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The Headhunters

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Travelers Headed for Trouble

DOWN in the hold of the *King Solomon*, a Polynesian sailor was piling up crates of canned food and humming a little under his breath.

It was cool in the hold, but not so outside in the pounding glare of the equatorial sun which, even this late in the afternoon, was scorching Kieta, Solomon Islands.

A footstep sounded behind the naked sailor and he turned, a grin on his face. Slowly the grin faded, to be replaced by a scowl.

Standing easily in the gloom was a dirty-faced white man of chunky build. In his hand he held a snub nosed .45.

"If it an't Hihi," said the white man. "'Oo would have thought to meet you here?"

"You more better get out," snapped Hihi, straightening up. "If boss comes, he killum plenty along you."

The white man grinned. "E won't be along, Hihi. I left him passing the time o' day at the club."

Hihi looked uneasily up at the bright square of blue sky which filled the hatch opening. He realized that he was alone aboard the schooner and that this man would show very little mercy if he took it into his head to shoot.

The white man, Punjo Charlie, looked amiable enough except for one eye which jiggled up and down and slid back

and forth as though well greased. The other eye, being made of glass, stared steadily ahead. *Punjo* stood for “tough one” in the dialect.

“No,” said Punjo Charlie, “e won’t be down for a bit. And I think mybe you’d be so good as to tell me right quick something I want to know about Tom Christian.”

Hihi made a stealthy move toward the keen dirk in his belt, but Punjo Charlie raised the gun ever so little and grinned a little harder.

“You went upcountry with Christian, Hihi. ’E found hisself too much gold for one man, him and Larsen. Mybe you’d like to tell me where it was, Hihi. Or mybe you’re tired of life. Remember what happened to Larsen, Hihi?”

Hihi looked levelly at the white man, not a little contempt in his brown, handsome face. “Yes, I was with boss, but you no get nothing along me. More better you go before boss knock hell outa you.”

“Now see here, Hihi,” said Punjo Charlie in a whining drone, “you’re mighty fond of life, an’t you? I wouldn’t want nothink to ’appen to you.”

Punjo Charlie stepped slowly forward. Hihi backed up until he was against the damp ribs of the schooner’s hold.

Punjo Charlie came on. Hihi suddenly gripped his knife hilt and sprang forward and sideways, weapon upraised, ready to strike.

Punjo looked fat and greasy but he could move like a striking snake. He did not fire, for that would bring down the town upon him. He raised his weapon, caught Hihi’s knife and brought the .45 butt crashing down on Hihi’s curly hair.

The brown man folded up and sank back, his eyes rolling, a seep of blood coming down his face. Punjo Charlie, with a glance at the hatch overhead, picked up several strands of hemp and lashed Hihi's arms and legs together in such a way that Hihi could not move.

The loyal Polynesian showed no immediate signs of waking up and Punjo Charlie had to resort to a full fire bucket which stood to one side. He sent the contents cascading down over Hihi and stood back, his good eye jiggling from the inert brown man to the hatch.

Hihi came awake slowly and then, with an attempt to leap up, felt the force of his ropes and fell violently back, cursing in several languages.

"You wait," cried Hihi. "Boss kill along you plenty, you bet. I not tell you nothing."

"No?" said Punjo Charlie, grinning evilly. "No?"

Punjo took the dirk and felt its edge. Slowly he leaned over the helpless brown man and drew a small pattern of red lines upon the shrinking chest. Hihi clenched his teeth and said nothing.

"Don't bother you none," said Punjo Charlie in disappointment. "Mybe if I was to hack off an ear careful-like you might like to say something about it. After all, Hihi, it an't nothink hard I wants of you. Just tell me where you left that pool full of gold dust and I'll let you stay right where you are. It an't anythink hard to arsk, Hihi."

"I not tell nothing," snapped Hihi.

Punjo Charlie regretfully took hold of Hihi's ear and fondled it. He tested the edge of his knife, assured himself

with a glance that Hihi was not going to talk after all and then, raising the blade, prepared to lop off the ear.

But before the knife could descend, heavy footsteps sounded overhead. Hihi started to cry out. Punjo Charlie slapped half a gunnysack into the open mouth, without any regard for Hihi's feelings in the matter. The sack was crawling with copra bugs.

Overhead, a clear, strong voice said, "Hihi! Where are you, you lazy devil?"

Punjo Charlie moved slowly back behind the stacks of crates until he could no longer be seen in the gloom. The footsteps came close to the hatch and Punjo Charlie raised his .45.

"Hihi!"

Punjo Charlie licked his puffy, greasy lips. That was Tom Christian's voice. Punjo had a score to settle with Tom Christian.

A white-clad man in a sailor cap thrust his shoulders and head over the coaming and yelled, "Hihi! You down there?"

Christian swung himself over the edge and clattered down the ladder. He was a little better than six feet tall and his shoulders were wide and straight. His gray eyes were clear and he had the air about him of a man who knows exactly what he wants to do and exactly how he will do it.

