

*Warrington Had Sworn to Beat
That Evil Island
or Bust.*



THIRTEEN HEADS

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SHORTLY after midnight the drums stopped their maddening throb, stopped abruptly. Yet their beat seemed to pulse on and on through the endless hours of choking silence that followed, the most ominous, the most trying silence Warrington ever had experienced.

"Damnation!" he exclaimed, lips stiff, after two hours of it. "What are they waiting for? What are they keeping so quiet about?"

Tense with expectancy, he sat in a chair on the screen-protected veranda. He sweated. Through the stubble of beard black on his lean cheek streams of wet coursed, dripped from his chin to swell other streams running down across his naked chest.

"Why the devil don't they attack if they're going to?"

He breathed irregularly, checking often the sharp whistling in his nose that he might listen; and he chewed hard on the stem of a cold pipe. A sweating palm stroked along the barrel of the rifle that lay loaded and cocked across his knees.

"This waiting—it's enough to drive a man nuts!"

He fell to listening again, holding his breath. More maddening than the throb of the drums, the pulsing silence.

Another hour dragged by. And another.

Then—

A boo-boo called hoarsely.

At that blast blown on a conch shell, Warrington swore with vast relief. The sound came from off in the bush, behind the bungalow, not too far away.

"They're coming!" he exclaimed almost cheerfully.

From his mouth he snatched the cold pipe, tossed it to the table where lay several opened boxes of cartridges. Wiping with a bare arm the sweat from his stubbled face, he slid from the chair to the veranda floor, crept to the railing. There he uncovered a narrow gun port cut in the double screen that enclosed the porch.

The night lay still and moonless, a starry blanket of suffocating blackness heavy on the island. Warrington could see little—the loom of the bush against the sky, the inky restlessness of the sea. Between the two, the sea and the bush, curved a crescent of white beach blotted about a hundred yards from the bungalow with the shapeless shadows of two copra sheds.

A shadow moved out on to the white crescent of the beach. Then another. Man shadows.

"Ah!" Warrington said softly.

He slid his rifle through the gun port, took careful aim at one of the shadows, squeezed the



trigger.

The shot shattered the stillness of the night into reverberating fragments. The flame from the gun, like a hot lance, stabbed the darkness. From a stricken throat came hoarse the cry of a last agony; from other throats, savage yells. Bare feet made thuddings on the sand. A spear, flung from the darkness, struck the veranda screening, rebounded into the darkness again.

WARRINGTON laughed, loudly, tauntingly. Again he aimed his rifle, again squeezed the trigger.

During the instant the gun spat flame, he closed his eyes that afterwards he would not for a moment be blind. He needed all of his sight, for he had to hold the natives back, keep them away from the screening that protected the veranda. Once they broke through there, hacked a hole with a bush knife— If that ever happened, his head would hang in a basket dangling from a rafter of the *hamal*, the head house.

The attack centered on the veranda. About the rear of the bungalow, which housed the store, Warrington had no concern. The black men could not break in there, nor could they bring fire to their aid. Sheet steel covered the roof and the side walls, covered the door, shuttered the two windows. Stout bars on the inside made the door and the windows quite secure.

The wide veranda was the weak point of the house. Together with the one front room, it made up Warrington's living quarters. It faced the sea and extended all across the front of the bungalow. From rail to roof a double screen enclosed it—an outer screen woven of a heavy galvanized steel strong enough to stop spears and arrows, and an inner mesh of fine bronze to keep out insects. At intervals along the rail narrow gun ports were cut, the openings covered with shutters of steel that could be opened only from the inside.

WARRINGTON'S rifle flamed at another man-form running across the crescent of white beach. The native crumpled on the sand. In death he had company; two others of his band lay near him. The living had drawn back. Somewhere near the bush they gathered; but because of the blackness of the night Warrington could not see them.

"Getting together to make a rush on me," he

guessed; and he shifted his position to a port at the right end of the veranda. "If they come bunched and on a run—"

He drew his revolver from his belt and placed it on the floor beside him. As he waited his jaws worked as if he chewed.

