

L. RON HUBBARD



THE CHEE-CHALKER

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

CHAPTER ONE

THE corpse was floating just at the bottom of the ladder where the dock lights reached thinly through the murky rain. The corpse was floating on its face, the way men will, and the back of the head seemed to move, though that was just the tide running through the hair. The tide had the corpse pinned against a piling so that the arms trailed out at an angle with the head and the feet curved in the same direction. The tide bubbles were full of phosphorus and lit it up all along one side.

Sven Nordsen had been drinking for about seven or eight hours and the quality of the liquor in Ketchikan had finally overcome even his strong stomach. He was so sick now that he was nearly sober. He stood on the Tamgas Trading Dock and wished he was back at sea in the *Mary D*, peacefully trolling for salmon with only a storm or two to worry about and maybe fog. Sven didn't see the corpse right away. When he did he leaned out and stared. Then he gave a shuddering kind of scream and went staggering up the dock to tell somebody about it. It was a somewhat wild night, even for Alaska, and so much had happened since dinner time that just one scream attracted no attention. Sven found Kelly, the night patrolman, and told him.

Kelly went down to the Tamgas dock and looked at the corpse. It was still there. Kelly flashed his light on it, looked at it for a little while and then said, "You go find Chief Danton, Sven. He's up at the Anchor."

Sven went up to the Anchor, more sober now, interested enough in his mission to avoid the three fights which lay in his path even though two of his friends were definitely interested. He found mild, serious Chief Danton.

"There's a corpse down at the Tamgas Dock, Mr. Danton."

"Who is it?" said Danton, finishing his drink.

"I don't know. Kelly said for you to come down."

"Have a drink, Sven?"

"Brrrrrrr! No."

"Never say I didn't offer you one."

"Well, maybe I better have one."

"Give him a drink, Morris," said Chief Danton, picking up his uniform cap.

"Something up?" said the barkeeper.

"Naw. Just a body down at Tamgas."

"Who is it?" said Morris the barkeeper, blowing his nose on his apron.

"I dunno," said Danton.

Sven watched Danton climb into his black slicker and leave. Morris set up a drink of rotgut.

"Takes the fog out of your bones," said Sven apologetically as he drained the glass.

"Who found it?" said Morris, faintly interested.

"I did," said Sven. "I looked down and there it was."

“Anything on him?”

“How do I know? I ain’t got any love for hauling stiff’s around. I tell you it sure was some shock to see it down there. Must’ve been in the water a month or two.”

“Naw,” said Morris authoritatively, “they go to pieces in a month.”

“Damned if they do!” said Njiki the wolf trapper, down the bar. “I seen a floater up in Sitka one time that had been in the water two months.”

“It’s colder in Sitka,” said Morris.

“Yeah, the hell it is. The water’s warmer. It’s closer to Japan, isn’t it?”

A young man took a seat near Sven and threw down a silver dollar. He motioned Morris to fill up Sven’s glass.

“You said something about a corpse?” said the young man.

Sven looked at him with suspicion. He was too well dressed and too neatly shaven to be an Alaskan. He had a peculiarly thorough way of looking at a person which wasn’t polite. He must be a chee-chalker. Still he looked strong and it was better to be polite. Besides, he had bought him a drink, as Sven belatedly discovered.

Norton repeated his question.

“Yea. It was down by the Tamgas Trading Dock.”

“Did you find it?” said Norton.

“Yah, I found it.”

“Guess I’ll go down and have a look,” said Norton. He left his change on the bar and took up his raincoat. It was a nearly white trench coat with a wide skirt. Norton pulled

his broad-brimmed city hat down over his eyes and walked out. The rain was sweeping in regimental fronts along the dark boardwalks. The neon signs in the bars made little progress against the soggy dark. Norton walked down past the Sourdough Hotel and out on the Tamgas dock. A stiff wind was blowing up Tongass Narrows, blowing froth off the tops of the waves which were faintly luminous patches of white in the blackness.