Christian reached the bottom and, stooping his head a little to pass under the crossbeams, looked down the length of the gloomy hold.

"Hihi!"

A slight movement in the darkness caused Christian to turn his head. His sun-dazzled eyes were long in picking up the silhouette of brown on the packs.

“What the devil. . . .”

Christian strode over and yanked the gunny sacking out of Hihi’s mouth and started in on the strands of rope.

“Boss,” whispered Hihi, “Punjo Charlie . . .”

“If you don’t mind, Christian,” said Punjo in his whiny voice, looking down the sights of his .45, “if you don’t mind, just stand there a bit, old fellow. I wouldn’t move none if I was you, Christian.”

Christian turned slowly and stared at the dirty, blue-jowled face and the jiggly eye. “You!”

“Ra’t you are, Christian. Me, Punjo. Owh, I’ve been looking forward to this, I can tell you. And how are you feeling, Christian?”

“So you’ve been looking forward to it, have you?” said Christian, acidly. “Well, so have I. I’ve been looking for you all over the Solomons. I believe I’ve got something to say to you, Punjo. Something about my partner, Larsen. Of course you wouldn’t know anything about his being murdered, would you?”

“Of course not, Christian.”

“Oh, of course not,” said Christian, bitterly. “Of course not. You caught Larsen when he went back to clean out that pool and you murdered him.”

“Why, Christian,” reproved Punjo Charlie. “’Ow could you think of such a thing?”

“I can think it all right. But you made a mistake, didn’t

you? You killed him before he could lead you to the place we had placered out. And now you're here, are you? It'll be a long time, me bucko, before you spend any of that gold."

"Do tell," said Punjo. "Now an't that too bad. Beg pardon, Christian, but would you mind sitting down there on those crates for just a moment? Long enough for me to put some rope on you? Hi don't want to kill you, Christian. Mybe maim you a little bit, but not kill you. Dead men," he added with a chuckle, "wasn't never known to talk very much."

"Take my advice," said Christian, "and clear out while you're still in one piece. I might change my mind and knock hell out of you."

"Listen to the brave lad," crowed Punjo. His good eye glittered and grew hard and he bared his teeth and his voice dropped down into a snarl. "So help me, Christian, you've stolen that mine off me and I'm going to get you for that. I've got contacts upcountry, Christian. I know Togu and his Kris and you can't arsk for a better lot of murderers than them. You tell me now and I'll let you go. Mybe I'll even split up with you when I get back. But if you think you can get it, Christian, you're a fool. Set one foot upcountry and I'll kill you."

While he had been talking, the .45 had dropped a notch or two, followed closely by Hihi and Christian. The brown man, silent so far, suddenly yelped, "Hello, Barry!" and stared up at the hatch.

Punjo involuntarily whirled toward the patch of blue sky and as he did, Christian's big fist lashed out and caught him on the point of the jaw.

The blue-snouted automatic went whirling into the

darkness. Punjo Charlie staggered back. Christian tried to vault the high pile of crates and get at him but two of the boxes slid off and tripped him.

Punjo knew he had overstayed his time. With a hasty glance about him, he dived for the ladder and started up. Christian pulled himself out of the crates, and searched feverishly about on the deck for a sign of the gun.

Overhead the patch of blue went out as Punjo slammed and locked the hatch cover.

Christian whipped the ropes off Hihi and then raced forward to the other opening. He could hear Punjo making for the gangway.

Leaping up the ladder three at a time, still swearing, Christian reached the dazzling light of day again. He scanned the dock and saw that Punjo was scuttling down its length.

That was all Christian had eyes for at the minute. He did not notice that three newcomers were now standing below looking in amazement at all this commotion, so incongruous in the sleepy peacefulness of Kieta harbor.

Christian leaped over the side and ten feet down to the worn dock planking and sprinted after Punjo.

That very greasy individual had slipped out of sight as though on a larded chute. Christian looked up and down the rows of iron-roofed warehouses and saw nothing but Melanesians sleeping in the shade.

Breathing hard, Christian came back to the gangway and started up. The spokesman of the party of three touched his arm.

“Beg your pardon, sir,” said this worthy gentleman, doffing

his sun helmet (which was very new), “but could you tell me where I could find a man known as Tom Christian? Are you the man?”

Christian turned and looked at the others, his mind still on Punjo Charlie. Dimly he noticed that this gentleman was rather old and gray and had the intent face of a scholar. The second member of the party was a young man of so well-bred an air that Christian knew it could not be true.

When he saw the third, he forgot all about Punjo. The third member was a girl whose eyes were so cool and so calm and so assured that you knew she had a hundred dresses and a dozen maids. She looked like something out of a fairy story in the filmy white dress. You expected her to be royal and imperial and a little bored. Christian found the face so interesting that he stared. Beautiful white women were few and far between in the Solomon Islands. The girl gave him look for look.