He did not have to wait long. Before he saw them he heard them coming, their yells, the pad of many feet running across the sand. How many of the savages there were he did not know. There was no time even to make an estimate; the beach was narrow and the blacks came in a bunch.

Warrington fired as fast as he could work the rifle. He had no time to reload. When hammer fell on empty barrel, he dropped the gun and snatched up his revolver.

"Stop them. Got to stop them." He kept saying that over and over, mechanically, like a broken phonograph repeating again and again the same few words. "Got to stop them."

He emptied the revolver into the running bunch of black men. A spear came through the gun port, grazed Warrington's arm. He jerked back away from the loophole. One of the savages, then another, began to hack at the outer steel screen with a bush knife.

Throwing down the revolver, Warrington backed to the table. With the opened boxes of cartridges he had placed, there lay a rocket, such a rocket as is used by ships for signaling. Taking it up, he quickly broke the stick off short; he lighted the fuse with a match, thrust the rocket through the loophole in the screen and dropped it to the ground in the midst of the yelling black band.

RESULTS were instantaneous. Leaving a hissing, angry trail of fire behind it, the rocket caromed crazily about the beach, looping, leaping, re-curving on its own trail like a thing possessed of a demon gone utterly mad.

With one awful howl of fear, the black men broke and fled for the bush. After the laggards hissed the rocket to explode with much noise and fire somewhere in the denseness of tree and vine.

Recovering his revolver, Warrington reloaded the gun; and then he reloaded his rifle. With his bare arm he wiped the sweat from his face, and he took up his pipe, filled and lighted it.

He laughed when he sat down in the chair beside his cot.

"Back home, on the Fourth, we kids used to

shoot rockets that way. We used to call them 'nigger chasers.' I don't know who named them that, but he certainly had the right idea."

He laughed again.

"I guess the excitement on this Vao is over with for tonight." He yawned. "Might as well turn in and get some sleep."

But he did not go to his cot. Until new day flamed in the east he sat in the chair, rifle across his knees. Throughout the remaining hours of darkness he sat smoking—and listening. Pulsing silence again ruled the bush.

BECAUSE Ed Warrington got stranded on a sunny beach, he became storekeeper for Daniel Lynn on the man-killing island of Vao.

As Warrington thought back over the chain of events leading up to the moment just passed of the night attack on the lonely post, the days, the weeks, the months—the whole stretch of time seemed to him the figment of a bad dream, a dream that still fuddled his mind with its evil vapors. He hardly knew now where and how it had begun. All of that was foggy in his memory. Vaguely he could remember a wandering, an illness. Then there had been the beach at Lynn's island where Lynn found him, dirty, ragged, unshaven and unshorn—and broke.

"You're a white man. You can't camp on this beach," Lynn said that day. A plump, short man with gray hair and mild gray eyes, he had a way almost of growling when he spoke. He added in the commanding manner of one quite accustomed to ordering the lives of men, "You come along with me."

And to his airy house Lynn took the stranded Warrington. He asked no questions, neither of the past nor of the future.

Warrington spoke of that one day. The two men lounged in wicker chairs on the wide, vine-screened veranda of Lynn's house. There a cool sea breeze, tangy with salt from the hissing reef, found them and played with the gray strands of Lynn's thinning hair. Warrington, his long form sprawled out, a foot cocked up on a stool, made a smoke ring, watched the breeze snatch it, break it, whisk it away. He said:

"I never before came across a man who had so little curiosity."

Lynn swirled the liquor in the tall glass he held in his right hand. Chipped ice against frosted glass

made a musical tinkling.

"What do you mean?" he growled.

"You haven't asked me a question about my past."

"That's your business." Lynn took a sip from the tall glass.

"And you haven't been curious about what I intend doing with my future?"

"That's more of your business. I'm not in the habit of questioning my guests about their personal affairs."

Warrington's eyebrows went up.

"Do you make guests of all the bums who happen to drift your way in these islands?"

Lynn growled, "Don't you credit me with any ability to judge a man?"

