

# L. RON HUBBARD



## Danger in the Dark

GALAXY  
P R E S E N T S

# Danger in the Dark

BILLY NEWMAN looked wearily at the apathetic face and needed no fine physician to tell him that he gazed upon death. For all its flat nose and thick lips and narrow brow, it was—or had been—pleasant, always filled with happiness as only the face of the simple can be. Osea had been a good boy. He had trudged stoutheartedly after his fellah mahstah, carrying heavy loads through the thickest of jungle and the hottest of days, through the thundering rains and the parching droughts. Osea would trudge no more. His machete and the artistry with which he used it could avail him nothing now against this unseen enemy, the Red Plague.

Fifteen hundred miles to the north and west lay Manila; but no frail dugout prow could breast that distance, much less traverse it in time to bring relief to Kaisan Isle. Fifteen hundred miles away and no steamer would stop for another six months, and even if a lugger put in, the one word *smallpox* would drive the vessel seaward again as fast as the trade winds blow.

Osea was dying. Billy Newman sat beside the bunk and wondered how many hours or how many days would pass before the witch doctor would have to bury him—Osea and those others down in the village who were even now fighting with their last gasps to live.

Billy Newman had never before felt so lonely—and he had had aloneness as his constant companion, it seemed, for all his days. Futility weighed down upon his slender shoulders and bowed them. His small face, which tried to be stronger in its possession of a thin, silken mustache, showed how many hours it had been since last he had slept. The only thing he had to encourage him in this was that he himself had long ago been filled brimming with the antitoxin. Perhaps it was still strong enough to keep him from getting the disease. But he had no real concern for himself in any event. These people, already wasted by the ravages of Spain and the white man's unhealthy civilization, hardly deserved the gruesome tricks fate played upon them. And to think of their laughter being stilled forever was more than Billy Newman could bear.

He had no slightest inkling of the source of the disease. The last ship in had left six months before, and certainly it had had a clean bill of health. Kaisan, at the southern end of the Robber Islands, was too small to merit more than a yearly call of a small tramp. There was no reason for more. Kaisan, like ten thousand of its brothers, offered little or no inducement to trade. When it rained one swam rather than walked. And when the rains went away the land withered and parched. Copra, these last few years, had cost more to grow than its selling price, and of other crops, it raised none.

Billy wondered dully why he had ever come here. He knew but he had not energy enough just then to recall the answer. Through a lucky gold strike in Luzon he had amassed eight thousand dollars and—he had thought it was still good

luck—he had been told that he could buy Kaisan for six thousand. He had bought.

Sitting there, waiting dispiritedly for Osea to die, he mulled over his arrival. At first he had laughed about it, not wishing to appear daunted by such nonsense. But now he well remembered what the fleeing seller had said.

The German had stood on the beach, eagerly watching his dunnage being loaded into a longboat. His fat, sun-fried face was filled with a glee which had long been foreign to it—but with a nervousness, too, as though he expected, even at this last instant, to be struck down where he stood.

“Goot-by, goot-by,” he said for the hundredth time. “Py colly, Newman, I wish you all der luck I got—which ain’t so much. But py damn, Newman, you vatch yourself, you hear? You look out. Don’t pull no funny pizness. I got mein dollars, and now I don’t want to leave you mitout telling you to vatch it. Ven I get to Manila I von’t say noddings. I von’t breathe a void about it. I ain’t no svindler. And ven I get around I vill tell dem for you that you’ll take six t’ousand dollars for der place. Maybe next year, py colly, ven der steamer cooms, it brings a buyer. I’ll do dot, Newman, I ain’t no svindler.”

“Maybe I won’t want to sell,” said Billy with a smile, surveying the white beach and the pleasant house and the native village and hearing the drums going to welcome him.

“Hah! Maybe you von’t vant to sell. Captung, you listen at him.”

“I heard him,” said the ship captain, grinning. “But I hope I bring you a buyer when I come just the same. And, more’n

that, 'cause I ain't so tough as I'm painted, I hope we'll find you alive."

"If you mean these people may turn on me—" began Billy.

"The people?" said the German. "No, py gott, dem fellers ain't goin' to hurt you none. Dem fellers is fine fellers, py colly."

"What is wrong, then?" persisted Billy.

"Vell . . ." the German looked searchingly at him. "No, py gott, you'll find it out for yourself. You von't pelief it anyway even if I dell you."

"That's a comfort," said Billy. "If I won't believe it, maybe it isn't so."

"Oh, it's so, all right," said the captain. "At least Hans here is the first live and kicking white man we've pulled out of here in eight years—and that's how long I've been on this run. You'll find the rest of them over in the native cemetery with the gugus—and there are more dead natives around here than live ones by a hell of a ways. He means about Tadamona. That's what seems to get 'em."

"Who?"

"Tadamona. He's the boss spirit around here. About seventy-five feet tall. If you see him or displease him, he either makes the plague come or he blows the place around with a typhoon."

"Oh," said Billy, grinning broadly. "If I didn't know these islands better . . . Why, hell's bells, gentlemen, there isn't an island in the Pacific that hasn't its seventy-five-foot spirit. But I've never happened to meet one." He chuckled. "I thought you were talking about something real there for a while."

