

# Beast of Batu



*The lash cut into Hedges' body*

*A Beachcomber Hurls His Defi at the Brutal White King of a South Sea Island!*

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**T**HE tumbling sea was deep blue, the isle of Batu was emerald green with a border of golden strand, and the coral reefs were pink and white. But the sky was a dirty saffron, so Cap'n Bill Clarn drove his schooner Rover toward the protected lagoon

with her sails belling and her bow lifting over the rolling seas.

"She's fixin' to blow plenty," Clarn said to Dave Gordon. "We'll have to weigh anchor."

"Yes, she'll blow plenty," Gordon

agreed, glancing at the threatening sky.

“We’ll weather it here at Batu,” Clarn decided. “The lagoon is well protected and there’s a good holdin’ bottom. A visit to Batu may be an interestin’ experience for you, too. It’s Luke Hedges’ place,”

“I’ve heard of him.”

“Double what you’ve heard, and then you won’t have the half of it.” Clarn looked at the saffron sky and spat over the rail into the boiling sea. “I’ve been playing around the islands all my life. I had my boyhood in the Singapore dives. I’ve seen plenty of hard men, but Luke Hedges is the worst.”

“Sort of island king?” Gordon asked.

“More like an island devil runnin’ his own private hell on earth. Hedges spends half his time thinkin’ up ways to make the natives cringe and shiver.”

“Why don’t they leave him?”

“Can’t. No boats, and Batu is a distance from other islands. Hedges keeps ’em marooned. Won’t even let ’em have a fishin’ canoe.”

“The authorities—”

“They don’t bother. Batu is small and off the beaten track. No official complaints, I suppose. Hedges goes his own way, wolfin’ down food and soakin’ in gin, stackin’ his copra and Shell. Now and then a tradin’ schooner puts in and buys his stuff and leaves supplies. Hedges doesn’t seem to care about gettin’ rich. Never leaves the island. Sits in his bungalow, or prowls around with a whip in his hand and plays king.”

“It’s a wonder somebody doesn’t slip a knife between his ribs,” Gordon said.

“A native tried that once when Hedges ordered the wrong girl to move into his bungalow. Oh, yes, he’s that sort. He chooses a new ‘queen’ ever so often. What Hedges did to that native was a lesson the others haven’t forgotten. The man’s a devil. Wait till you see him. We’ll go ashore soon as we anchor.”

THE schooner was driving in toward the mouth of the lagoon, and Clarn gave his attention to his ship. Gordon watched the island. Hedges’ bungalow could be seen a distance back from the beach with a winding path leading to it. Apart from the bungalow was a small warehouse.

No native craft was drawn up on the shingle. Nobody was in sight. The palms were commencing to sway wildly in the wind, but nobody was making preparations against the coming storm.

The *Rover* scudded into the lagoon like a gull riding with the wind. Clarn barked orders and canvas ran down and the anchor splashed. The Kanaka crew worked swiftly, expertly making everything shipshape for the blow. Clarn gave orders to his Kanaka mate, and a skiff was dropped.

“We’ll go ashore, Gordon,” Clarn said. “If the blow is bad, we’ll stay the night.”

Clarn oared the light skiff and Gordon watched the beach. Still he saw no sign of life. It was uncanny. For a schooner to put in at a place like this, where craft seldom touched, generally was enough to bring all the natives tumbling down to the water’s edge. But Batu looked deserted.

The skiff touched shore, and Gordon helped Clarn pull it far up on the shingle. They started up the winding path.

A few feet ahead of them, somebody suddenly broke through the jungle growth and stumbled into the path. They saw it was a human being of some sort, with rags for clothes, half his body bare and filthy. He had a scraggly beard, and his eyes burned. He lumbered toward them. Gordon slipped his hand into his coat pocket and gripped the stubby automatic he had there.

They made out that the creature before them was a white man. He straightened his body as he came on toward them, and they could see he had a huge frame, but with little meat on it. He held out his hands to them imploringly.

“Take me away from here!” he begged. “Take me away!”

Before Gordon or Clarn could speak a roar came from the bungalow, a hoarse human voice bellowing above the rush of the wind and the smashing of breakers on the reefs.