"I'm sorry. . . . I was thinking of my own case, the way you took me in. You'd never seen me before. You didn't know me. I was dirty, in rags, broke. For a month you've fed me, given me a bed in which to sleep. You've given me clothes to wear, tobacco to smoke, liquor to drink. I'm shaved and shorn and washed—"

"And still broke," Lynn reminded him. "Think that one over."

"H'm!" Warrington had not thought of that. He thought of it now, of just what it did mean. "Meaning I can't leave here until you're ready to let me go?"

"It's seldom a craft other than those I own ever touches here. You can't leave on a boat of mine unless I say you can. None of the others would take you without my permission."

"Sort of a prison isle, eh? I must confess I enjoy its comforts. It's a quiet retreat."

"I own one quieter," Lynn said to that. And then he asked Warrington, "Ever hear of Vao?"

Warrington never had. Lynn went on:

"There's a place where you get quiet—in large doses. I've got a store there. It's a paying post, too. The natives fish pearl and shell, and they make quite a little copra. A schooner touches the place once every six months, weather permitting. That's the only time my storekeeper ever sees another white man."

Warrington rolled the slim cigar he was smoking from one corner of his mouth to the other. He remarked, "Sounds rather isolated!" and he clasped his hands behind his dark head.

"Isolated?" Lynn grunted. "It's a two days' sail beyond—a lonely damn' hole! And it's hot—"

humid. The natives—they're black—are an uncertain crew, touchy to handle."

A GAIN the trader tinkled ice against glass and sipped of his drink.

"I need a new manager there," he said.

Warrington laughed a little.

"Loneliness—heat—humidity—touchy natives! If you ask me, Lynn, you build up your ballyho the wrong way to interest a man."

Lynn growled, "I never kidded anyone about that island. When I'm after a man to take the post I always tell him the truth about it."

He finished the drink, put down the glass.

"Vao is a man-killer. I've never had a manager stick out his three years. That's the customary term of service. Three different boys tried to stick it. They're buried out there."

"Natives?"

"They put on the finishing touches. It's the heat that gets the men first. That breaks them. Then the loneliness drives them nuts." He added after a time, "The black boys of Vao go in for heads."

Warrington made another smoke ring. "Nice place! What do you pay?"

"Seven hundred American for six months. Fifteen hundred a year. Five thousand for a three-year stretch with a bonus of a thousand if a man stays on until relieved."

When he said that Lynn shook his gray head.

"That last is likely to be for an indefinite period," he concluded. "I always have a hell of a time digging up a relief."

With narrowed eyes Warrington for a time sat looking out at the boiling reef. A month before he had come across that bar. Jetsam he had been then, cast up on the beach—and Lynn had salvaged him.

The trader was saying:

"Not a man in these parts will take the job. They're all afraid of Vao. I don't blame them any. But just the same it riles me. I hate to give up the post. It's worth money. If I leave the store six months without a manager, I lose my concession—and Jacques Garnier is just waiting for that to happen so he can step in. I've always believed he had a hand in finishing the three boys who died there, but of course I haven't any proof."

He puffed at his cigar.

"I've got a manager out there now—did have the last time a schooner stopped; maybe his head's in the black boys' *hamal* now. He wanted me to

send him a relief man this trip. But where will I get a man?"

Warrington said quietly, "I'll take the job."

Lynn looked at him sharply. "You'd better think that over slow, young fellow."

WARRINGTON did think it over. For a week he thought of little else—Vao the man-killer, the debt he felt he owed Lynn. He balanced one against the other. One day he asked Lynn:

"When does a schooner head for Vao?"

"In about a week," the trader growled. "You harboring the idea you're going out there for six months or so?"

"For three years," Warrington replied. "Or die in the attempt."

Neither made mention of the subject again for several days. Then one evening as they sat on the breeze-fanned veranda, the gray-haired man nodded toward two of his schooners at anchor inside the reef.

"They're clearing at dawn, both of them," he said gruffly. He did not look at Warrington. "The *Irene* is bound for Sydney. The *Grace* goes to Vao. You can take your choice."

"I sail on the *Grace*." A tightness settled about Warrington's lips.

SIX weeks later he stood on the white crescent of beach at Vao and watched the whaleboat pulling back to the schooner. Hannery, the supercargo of the *Grace*, waved from the stern seat.

