He recovered himself with a jolt and faced Schwenk. "I've got something else to do."

He strode quickly up the beach and through the screening palms. He took a machete from a black man and cut the still-unconscious Finky down.

Giving Finky's feet into the care of a giant named Joffo and carrying the bloody head himself, Briscoe approached the mean, filthy thatched huts which made up the slave quarters.

"Doc" Rengarte, a drunken and disgraced French Army vet, tagged after them, combing the lice thoughtfully out of his gray beard.

“See that he gets well,” ordered Lee Briscoe.

“You can’t kill ’em,” said Rengarte. “When I was in *le Maroc* I once had to operate—”

“If he dies,” said Lee Briscoe, “you’re liable to be tagging right after him.”

“You’re so emphatic, Briscoe. By the way, did you see that dame? Ah, quite lovely. And how you stared, Briscoe! Don’t let Schwenk see you staring like that. He’s got first rights around here, whether you admit it or not. . . . Ah, well, Briscoe, I suppose you’ll have to kill me. This man’s very, very dead.”