Norton looked around. A light was on in the Fish Exchange and a lot of men were standing around in there. Norton pushed through the huddle at the door and came up alongside Fagler, the Federal marshal, who was talking to Chief Danton.

Fagler stopped talking and looked at Norton. "Hello, Norton." There was faint antagonism in his voice as though he resented Norton's butting in. The FBI was not too popular with the Ketchikan marshal, for it tended to override him in certain matters.

Norton looked at the corpse. It was stretched out on the floor, leaving a wide pool of water which ran out and mixed with the water streaming off the raincoats of the men who stood about it. The face was eaten away by fish. It was bloated and the flesh was gleaming white where it had been cut. Other places it was black.

"Who is it?" said Norton.

Fagler, the marshal, didn't answer.

"It's James England, the man who owns the radio station here." Chief Danton displayed the name inside the dead man's coat.

“Probably got drunk and walked into the water,” said Fagler.

Bill Norton was only professionally interested. The FBI was not concerned with murder until it became part of other things. But Bill Norton didn't like the officious assurance in the marshal's voice. He bent down and turned the head to one side. There was a spot where the skull had been caved in.

“Fell and hit a piling before he went in,” said Fagler.

“Yah,” said Norton. “Every time I see a corpse pulled out of the water in this town it hit a piling when it fell in and broke open its head.”

“It's easy to do,” said a new voice, that of Thomas Hecklin, the local banker. He stood eyeing Norton from under the yellow brim of a sou'wester.

“That's right,” said Chief Danton. “Besides, there ain't any call to stir up a lot of trouble with an investigation.”

“Dead by accidental drowning,” said the coroner, writing in a book. “Isn't that what you say, boys?” His jury nodded their heads.

Norton just looked around.

“Well? What would you do, then?” said Fagler.

Norton looked at the marshal and walked out. He walked out on the dock and stood there for a while letting the rain cool off his face. He hated being squeamish but he had never gotten so calloused that he did not get sick when he had to look at a drowned corpse. The nausea would come over him and stay with him for sometimes an hour. He looked at the patches in the dark made by the whitecaps and wished he was as tough as people thought he was. Or he wished that

people wouldn't think he was tough so that he wouldn't have to be tough.

The men came out of the Fish Exchange and a wagon came for the corpse of James England. Paul Wagner came up and stood beside Norton in the dark rain.

Paul Wagner owned the Tamgas Trading Company and was a very important man in Ketchikan, even in Alaska. "Aren't you with the FBI?"

Norton looked at him from under his hat brim.

"Fagler said you were and I wanted to know what you thought about it. I'm Paul Wagner."

"Well?"

"I wanted to know what you thought about this. It is serious. James England was an important fellow to Alaska. His station up there on the knoll is Alaska's biggest and best. Now what's going to happen to it? I depend on him, or rather did, for my advertising. What do you make of it?"

"Make of what?" said Norton.

"Why, his murder."

"I thought they said it was suicide."

"They said it was accidental."

"I wasn't listening very closely."

"What do you make of it?"

"Why should I make anything of it? It's none of my business."

"I thought you were in town to look into his disappearance."

"Did you?"

"Well," said Wagner, his dark face turned full on Norton

now, “that was my impression. The Federal marshal wasn’t making any progress and so I thought you had been sent down to look into it.”

“Know anything about it?”

“About his disappearance?”

“Yes.”

Wagner looked closely at Norton but he couldn’t see through the rain and shadows well enough. “I know no more than anybody else. He had no enemies in particular and he was well loved.”

“I heard differently,” said Norton.

“No man is worth his salt who hasn’t a few enemies,” said Wagner nervously. He stayed around for nearly a minute but nothing more was said and so, uncomfortably, he went away.

Norton was glad he had gone. He wanted some more cold rain on his face. He wished corpses weren’t a part of a lawman’s business. At times like these he intensely regretted the small gold disc pinned to his wallet. That small gold disc sent him to such unseemly places.

Ketchikan, for example.

He looked at the rain and wondered that the skies were never emptied. A hundred and eighty inches a year was a tropical output with none of the tropical advantages. Of course it wasn’t as cold here as it was in Juneau. Far north though it was, it was as warm through the winter as most of the US coastal towns. If only it wouldn’t rain.