"Keep your guns oiled and handy," had been Hannery's last advice. "Give old Barri his daily quart of rum, but don't take any of it yourself. You can't fight the heat and loneliness and that stuff, too. You've seen what it's done to Massy."

Massy, the man Warrington had relieved, had rowed madly out to meet the schooner the day before, sobbing and laughing hysterically, a half insane, physical wreck of a drunken man.

"A few weeks more," Hannery had said then, "and the black boys would have had his head hung up to dry. It's the booze that gets them here more than anything else."

"It won't get me. I don't drink," Warrington had declared.

He thought of that now, thought of the cool drinks he had drunk at Lynn's place, as he watched the whaleboat pull to the schooner. The sun on the beach broiled him, and he sought the shade of the

veranda, his tongue dry in his mouth, his throat parched. But he would not drink. He sat and watched the schooner hoist sail, move slowly down the bay, disappear from sight about a point of headland.

Night came shortly after that, silent night of suffocating blackness. Long night. Though he tried, Warrington could not sleep. The heat, the solitude, the pulsing silence would not let him. He thought of Lynn's house, the breeze in cool from the hissing reef, the long cool drinks, the comfortable beds. Above all he thought of Lynn's growling talk so pleasant to listen to.

"Damnation!" Warrington finally swore and got up from his cot. For the mere sake of hearing his own voice he cursed the awful loneliness that had closed in all about him. Then he tried to laugh. "I'll be all right when morning comes," he assured himself.

Morning brought Barri.

The black man with the watery eyes and the lime-bleached kinky hair came with the first new heat of dawn. Clad only in a dirty loin cloth and a fiber girdle from which hung a bush knife, he emerged from the bush and advanced across the beach toward the store. In one hand he carried a long spear, in the other a rusty tin can.

Advancing to within a hundred yards of the store, Barri halted. Thrusting the butt of his spear into the sand so that the long, slender shaft stood upright, and laying his knife beside it, he came unarmed to the door and waited for Warrington to open it for him.

In the store he held out the rusty tin.

"Rum," he rasped. "Rum."

The can held about a quart, Barri's daily allowance, for the black man was chief. When Warrington drew and handed him the rum, Barri downed near half of it in a single gulp. With the rest of it he stalked from the store and across the beach, to take up his knife and spear and disappear into the bush.

So began Warrington's first day on Vao.

THE days that followed were much the same. It became Warrington's habit to go for a swim after Barri's early visit. Stripped, revolver belted to naked waist, rifle in hand, he would hurry across the sand to a small whaleboat beached a few yards from the house. Launching the boat, he would row out a short distance—the bottom sloped sharply to

green depths—and there, knife looped by a cord to his right wrist, he would go overboard. It was his hour of play, yet it had in it no moment of relaxation; he had to keep his eyes open for sharks and at the same time watch the store.

During the day the natives came to trade. They brought copra and shell, occasionally a pearl or two. They came in groups, always several together, and always they were armed with spears and knives, sometimes too with bows and short, unfeathered arrows. Their weapons they put down a good hundred yards from the store, and they came to the door never more than two men together. That was the rule—never more than two unarmed natives in the store at the same time. Warrington himself always wore a belted gun.

Slobery-lipped, watery of eyes, the black men personified a danger against which Warrington had to be constantly on guard. The store, the front room and veranda, the narrow strip of beach white between house and copra sheds—beyond those limits Warrington dared not venture. The confinement galled him after a little, maddened him as time dragged on through killing weeks of heat and awful loneliness.

As far as his physical being went, the heat tried Warrington the most. Day after day the sun burned fiercely in an unclouded sky, its glare and fire reflected by sea and sand; and the nights drew a suffocating blanket of darkness over the island. A breeze never seemed to stir.

Sleep became hours of restless tossing on a sweat-soaked cot. Warrington grew thin and wan. His appetite failed him. Often for several days at a time he had absolutely no desire for food. Constantly he did have a throat-parching thirst that the tepid water of Vao could never satisfy. One morning after he had filled Barri's rusty tin, and the black chief had gone back to the bush, Warrington drank a cupful of rum. It kindled a fire within him, a fire of new life, and for a few hours Vao was a pleasant place on which to live.