“Slimy! Get away from there!”

The man in the path flinched at sound of the voice. He glanced toward the bungalow and plunged back into the jungle growth.

A man appeared on the veranda of the bungalow. He stood with his feet planted far apart, swaying drunkenly. He wore clean whites, but his feet were bare and his shirt was open in front down to his belt. A stubble of dark beard covered his face, and his mass of bushy black hair was unkempt.

“This way, gentlemen!” he called. “Welcome to Batu!”

“That’s Luke Hedges,” Clarn whispered to Gordon.

**H**EDGES waited on the top step to greet them. They saw he was short and thick in body, but he did not give the impression of having great physical strength. He looked like a man of whom dissipation had taken heavy toll.

“My old friend, Cap’n Bill Clarn!” Hedges greeted. “Come to trade?”

“Haven’t anything with me to trade,” Clarn replied. “I happened to be in these seas and saw a blow comin’, so thought I’d anchor in your lagoon and give you a visit.”

“You’re more’n welcome. Your friend?”

“He’s Dave Gordon. He’s thinkin’ of goin’ into trade and is makin’ a trip with me to get acquainted.”

“Come in,” Hedges urged. “I’d have shaved and put on my shoes if I’d known you were comin’.”

He chuckled and waddled across the veranda to hold open the screened door of the bungalow. Clarn and Gordon went up the steps and entered. They found the spacious

living room clean and comfortably furnished. A large round table was in the center of the room with easy chairs around it. A bottle of gin and glasses were ready. They took the customary drink of welcome and sprawled in the easy chairs.

“Excuse me a minute,” Hedges said. He got up and strode out on the veranda and struck a huge gong which hung near the railing, and the wind carried the reverberating deep tone. “That’s to let my people know they can come out of hidin’ and go about their business,” he explained as he returned to the table. “When I see a ship puttin’ in, I hit the gong and they hide themselves. They stay hidden till I know who’s comin’. I don’t want strangers to spoil ’em.”

“We noticed a white man in the path,” Clarn said.

“Yes, I suppose you might call him a white man,” Hedges replied. “That’s Slimy.”

“Friend of yours?”

Hedges glowered at him. “I don’t make friends of beachcombers, Cap’n. Slimy showed up here about a year ago. Got kicked off some tradin’ schooner, or jumped overboard and swam ashore, I never did learn the truth of it—I was drunk at the time. I’ve made him useful. Named him ‘Slimy’ because that’s the way he looks.”

“Doesn’t he want to get away?” Clarn asked.

“Possibly, but I need him here,” Hedges replied. “There was a time when white men walked on me. So I came here, where I could walk on natives. And along comes Slimy, uninvited, who’s a white man in a manner of speakin’, and it’s my pleasure to walk on him. Squarin’ accounts. Slimy never did me a wrong, but he’s a sort of symbol of men who did.”

“Is that justice, Hedges?” Clarn asked.

“On the island of Batu, Cap’n, justice is what I make it,” Hedges replied. “Let’s change the subject. Drink up! I hope you’ll stay the night.”

Hedges clapped his hands and a native houseboy came into the room.

“Two guests for dinner and to spend the night,” Hedges told him. “We want a good dinner. Fix up the guest cots.”

THE native boy lit the oil lamps, bowed and disappeared. Hedges poured fresh drinks. It grew darker. The velocity of the wind increased. Clarn stepped out on the veranda and saw that his schooner had her riding lights burning. He could trust his Kanaka mate and crew. He returned to the table.

“I have an idea for a good joke,” Clarn overheard Gordon saying to Hedges. “This man Slimy—I wonder how he’d act if he was one of us for the evening?”

Hedges bent forward. “How do you mean?”

“Make him bathe and shave, and toss him some clean clothes. Let him be one of us for a few hours. We may get a good laugh out of him trying to act like a gentleman.”

“That would be rich!” Hedges roared. “Slimy, a perfect gentleman for one evenin’. A lousy beachcomber!”

“He’d probably make a lot of funny blunders,” Gordon continued. “I remember hearing how ‘Bully’ Tarvish played a trick like that. You’ve heard of him?”