Bill Norton did not much like this country. He had been in it six months, most of the six spent behind a desk in Juneau,

the last spent wandering around Ketchikan trying to get a lead on a sack of “snow” and Jerry McCain. He had found the heroin leading nowhere so far as he could discover. And he had found no sign of FBI special agent Jerry McCain. There was no more “snow.” There was no trail whatever leading to the disappearance of his former boss. There was only rain. Rain and bars and drunken Indians and soldiers much drunker. Bill Norton, looking at the bobbing masthead and boom of a halibut boat tied to the Tamgas dock, was reminded of a gibbet.

Up the slippery boards skated a burblingly active young man, one of Bill’s main responsibilities. Chick Star had just graduated from the School in Washington. Some clerk had sent him to Alaska on the first boat. Chick wore people out.

“What’s the excitement?” said Chick.

“Corpse,” said Norton diffidently.

“Aw, honest? Who, where?”

“England. Drowned.”

“Gee! You finally located England? Gosh! Say, that’s good work! Gosh, why wasn’t I around?”

“If you’d stop chasing kloothes you might get in on something sometime,” said Norton, bored.

“Kloothes,” said Chick in a hurt voice. “I don’t chase kloothes. I can’t stand the sight of an Indian. Why would I chase kloothes?”

He was so earnestly involved, so gashed to the marrow, that Norton looked at him. Chick was six feet seven. He weighed two hundred and eighteen pounds. He ran into and knocked

over things. He was twenty-three and serious. He was full of ambition. He polished his gold disc every night before he went to bed and carried his heavy Colt revolver to dances.

“If you don’t you’ll go nutty with this rain,” said Norton.

“Oh, I like the rain,” said Chick. “It’s exciting. Things are dark and mysterious. Where’d you find England?”

“I didn’t find him.”

“But you must have,” said Chick, gloatingly surveying his hero. “Was he stabbed?”

“He fell in and hit his head on a piling. The fish ate his face.”

“Aw.”

“Well if you can’t take it you’ve got no business hanging around the Bureau.”

“You’re being modest,” said Chick hopefully. “You found him and he was murdered and you know who did it.”

“Sherlock Holmes doesn’t happen to be even a faint relation of mine,” said Norton. He slogged through the horizontal sea in the air toward bed at the Sourdough Hotel.

“Say!” said Chick, “did you see that?”

“What?”

“Those two men come out from behind that truck and turn the corner up there. They looked suspicious!”

“If they’re suspicious you’ve given them plenty of warning with that brass voice of yours.”

“Honest they did.”

“Probably were having a quiet drink where their pals wouldn’t ask for any.”

Chick loped up beside Norton, splashing heavily through

the puddles like an overgrown tank and thoroughly spattering his despondent boss. Suddenly Chick threw out his arm to stop Norton and almost knocked him flat backwards on the slippery boardwalk.

“Look at that!” said Chick in what he hopefully supposed to be a whisper.

A young woman had come out of the door of the Sourdough Hotel ahead of them. The lights from the windows were not sufficient to show her features but they were ample to bring into silhouette the two men who emerged from an alleyway. The silhouettes swooped down upon the young woman and grabbed her. Hurriedly they led her straight toward the dock. They evidently did not see Chick and Norton standing on the walk before them for all was blackness in that direction.

“Take your hands off me!” protested a girl’s voice.

“Come along,” said one of her captors.

Norton was always faintly nervous when he was with Chick. He could never be sure what Chick would do. Chick would follow orders after a fashion—with a few “improvements” of his own—but when Chick had no specific orders, anything might happen.

Chick gallantly sprang forward. His first blow knocked the tough nearest the gutter sprawling into the street where he splashed and bounced and splashed again. Following up, Chick forgot the small detail of keeping his eye on the other man and was, in an instant beyond him, thus presenting his back. The arm of the second tough came up and went down. Chick curled into himself and before the sound of the

striking blackjack came to Norton, Chick was a bundle of mud-stained clothes in the gutter.