But that night, the inner fire burned out again; loneliness stalked from the bush more awful than ever.

"No more booze," Warrington decided.

To keep that decision in mind, he drew a bottle full of rum and placed it on the veranda table where it would be constantly before him while he fought the sweltering heat and the savage solitude.

THE day the *Grace* paid her first call after Warrington had been six months on the island, Warrington was sick, too sick to leave his cot and go to the beach and meet Hannery when the supercargo came ashore.

"What's the matter?" the big sun-browned man asked anxiously when he had hurried to the bungalow. "Fever?"

"Heat—night and day," Warrington said weakly. "It lays me out about every so often." He added, "I'll be all right in a day or two."

Hannery eyed the bottle of rum on the table.

"You haven't been taking too much of Barri's medicine?"

"I don't drink," Warrington said. "I just keep that there to remind myself not to."

"Good work!" The supercargo produced an envelope from a pocket. "From Lynn," he said. "Look it over while I see what you've got for me."

He left the veranda and went across the beach to the copra sheds.

Warrington, lying on his cot, opened the envelope. The note from Lynn was brief.

"Don't overdo it," the trader wrote in part. *"I realize you took the post only because you felt you were under obligation to me. Any debt you may have owed me long since has been discharged. You are at liberty to pull out on the Grace. Don't let Vao get you."*

A couple of hours later when Hannery had seen to the transfer of the copra and shell from the sheds to the schooner, he came again to the bungalow.

"Ready?" he asked Warrington. "The captain wants to get going."

Warrington sat up.

"I've a few pearls," he said, getting unsteadily to his feet. "I'll get them." Then he asked, "What about my supplies for the next six months?"

Hannery stared at him.

"The next six months? Man, have you gone crazy?"

"Not quite." Warrington's voice came hoarsely from his throat. His thin, pale face worked. "I probably will be when you come again—if I'm alive."

"You're staying on? You're sticking to this blasted island?"

"For three years—or till death do us part."

"You've gone nuts already!"

Warrington growled, "You go get my supplies! And don't you forget I've got to have rum. That

Barri swills a barrel of it every six months."

"You're nuts!" Hannery exclaimed again as he took himself off to bring in the supplies.

That night, Warrington felt, insanity stood very close to him. Before sundown the schooner had sailed. Again he was alone. Another six months of heat and loneliness lay maddeningly before him.

Weakly he paced the veranda.

"Maybe Hannery's right. Maybe I am insane." He laughed. The sound of the laugh frightened him. It did sound mad. "I am crazy!" he declared. "I should have gone when I had the chance. Another six months—"

From the table he snatched up the bottle of rum, pulled the cork. But before he drank he flung the bottle from him.

"No!" he choked. "No!"

He stumbled to his cot, fell across the sweat-soaked mattress.

WARRINGTON was but a shadow of his former self at the end of a year when the schooner *Grace* called a second time at Vao.

"You'd better quit," Hannery, the supercargo, advised when he came ashore. "You'll be sweated out, dried up before another six months go by. One man can stand only so much."

"I'm getting used to it," Warrington lied. "It's getting easier, day by day. By the time my three years are up I'm sure I'll actually like the place."

"Yeah! By that time you'll be fit to plant." Then he wanted to know, "Did you ever see where we put what we found of those three boys who overstayed their time here?"

Warrington shook his dark head. During his year on the island he had never ventured farther from the bungalow than to the copra sheds.

"Come along with me," Hannery said.

Followed by an armed guard of the men who manned the whaleboat, the big supercargo led Warrington to the edge of the bush at the end of the crescent beach. There he pointed out three mounds over which rank vines grew.

"They tried to beat out Vao," he told Warrington. "We gathered up what bones we found and buried them here. They haven't a skull to share between them. The black boys got those."

On the way back to the bungalow he said:

"You'd better pick up your things and pull out with us."

But, tight-lipped, Warrington only shook his

head.

"You tempt me, more than you know. But it's three years—or bust."