“Who hasn’t heard of Bully Tarvish?” Hedges said. “What a trader! He knew how to handle natives. He disappeared a few years ago after sellin’ out. Some say he went to Europe to live like a king.”

“It may interest you to know,” Clarn put in, “that my schooner belonged to Bully Tarvish. I bought her from the man who got her from Bully.

“My stepfather knew Tarvish well,” Gordon added. “My stepfather was Sam Mannering.”

Hedges looked at him with sudden respect. “Mannering was before my time, but I’ve heard of him. Made a fortune in trade, didn’t he?”

“Yes. He told me many yarns about Bully Tarvish. Once, when a Chink ran amuck with a knife. Tarvish saved my stepfather’s life.”

“I can’t see a man like Tarvish goin’ to Europe and livin’ soft,” Clarn declared. “Be like a fish out of water. A man used to roarin’ around, sailin’ his own ship, bossin’ natives and makin’ his own deals—”

“He didn’t go to Europe,” Gordon said. “He went back to the States where he was born. I had a line on him a couple of years ago.”

“That joke of yours, Mr. Gordon—let’s not forget that,” Hedges put in, “We’ll do it.”

He got up and waddled out on the veranda again, struck the gong twice and waited at the top of the steps.

Clarn glanced at Gordon swiftly. “What’s the idea behind this joke business?” he whispered.

“Careful!” Gordon warned, glancing toward Hedges. “It’s just a little experiment. Watch me and follow my lead.”

They saw “Slimy” come up to the bottom of the steps through the gathering gloom, summoned by the gong. The lantern swinging in the doorway revealed his face to them clearly, a countenance in which hate and fear were blended.

“Get inside, Slimy,” Hedges ordered. “Take a bath and shave and make yourself decent. Tell the house-boy to give you an old suit of my clothes. You’re to eat and drink with white men for a change. Get in there!”

LOOKING bewildered, Slimy shuffled past him and into the living room. He glanced at Gordon and Clarn, but did not speak. He went to the rear of the house, and Hedges laughed and returned to the table.

After quite a time, Slimy returned. His beard was gone, and his face was chalky white where the beard had been. He stood erect in a clean suit of whites, and had put on a pair of old shoes. His shirt was buttoned up to the

throat, not wide open like Hedges!

“Good evenin’, Mr. Slimy,” Hedges greeted, sarcastically. “You’re lookin’ fine and prosperous. Sit down and join us in a drink. Help yourself to a cheroot, too.”

Slimy swallowed hard and sat down. He started to slump in the chair, then suddenly straightened. He did not speak. Gordon expected him to gulp his drink greedily, but he sipped it, then put the glass on the table and lit a cheroot. The flare from the match emphasized the cadaverous appearance of his face.

“Mr. Slimy hasn’t had alcohol or tobacco these last few months,” Hedges said. “Bein’ considerate of his health, I’ve forbidden it. But you can have all you want now, Mr. Slimy.”

Slimy did not answer. They waited for some time for dinner. When it came, Hedges ate like a hog, bending over the table and shoveling food into his enormous mouth, washing it down with gin and soda. Gordon and Clarn hid their disgust with difficulty. They watched Slimy, who ate like a gentleman. Finally, sated with food and drink, they relaxed in the easy chairs.

It was Hedges, perhaps as a thrust at Slimy, who turned the conversation to failures and beachcombers.

“When a man gets down, he never gets up again,” Hedges declared.

“I don’t agree with you,” Gordon said. “A man may slip down the social scale for some reason, but a little thing may bring him up with a jerk, give him new life. Perhaps a situation where he’s called on to show himself a man by helping others.”

“Once down-and-out and always down-and-out,” Hedges said. “Take Slimy here. Don’t know what he ever was, but it’s plain what he is now—a lousy beachcomber!”

Slimy’s face turned whiter and his eyes glistened, but he did not reply.

“We’ve made him clean up and sit at table with us,” Hedges went on. “Think that’ll

reform him? Tomorrow he’ll start goin’ to seed again.”

Hedges refilled the glasses. He spilled the gin, and was unable to get out of his chair. His voice was thick when he howled for the houseboy to fetch a fresh bottle.