The captain and Hans had exchanged a glance and a shrug. They gravely took their final leave of him and then put off in the longboat to go geysering through the reef surf and out toward the steamer. By their heads Billy could see that they were talking dolorously about him. And there he had been left in a circle of baggage while the village chiefs in all their grass and feathers had marched down to acknowledge his leadership. He noted that they seemed to be in very good practice.

But still he was not going to be caught believing in such nonsense. The plague was the plague and nothing more. It had leaped, it was true, from nowhere, and before it would depart a good hundred of the two thousand would mark its path with white gravestones. Plague was plague. The villain was a small microbe, not a seventy-five-foot, wholly mythical god.

The medicine drums were beating wearily and another, greater drum had commenced to boom with a hysteria which spoke of breaking nerves. The slither and slap of bare feet sounded upon Billy's verandah, and he straightened up to see that Wanoa and several lesser chiefs had come.

They greeted him with deep bows, their faces stiff to hide the terror within them.

"*Hafa?*" said Billy, giving it the "What's the matter" intonation.

"We come to seek your help," said Wanoa.

"I have done all I can," replied Billy. "But if you think what little medicine I have may stave off any new case . . ." He

got slowly to his feet and reached mechanically for his topee, although it was already night.

“Medicine does no good,” said Wanoa with dignity. “We have found it necessary to use strong means—” He paused, cutting the flow of his Chamorro off short, as though he realized that what he was about to say would not go well with the mahstah.

“And?” said Billy, feeling it somehow.

“We turn back to old rite. Tonight we sacrifice young girl to Tadamona. Maybe it will be that he will turn away his anger—”

“A young girl?” gaped Billy. “You mean . . . you’re going to kill—”

“We are sorry. It is necessary. Long time ago priests come. They tell us about fellah mahstah Jesus Christ. We say fine. Bime-by island got nothing but crosses. Tadamona is boss god Kaisan. Tadamona does not like to be forgotten. For a long time he slept. And then he see no sacrifices coming anymore. He get angry. For thirty years we get no rest. We get sick, all the best people die, the crops are bad, the typhoons throw our houses down. Then white men here get plenty power and Tadamona jealous and not like. Things get worse and worse. Tadamona no like white man because white man say he is boss. Tadamona is boss.”

“You can’t do this,” said Billy quietly. “I won’t let you murder—”

“We not murder anybody,” said Wanoa. “Christina say she happy to die if people get saved.”

“Christina! Why, she . . . she’s a mission girl! You’re lying! She’s half-white! She would never consent to such a thing!”

Wanoa made a beckoning motion at the door, and Christina came shyly inside to stand with downcast face.

Billy walked toward her and placed his hand on her shoulder. Very often these last months he had watched her and wondered why he should go on forever alone. He would spend the rest of his life here, and Christina—she had that fragile beauty of the mestiza, beauty enough to turn the heads of most white men.

“You consented to this?” said Billy.

She nodded, not looking at him.

“Christina, you know something of white ways. You know what you have been taught. This Tadamona—why, he is nothing but airy mist. He is a superstition born out of typhoons and sickness and the minds of men who know little. Tadamona does not exist except in your imagination, and your death could do nothing to drive off this plague. You would only add another gravestone in the cemetery, and all the village would weep for you when the disease went on unabated.” And as she did not seem to be listening, he raised his voice with sudden fury. “You fools! Your island god doesn’t live! He never did live, and he never will! Give me this week and I’ll stop this plague! Obey my orders and it will take no more of your people! Tadamona! Damn such a rotten idea!”

They stared at him with shocked attitudes, then glanced uneasily out into the darkness.

“You must not speak so,” said Christina in a hushed voice. “He . . . he will come for you.”



“How can he come for me if he doesn’t exist?” cried Billy. “You have seen the footprints in the rock,” said Wanoa. “A trick of lava!” shouted Billy. “No man or god has feet ten feet long!”

“You have heard him grumbling in the caverns of the point,” said Wanoa.

“A trick of the sea in hollow coral!”

“You have seen where he has torn up palms by the roots,” persisted Wanoa.

“They were ready to fall at the slightest breeze. I tell you, you can’t do this! Tadamona is in your heads, and only in your heads, do you understand? If he lives, why haven’t I seen him? Why?”

“He is too cunning for that,” said Wanoa. “And to see him, to look him full in the face, is to die. Those of our people who have seen him have been found dead, unmarked, in the streets. The wise ones here never stir about after midnight.”

“Bah! If he exists let him come and show himself to me! Let him walk up that path and call on me!”

They shrank back away from him as though expecting him to fall dead on the instant. Even Christina moved until his hand fell from her arm.

He was tired again. He felt so very alone and so small. “You can’t do this, Christina. Give me a week and I’ll stop this plague. I promise it. If I do not, then do what you like. But give me that.”

“More people will die,” said Christina. “I am not afraid.”

“It is the white blood in her,” said Wanoa. “It will quiet Tadamona. In a week, we will lose many, many more.”