

L. RON HUBBARD



Destiny's Drum

GALAXY
PRESENTS

To Face a Firing Squad?

JOSÉ EMANUEL BATISTA'S voice flowed on like a river of crude oil—conversational, ingratiating in spite of the portent of his words.

“And then, *senhor*,” said *Governador* Batista, “what may I be expected to do? You come here, attack my poor soldiers, laugh at them, and then refuse to state the reason you come to Kamling. What am I to believe?”

The white man, who lounged in the battered wicker chair on the other side of the more battered pine desk, returned no answer. His eyes were fastened on something outside the thatched hut.

The *governador* leaned forward. “And if, *senhor*, you are an international spy, come to survey the fortifications, I find it necessary to shoot you without delay. And if you are the only other thing you can be, an outlaw, also must I shoot you. In fact, *senhor*, I think it is best that I order out my firing squad immediately.”

The white man sat up a little in his chair, still staring out the door. “What,” he said, “is the name of that white girl out there?”

The *governador*'s smoothness fell away from him. An exasperated light entered his black, beady eyes. His several

chins lopped over the edge of his white jacket collar and quivered there. It appeared that he had been struck a mortal blow.

The girl in question had swung down from her horse and had entered the trading post. Dust swirled in small geysers where her riding boots had left their imprint.

The white man turned, then, to give the *governador* more particular attention. "Now what was that you were talking about?"

The *governador's* bushy brows were drawn down tight and his spiked mustache stood straight out from the round swarthy ball which was his face.

"*Senhor*," he said, "you are insulting to my dignity of office."
"What office?"

"What office? *¡Por Dios!* Have you no respect whatever? The office of *governador* of the island of Kamling, jewel of the Banda Sea."

"Oh." A pack of black cigarettes lay on the *governador's* desk. Taking one, the white man looked innocently into the official's face. "Have you a match?"

José Emanuel Batista sighed as quietly as possible and passed a paper package to the white man, a rugged young man in tattered white sailor pants. The young man's eyes were infinitely blue, infinitely languid. He was plainly bored.

"Let me go over this again, *senhor*. It is plain that you do not understand what you face. A firing squad!" The *governador* waved a dramatic hand across the street to a white wall.

"Is that all? *Governador*, it is much too warm to argue. If I am an international spy, shoot me. And if I am an outlaw,

shoot me. But, for heaven's sake, don't talk so much!" He dragged upon the cigarette and braced his feet against the door jamb. The flimsy hut rocked perilously.

Once more the *governador* sighed. He glanced up at the face of the native who stood beside him. That face was brown, mostly filed teeth and lusterless eyes. The chin was resting on a naked wrist and the hand was holding a long, sharp spear. This was Aboo-Tabak, King of Kamling, though his regal robes consisted of a breechcloth and his badge of office was nothing more than a luminous-dialed, loudly ticking alarm clock which dangled about his scrawny throat.

"Aboo-Tabak," said the *governador*, "this man has insulted your office, my office, and the authority invested in us. What shall we do with him?"

"Eat him."

The white man laughed and took another drag from the black cigarette. "The government of Portugal forgot about this island thirty years ago and they've probably forgotten all about you as well."

"Continue!" ordered the *governador*.

"All right. I'll add that you're former Sergeant Duarte of the island of Timor, wanted for murder and a few other things. And that you blackbirded along here for a while known as Portuguese Joe."

"How do you know these things?"

The white man yawned and readjusted his feet. He kept a weather eye on the door of the trading post.

"I know them, that's all," he said. "Otherwise you wouldn't care whether I landed here or not, and you wouldn't put

yourself to such great pains to shoot me. Although you haven't asked it yet, my name is Sheridan."

The *governador's* eyes glittered with amazement. "Sheridan!" he croaked. "Sheridan of the Nineteenth Route Army? That Sheridan?"

"I blush to admit it."

José Emanuel Batista sat back, rubbing his moist, fat palms together. "Then there is a chance that some of your rich friends might wish to buy you back again!"

"Not a chance. Go ahead and shoot me if you want. I'm tired of this."

"But wait," said the *governador*. "There is something you might do which would purchase your liberty."

"What?"

"Up above the town, three or four miles back from the edge of the sea, *senhor*, there is a man that causes me trouble."

"And," supplied Sheridan, "you want me to kill him for you."

"That's right."