Outside, the wind was screeching across Batu and the seas were pounding the reefs. Clarn went to the veranda once to make sure the *Rover* was all right.

“Gen’men, I’m getting’ drunk,” Hedges said. “My boy’ll take care of me and show you to your cots. But stay up and drink as long as you like. You, Slimy! You can get out now. Back to your hut! You haven’t been a damned bit of fun.”

Slimy stood erect and bowed to Gordon and Clarn. He had not been drinking much and was cold sober.

“GENTLEMEN, the master of the island speaks, and I must obey,” Slimy said. “If I can go with you when you leave, work my passage—”

“None of that!” Hedges snarled. “You’ll stay on Batu, Slimy. Cap’n Clarn, if you want to keep friendly with me, you won’t take him.”

Hedges put his arms on the table and dropped his head upon them and gave a snore. Gordon’s eyes met Slimy’s squarely. Clarn watched them. Sure that Hedges was dead to the world, Gordon reached into his coat pocket, took out his automatic and slipped it to Slimy.

“Not to be used for revenge,” Gordon whispered.

Slimy stuffed the gun out of sight quickly. “Good night, gentlemen.”

Slimy hurried from the room and disappeared. The houseboy and another native came in, lifted Hedges and carried him away. The houseboy returned and conducted Gordon and Clarn to another room where guest cots were ready.

“Storm’ll pass by mornin’,” Clarn said,

as they undressed. "I think you were a fool to give Slimy that gun."

Gordon smiled as he blew out the lamp....

Slimy slipped and staggered through the jungle growth until he came to a cluster of huts beneath swaying coco palms. Some of the natives were awake and watching the storm. Slimy spoke to several, and they ran to other huts.

An hour later, all gathered on the beach at a spot where they could not be seen from the bungalow if lightning flared in the sky. They grouped around Slimy to hear what he said.

Heavy swells entered the lagoon and rolled across it, but the smashing seas were outside battering at the reefs. The schooner rose and fell, rolled and tipped. Slimy spoke rapidly, then went to where Clarn's skiff rested on the shingle.

They launched the skiff, and three men got into it with Slimy. They pulled laboriously toward the schooner, making slow progress against the force of the wind. Behind the skiff and on either side of it were the swimmers.

Men and women and children, the natives of Batu were swimming out to the schooner, following the skiff. Slimy had guessed there would be no lookout on such a night. The skiff was made fast to a line at the stern. The natives swam around the vessel. Slimy and two others gained the deck and worked rapidly in the darkness, dropping lines. The natives swarmed aboard.

Slimy howled. Yellowish light gleamed as the door of the forec's'l was opened. The Kanaka mate rushed out with the few members of the crew. He found Slimy confronting him, a stern figure in drenched whites with automatic held ready.

"Up sail!" Slimy ordered.

The Kanaka mate howled at his men and charged. Slimy chopped with the gun and the mate sprawled on the deck.

"Up sail!" he barked at the Kanakas.

"We're goin' out. The wind's right and I can take the ship through the reefs."

He drove them to it. They were frightened of the storm, afraid to handle the schooner in it, but were more afraid of Slimy and the gun he held.

**C**HHECKED and accounted for, the natives of Batu huddled where they could. At the wheel, Slimy watched a white, frothing line of breakers. His voice cracked above the roar of the storms as he howled orders intermittently.

The Kanakas were used to obeying, and they obeyed Slimy. Conscious again, the mate crawled back to the wheel, and Slimy bent over him.

"Sorry I had to smash you," he said. "I'm takin' the *Rover* out. Tell you about it later. Get as many of these folks under cover as you can—women and children. The men can shift for themselves."

Under shortened sail, the schooner plunged at the mouth of the lagoon. Her bow dipped under and reared sickeningly. She lurched and righted, ran before the wind like a wild thing, with her rail awash half the time.

Then she was out and free, a prey of the tumbling seas and pounding waves. She seemed to spring from sea to sea as she went through the black night with Slimy fighting the wheel. The Kanakas were quiet. The Batu natives looked to Slimy to win through.

So the *Rover* traveled through the night and out of the direct path of the storm. The raging wind lessened, but the great seas remained as an aftermath of the blow. Slimy had speech with the Kanaka mate and seemed to satisfy him on several points.