“We heard that you were leaving for the hills,” continued the old gentleman, “and we thought we might prevail upon you to guide us. We would pay. . . .”

Christian’s face suddenly fell into an astonished looseness. “Upcountry?” he said as though he couldn’t believe his ears.

“Yes, yes, upcountry.”

“You?” said Christian, still not believing it.

“Why . . . why, er, yes, upcountry. You see, I am Professor Forsythe of Hale University. I have been sent out to trace the origin of the Melanesians and Micronesians. This is my assistant, George d’Stuyvesant, and this is my daughter, Diana Forsythe. You *are* Mr. Christian, aren’t you?”

Christian nodded, still amazed. "You mean," he said carefully, "that you are going upcountry with these people, this woman, I mean?"

"Why, yes, yes. We've just landed here and we have but little time. I am very anxious to get this work over with, Mr. Christian, because it is so important."

"Did you ever hear of headhunters?" said Christian.

Professor Forsythe brightened instantly. In some excitement he removed his glasses and polished them thoroughly. Then he replaced them, took them off and polished them again.

"Yes, yes," said the professor. "I had heard it and I'm glad to know that you confirm the opinion. There *are* headhunters there, aren't there?" he added hopefully.

If Christian had been surprised before, he was astounded now. He looked them over carefully, one to the others, and blinked two or three times. They were carefully dressed, he saw, and their fingernails were clean, and they looked well fed and soft.

"You mean," said Christian, getting this thing straight once and for all, "you mean you're glad there are headhunters up there?"

"Yes, yes," cried Forsythe. "Yes, yes. You see, if there are headhunters, there will be heads, perhaps left over from the centuries, and if that is true, then I have a chance of proving that these people are not a separate race, but descended from Negritos and Malays, perhaps."

"And you want to go get these heads?" said Christian.

When the professor and the girl and the assistant all nodded

as though moved by the same string, Christian suddenly felt a desire to laugh in their faces. These people were just out of the United States, just out of a land where a cop stood on every corner and where you merely snapped your fingers and you had clean clothes and good food and a ride as far as you wanted to go—and they wanted to find the headhunters.

And Christian, wild, arrogant soul that he was, might have laughed if Hihi had not appeared that moment carrying Punjo's .45 automatic.

"You get that son—?" said Hihi.

The girl blushed and looked startled. The assistant bristled a little and then stared wide-eyed at the gun.

"No," said Christian. "Hihi, set something in the cabin for these people." And to the three, he said, "Of course you'll come up and have a spot of something."

Christian had taken the automatic. He spun it about now by the guard as though it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

The professor nudged Christian. "You had better put that away, Mr. Christian. Here comes a man who looks like a police officer."

Christian stared blankly at Forsythe and then turned to welcome the khaki-clad young Australian who swung jauntily up the dock.

"Hello, Barry," said Christian. "You're late."

"Yes, damn it," said Barry with a smile. "I heard Punjo Charlie had been down here raising the devil. Hallo, Professor, beastly hot, isn't it?"

Forsythe looked from the gun to Barry and then realized

that its presence had no significance to the police lieutenant. This was a startling fact to Forsythe. He had just come from a country where the possession of firearms meant a year or so in jail.

The realization struck all three of them and some of their ease of manner deserted them. The girl moved away.

"It's terribly warm," she drawled. "I am sure Mr. Christian will excuse us. Come along, Father, I think these gentlemen have some business."

"But . . . but . . ." sputtered Forsythe.

George d'Stuyvesant and the girl were already walking away. The professor followed them.

In an awed voice, Christian said to Barry, "*They're going upcountry.*"

"They've got as much right to get killed as the next," drawled Barry, swinging his swagger cane.

"You can't let them go," said Christian. "It's murder."

"The resident must be drunk. He said they could. But see here, Tom, old chap, you can't do this, you know."

"Do what?"

Barry shook his head. "You can't go upcountry with Punjo Charlie itching for your hide. I won't let you get killed that way. He has Togu and the Kri tribe out. I know. He fools them with that beastly glass eye, you know. Fancy that, now. A glass eye."

"Listen," said Christian, "he had a hand in killing Larsen. I know that. Well, I can't let him scare me out. There's a half million at stake."

"You're a stubborn blighter," said the Australian. "As

stubborn as these countrymen of yours, Tom. Give up this thing right now before you're dead and leave your head hanging in a long house up in those hills."

This was a long speech for Lieutenant Barry, but Christian was not impressed. "He can't scare me out. He killed Larsen and I've got that to attend to. Besides, I've waited too long now. I couldn't go with Larsen earlier, and that's why it happened."

"I can't go with you," said Barry. "Not for another week."

"And then the rains will start. I've got to get up there before Punjo Charlie does, the filthy scum. I've got to get there and out before he can, and I'm leaving as soon as I can get things together."

Barry sighed and followed Christian into the cabin.