Norton sighed. He stepped forward. The blackjack came down and the wrist swung into the crook of Norton's arm. Norton spun sideways to the tough. Out of the bearded face came a distorted yowl of anguish, cut by the muffled snap of an elbow. Norton caught the blackjack before it hit the sidewalk. Norton had no illusions. The tough was crumpling but one flip of the sap made the job complete. The other man was getting up and dazedly attempting to locate something to fight. He had his back to the lights. He saw the upraised blackjack and then he saw stars. Norton rapped him over the ear and across the nose for luck and then gave him a healthy kick in the ribs to see if he was still conscious. He wasn't.

Chick was moaning and the girl was crying.

"Shut up." Norton told the girl.

She looked at him through startled eyes.

"Ton of beef," grumbled Norton, picking Chick out of the gutter. "Stand up, will you?"

Chick's knees gave way and he sank upon the curb.

"Get up," said Norton. "Do you want to drown?"

The girl stood, paralyzed, it seemed, by shock.

"Well? Are you waiting for a fish derrick to come along and lift him?" said Norton. "Give me a hand."

Without taking her eyes from Norton she took Chick's arm and helped stand Chick on his feet.

"Now help me walk him into the Sourdough," said Norton.

She helped him walk Chick into the Sourdough. They

somehow got the weighty colossus across the lobby, a river of muddy rainwater in their wake, and up the steps. The clerk woke up and looked indifferently at them. He yawned and went back to sleep.

“Third floor,” said Norton. “Bear up. Do you think I can carry him by myself?”

The girl put all the strength she could into boosting Chick up the stairs. The case was narrow so that they could not walk on either side of the injured gallant, but after much pulling and pushing and swearing by Norton they got him up to the third floor and down the hall to his room.

Norton shoved Chick onto the bed. “Get some water,” he said to the girl without looking at her.

She stared at Norton until she reached the bathroom and only ceased when she had to locate the water tap and a towel. She came back and continued her hypnotized regard.

Norton pushed the wet towel over Chick’s face and Chick tried to push it away. Norton felt the bruise and decided that the injury was slight. He decided that, not from any medical knowledge of fracture or concussion, but the belief that nothing short of a ton of dynamite placed directly under his feet could really hurt Chick.

“That’s all,” said Norton. “He’ll come around.”

For the first time she spoke to him. “I haven’t thanked you for helping me.”

For the first time Norton looked fully at her. She was a beautiful woman, that he could not deny. She was a heartwarming blonde in a land of brunettes. She was

expensively and tastefully dressed and was certainly a lady, once more a rarity.

“Why?” said Norton.

“There . . . there’s no telling what might have happened if you hadn’t attacked those men.”

“Yeah?” said Norton, his tone faintly ironic.

She frowned a little, failing to understand him. “But I truly appreciate it.”

“You can beat it,” said Norton. “If you please,” he added remembering that she was, after all, a woman, and that he had to be polite.

“What’s the matter with you?” she demanded.

“Lady, I don’t happen to be as young or as foolish as my friend. Good night.”

“You mean . . . you wouldn’t come to the rescue of a woman?”

“Certainly. I’ll rescue anybody if they need it.”

“Sir, I do not like your tone.”

“Lady, I neither know nor like your game. Good night.”

“And what do you mean by that?” It was plain to see that her temper was delicately adjusted on a fulminate of mercury fuse.

“I mean you’d better paddle down and see if your pals have come to their better senses before they drown in this confounded rain.”

“You are insulting.”

“And you are obvious. Good night.”

She slammed the door so hard that the walls went in and

out accordion fashion for seconds. Then she threw the door open and snatched up the purse she had left on the bed and slammed the door twice as hard. A moment later she opened the door a third time.

“I ought to scratch your eyes out!”

“I ought to hang one on your lovely eye for getting my young friend sapped. And if you open that door again, I will.”

This time when she slammed the door, a chair fell over and a pane of glass fell musically out of the window to the street below.