He was a different Slimy. The air of command was about him. His voice had a sharp bark when there were orders to give. His emaciated body was erect, and he gripped the wheel with such force that his knuckles were white.

The gray dawn found the schooner plunging on.

Back at Batu, the same dawn found Clarn and Gordon springing off their cots as they heard Hedges bellowing and smashing at the gong on the veranda. They dressed and hurried out. Hedges was raving.

“Not a damned native around the house!” he cried. “I’ll skin ’em alive. Thought I’d sleep till noon.”

Clarn and Gordon went out on the veranda, Clarn’s first glance was toward where his schooner should have been riding. When he found the vessel gone, his wild cry made Gordon snap around.

Clarn ran down the steps and along the path to the beach with Gordon at his heels. Hedges remained on the veranda.

“Skiff’s gone, too,” Clarn howled. “What—”

“I imagine you’ll find every native on the island gone,” Gordon said. “Slimy has removed them from Hedges’ brutality.”

“Slimy? You think he took the schooner out?”

“That’s what I think.”

“Then she’s lost,” Clarn said. “I wouldn’t have taken her out myself in that blow.”

Hedges had charged through the jungle growth howling like a madman, and now came rushing back.

“Every lousy son of ’em is gone!” he bellowed. “They took your schooner, Clarn. They’re all shark meat now, and serve ’em right!”

**F**OUR days later, early in the morning, a sail appeared. Clarn saw it first, and his cry brought Gordon and Hedges.

Hedges was a sodden wreck. He had been drinking heavily during the four days. Clarn and Gordon had cooked the meals and kept the bungalow clean.

“She’s puttin’ in,” Hedges said. “Hope it’s some trader I know well. I’ll have him get me natives.” He waddled away.

“Anyhow, we’ll have a chance to get

away from this rotten Hedges,” Clarn growled. “Wonder if I’ll ever find any trace of the *Rover*?”

“If you don’t, I’ll fit you out with a new schooner,” Gordon said. “I feel a sort of responsibility.”

Hedges called to them, and they went into the bungalow. In his drunken stupor, Hedges had some idea of preparing to greet guests, and he begged Gordon and Clarn to help him put the house to rights.

Out on the veranda a few minutes later, Clarn gave a wild cry as he looked at the approaching craft. She tacked, and Clarn recognized her instantly.

“It’s the *Rover*!” he shouted. “Can’t fool me about my own ship. She’s lived to come back.”

The schooner was charging straight at the mouth of the lagoon. Clarn and Gordon started down the winding path, and Hedges followed slowly. The schooner entered the lagoon, and they could hear a hoarse voice bellowing orders. Sails ran down and the anchor was dropped. The skiff was put overside.

Two Kanakas jumped into the skiff and were followed by a white man. The skiff came toward shore. The white man in the stern was wearing an old captain’s cap.

“It’s Slimy!” Clarn roared.

“Slimy?” Hedges thundered. “I’ll skin him alive! I’ll tear his back to pieces with my whip!” He was holding the whip he so often had used on his natives.

Clarn’s face was a blank as the skiff touched shore and the Kanakas pulled it up on the shingle. Slimy strode toward them with the Kanakas behind him. As the three neared those ashore, the Kanaka mate began shouting at Clarn, defending himself, saying he had been made to do what he had done. Clarn howled for him to be silent.

Slimy stopped a few feet in front of them.

“Cap’n Clarn, don’t blame your mate

or men," he said. "I seized your schooner the other night—an act of piracy, I suppose. But I brought her back in good condition. I could have jumped her, you know."

"I'm waitin' to hear what you did," Clarn said.

"I was on Batu almost a year," Slimy explained. "I'd gone down the social scale. Had a lot of money once, and clever folks got it away from me. Tried to mix with those not my kind, and paid for it. Lost my grip and couldn't seem to find it again."

"Well?" Clarn questioned.

"I was on a tradin\* schooner that went past Batu, and went overside and swam ashore. Didn't know there was a trader here. I'd been here before and knew there were fine natives. Intended to live here till I got the liquor out of my system, to straighten up and make a fresh start. And I found Hedges here."

"You rat!" Hedges howled.