"You're a fool!" Hannery exploded. "You're deliberately committing suicide. You can't beat this Vao! It's got you on the skids right now."

They went to the shade of the veranda. Warrington lay down on his cot, a pale, thin, heat-ried man.

"Hannery," he said after a little, "I am often insane the long nights I am here alone. Those are the nights when I can't sleep, when I'm too exhausted by the heat even to sweat any more. If you should come along then—I'd swim out to meet you. You'd have to kill me before you could get me back on this beach."

He paused for a time, moistened dry, cracked lips with a dry-looking tongue. He went on:

"Today I am as sane as you are, as much as you may doubt that statement. I know that this island has me on the skids, as you call it. I don't want to die, neither do I want to go insane. I want to get away. I want to sail with you on the *Grace*, today, before sundown—but I can't."

"You can't?" Hannery looked at Warrington queerly, as if he had nothing but doubts of the storekeeper's sanity. "Why the devil can't you, I'd like to know? Lynn doesn't expect you to stay here and kill yourself. You're under no contract."

"But I am," Warrington said. "With myself. I gave my word I'd stay three years."

"Lynn has no idea holding you to that."

"But I have. With me it's a matter of—well, call it principle, if you like. I've got to stick."

"Now I know you're crazy," the supercargo declared. "When you put principle, if that is what it is, above your health, your sanity, even your life—Vao's got you!"

"Perhaps it has. Perhaps in another six months it will have finished its work. I'll have to risk it."

HANNERY got up from the chair in which he had been sitting, and he began to pace back and forth the length of the screened veranda.

"Maybe," he said hoarsely after a time, "maybe we ought to take you off by force. I could knock you on the head and then carry you."

He stopped pacing, faced Warrington.

"Just one man has ever stayed here eighteen months and lived to tell the tale. We took him off raving crazy."

Warrington said nothing to that. Hannery went on:

"I'd hate to take you off that way. I'd hate worse to set the boys to digging a hole in the sand for your bones." And then he declared, "If you're alive the next time we stop, I'm going to have Lynn's permission to order you away."

Warrington sat up on the cot.

"Don't think me too mad, Hannery. I'm not doing this without purpose. This post pays. You know that. If I can beat out this island for three years, then I've got it whipped. The curse will be off. After that Lynn will have no difficulty finding managers."

Hannery shook his closely cropped head.

"But man—the risk!"

"I know," Warrington agreed. "But I owe Lynn that much, to save the post for him if I can. He saved me once."

"He picked you up because he needed a man for this job. He thought you'd fit."

Warrington smiled a little.

"Lynn's proud," he said, "of his ability to judge a man. I can't let him down."

ONE morning when Barri came for his daily allowance of rum, instead of the usual rusty tin the bushy-haired black man carried a bright new tin that had the capacity of a full gallon.

Warrington took the container from the chief's hands and looked it over.

"Where the devil did you get hold of this?" he wanted to know.

But Barri's understanding of the white man's talk was limited to a simple word or two.

"Rum," he rasped. "Rum."

Warrington was puzzled. The tin had not come from the store, not at any time during the eighteen months—it was now about that length of time—he had been manager of the post. More, he was positive it had not been in Barri's possession more than a few hours; it was too new and bright. Not a spot of rust discolored it. A day or two in the bush of hot and humid Vao would produce at least a few specks of oxidation.

"Where did you get it?" he asked Barri again.

Then he realized the uselessness of questioning the chief. The black man did not understand that much English, and Warrington, on his part, had no command of the language of the bush.

"Something's queer somewhere," he muttered.

"I'd like to know just what."

He drew the usual quart of rum, poured it into the new tin which he handed back to the chief.

Barri looked at the rum in the tin. He scowled, and he held out the can toward Warrington again.

"Rum," he rasped. "Rum."

Warrington growled, "You've got your rum, you black devil. Take your morning's pull of it and then get out of here!"

Barri continued to hold out the bright new gallon container.

"Rum. Rum."

For some moments the significance of the repeated demand did not make itself clear to Warrington. Then suddenly he understood.

"What are you trying to work on me—a racket? Trying to shake me down?" he demanded angrily. "Well, it won't work! You take what you've got and get to hell out of here."