"And what's he got that you want?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, *senhor*. Has he, Aboo-Tabak?"

The King of Kamling shifted his weight on the spear. "Girl, gold. Sure, you want lots along that feller."

José Emanuel Batista smiled a sick smile. "He's lying, Sheridan. He gets those ideas now and then. The sun, you see."

Sheridan snorted. "Having heard a few stories about this Portuguese Joe, I'd rather believe a cannibal."

"Cannibal!" barked Aboo-Tabak, leaning forward on the spear. "I be Muslim, praise Allah!"

Sheridan grinned, though the dead viciousness in

Aboo-Tabak's eyes hardly invited such an expression. "But," said Sheridan, "if you're a follower of Allah, then why do you let yourself be ruled by an infidel dog of a Christian?"

"That's enough of that!" roared the *governador*, jumping to his feet.

Aboo-Tabak's eyes lingered on Portuguese Joe's fat shoulders which threatened to burst through the white duck jacket.

"Well, why?" insisted Sheridan.

Aboo-Tabak smiled, displaying yellow, pointed teeth. "He say someday he take me to town called . . . called . . ."

"Paris," supplied José Emanuel Batista, sitting down again. "Now, *senhor*, to return to our business again. As long as you refuse to kill this man for me, I see no other course but to let my regiment execute you. After all, *senhor*, you came here this morning, landed and immediately quarreled with my men."

"They tried to take my money and guns from me."

"That is a severe charge against my troops, *senhor*. You infer that they are bandits, eh?"

"Certainly," agreed Sheridan cheerfully. "But hold this up a moment, will you? The girl is coming out of the trading post."

The *governador* jumped up, almost upsetting his desk. He started out the door, but Sheridan's raised feet blocked him. With a grin Sheridan lowered the offending legs and stood upon them. He was almost a foot and a half taller than Portuguese Joe.

Across the street two soldiers rose up from their place at the base of the wall. They cradled their rifles across their arms and watched Sheridan with sleepy eyes.

The girl had mounted the small pony, after tying a bag of

supplies behind the saddle. She cantered toward the group which stood in the sun waiting for her. At first it appeared that she would pass by without a glance. Then she caught sight of Sheridan and pulled up.

The *governador* was at her side instantly, sweeping off his pith helmet in a grand bow. But the girl paid him no attention whatever. She was scowling at Sheridan. And Sheridan took note that she was beautiful even when she scowled. Her face was untouched by the violent sun and her blue gray eyes were steady and clear. She carried a Luger automatic holstered at her side.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded of Sheridan.

“I’ve been wondering myself.”

“What’s your name?”

“Sheridan.”

Her eyes widened a little. “But what are you doing in this place?”

“I came down for my health. It was too rainy in China.”

“Then you’ve come to the wrong address. It rains eight times a day here right now—and this is the dry season. What’s this fat fool trying to do to you?”

“I beg the lady’s pardon,” wheezed Portuguese Joe. “Is it fitting that—”

“Don’t believe anything he says.”

“Well, I’m glad of that,” Sheridan smiled. “He tells me he is about to set me up before a firing squad.”

She whirled on the *governador*. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“Now, now!” said José Emanuel Batista. “I was merely

having a little fun with Sheridan.” He reached up and caught at her hand on the pommel.

Jerking her fingers away, the girl lifted her riding crop and brought it slashing down at José’s cheek. Unfortunately, Aboo-Tabak had come closer to the horse and part of the blow struck his hands. Blood spurted from the cut on the *governador’s* face.

The horse shied at the sudden lunge of the two men. Aboo-Tabak’s spear slashed up wickedly. José’s fat hands fought to catch the girl’s shoulders.

Abruptly both of them sprawled face down in the dust. Sheridan withdrew his foot and stood back. With a half bow he said, “Perhaps you’d better be on your way. There’ll be a shooting here in little or no time.”

The girl started to draw the Luger, but the two soldiers were already laying hold of Sheridan. José and Aboo-Tabak were jumping up, sending the dust feet high in their wrath.

Eyes wide, knowing that it was no use, the girl spurred forward. In a moment her horse was lost in the overhanging edge of the jungle, which lay over the hill before them.

“Now,” said José, “we shall see whether or not I was fooling about that firing squad.”

Aboo-Tabak stood with folded arms and his smile displayed his pointed teeth.

“Praise Allah,” remarked Aboo-Tabak.