**"I** SAW how Hedges was mistreatin' the natives, but I couldn't do anything to help 'em. Inside a week, I wanted to kill Hedges. But he had me. I couldn't get off the island. I had to take his abuse. If I'd killed him, the first schooner that put in— Well, they'd have taken me away to swing, and I didn't intend to swing for a swine like Hedges. He did me one favor, though, when he denied me liquor. My health improved and my strength came back."

"About the schooner?" Clarn suggested.

"Simple enough, Cap'n. I got all the natives aboard, held a gun on your mate, made the crew get up sail and went out of the lagoon. I sailed to another island, near enough for all the natives to jump overboard and swim ashore to tell the story. I told 'em how to make complaints about Hedges, and there'll soon be a gunboat droppin' in here to see about it. Then I brought the schooner back."

"Piracy!" Clarn declared. "But you— you sailed her out into that storm and got her

through. That's some sailin', mister."

Hedges charged forward suddenly, his whip uplifted.

"You lousy beachcomber!" he screeched. "Take my natives away and cause me trouble, will you?"

The lash sang through the air, but the blow did not fall. Slimy sidestepped neatly and caught Hedges' descending arm. He tore the whip from Hedges' grasp, and the lash sang again and descended and cut into Hedges' hoglike body.

Clarn and Gordon stood aside. Slimy struck repeatedly, while Hedges cringed and howled and tried to wrap his arms around his head. Finally, he stumbled to his knees and then sprawled in the sand. Slimy stepped back.

"That wasn't for the things you've done to me," he said. "That was for what you did to the natives, you scum! Now, you can stay here alone on Batu till the gunboat comes. They'll take you away fast enough."

He tossed the whip out into the water and faced Clarn again.

"I suppose you want to get aboard, Cap'n, you and Mr. Gordon," he said. "I'll go along and take what you want to hand me. It'll be worth it."

They left the sobbing Hedges sprawled in the sand and walked slowly down to the skiff. The Kanaka mate and the man with him waded out and started swimming to the schooner. Without speaking, the three white men got into the skiff, and Clarn picked up the oars.

"Stealin' a schooner at the point of a gun is somethin' serious," Clarn said, as he rowed methodically. "I can't deny that I'm in sympathy with why you did it. And you sure showed good seamanship takin' her through that storm."

"She's a fine schooner," Slimy complimented. "And when a man knows a ship—"

"You know the *Rover*?" Clarn broke in.

“I know her well. Know every inch of her. She was my ship once. I’m Bully Tarvish.”

“You’re Tarvish?” Clarn howled, his eyes widening.

“THAT’S right. I cashed in and went back to the States some years ago. Then went on to Europe and let myself get swindled out of all I had. Lost faith in human nature, too, on account of a worthless woman. Worked my way back to the Islands, but kept away from my friends. Went down the social scale. And now I’ll take what you want to hand me, Cap’n, for seizin’ your schooner. But I’ll be decent after the law’s done with me.”

“You’re doin’ yourself no good if you start a long term in jail,” Clarn replied, his eyes twinkling. “We’ll just say that you’d been named my mate before you took the schooner out. That’ll make it simple.”

“I guessed you were Tarvish,” Gordon said. “I saw you once when I was a boy. My stepfather made me promise, as he was dying,

that I’d always be ready to do you any favor I could, because you saved his life once. Wanted to be sure, so I coaxed Hedges into making you shave and clean up and sit at table with us. It was the shave I wanted particularly. With your face shaved, I knew you were Tarvish.”

“So that was it!” Clarn said.

“I knew Bully Tarvish wouldn’t stay a beachcomber if he had a chance to get away from it. The new trading schooner I’m having built— I’ll be glad if you’ll operate her for me, Cap’n Tarvish. And I think I can buy Hedges’ concession at Batu, so you can put the natives back on their home island. We’ll put some good man in charge of the place.”

They reached the schooner and went aboard. Tarvish, his eyes gleaming, patted the rail lovingly.

“If you could make the deal, Mr. Gordon,” he said, “I wish you’d let Cap’n Clarn have the new schooner and arrange for me to handle the Rover. I was a fool ever to sell her. A man gets attached to a ship.”