Barri made no move to go. He scowled fiercely at Warrington and repeated the one word of his demand:

"Rum."

He wanted, Warrington knew, the new tin full as the old tin always had been filled; but the rusty old can had held a scant quart, while the bright container could hold a gallon.

Warrington scowled almost as fiercely as the slobbery-lipped Barri.

"No," he growled very decidedly. He pointed toward the door and commanded, "Go."

"Rum," Barri rasped insistently.

Warrington drew his revolver. Again he pointed toward the door, and he repeated the command, "Go," adding impatiently, "and make it snappy, old boy, or I'll crown you!"

Barri's scowl deepened; but when Warrington cocked the revolver, the hammer making a sharp click as he drew it back, the black chief turned and stalked from the store.

Warrington closed the door and bolted it.

"There'll be trouble brewing now," he knew. "I'd like to know where he got hold of that can."

Not a native came to the store to trade all that day. With the sinking of the sun, drums began to throb in the bush. Warrington looked to his guns, and he opened several boxes of cartridges, put them on the table handy to his reach. Beside the cartridges he placed a rocket.

ALL day, following the night attack on the store, the three dead lay on the beach that glared white-hot under the blazing fire of the fierce sun. Not a living black man came even for a moment into sight. For the first time since Warrington had kept the store on Vao, nearly eighteen months, Barri did not come for his daily allowance of rum.

"Maybe I put a ball into him during the excitement. Maybe he's badly hurt."

The thought made Warrington uneasy. Not that he felt any disturbance of conscience because he might have wounded the chief; he simply was uncertain as to what the consequences would be. That day he did not venture from the bungalow. He stood guard on the veranda, gun in hand every hour.

And throughout the night he watched—and listened. The bush pulsed with silence. If black men ventured abroad he heard no sound of them. He thought they kept to the denseness of the bush; but in the morning the dead were gone from the beach—and Barri, whole as ever came for his quart of rum. He carried his rusty old tin can.

For a few days Warrington played cautious. He stayed close to the bungalow, even foregoing his morning swim; but the black men made no suspicious moves, and Warrington began to sleep again nights, as restfully as the heat would let him.

On the fifth day after Warrington's repulse of the attack, a strange schooner sailed into the bay early one morning and came to anchor. A whaleboat, black men manning the oars, pulled for the shore. In the stern a white man stood and guided the boat with a steering oar.

A tall man, big, powerfully built, he wore soiled whites and an old straw hat. A broad black leather belt held a sheathed knife at his right hip.

"*Bonjour*," he called out in a loud, strong voice to Warrington who had walked across the beach to meet the landing party. "I come to pay you a visit, *m'sieu'*. I am Jacques Garnier."

Not waiting for the whaleboat to ground, he stepped overside into knee-deep water and waded ashore. He was barefoot.

"*Tonnerre de Dieu!*" he shouted. "This Vao she is 'ot!" He swept off his straw hat and with a bare, muscular arm—his shirt was sleeveless—he wiped sweat from a hard-bitten face heavily stubbled with black. "'Ow you stan' her so long?"

"I keep out of the sun," Warrington said. "Let's

get up to the veranda.”

On the veranda table he set out rum and water. Garnier drank his rum neat, a tin cup full of it, and he wiped the cruel line of his mouth with the back of a big hand.

“*Sacré nom!*” he all but shouted then. “You look like one damn’ ghos’. You sick. The curse’ ‘eat she kill you a’right. This Vao all time ‘ot like ‘ell. One man stay ‘ere long ‘e die.”

“I’ve been here eighteen months,” Warrington told the strong-voiced man.

“I know. I ‘ear that at Vila.” The Frenchman swore. “You been ‘ere long enough. Too damn’ long. I take you away. I come for save your life.”

“Kind of you.”

“*Ah, oui.* Name of a pig! I am like that.” He slapped a thigh. “I like you. I give you job on islan’ like paradise. The breeze she cool. The native she be ver’ friendly. Not ugly black fella like this damn’ place.” He grinned expansively. “An’ the girl she pretty an’ make plenty love for white man.”

WARRINGTON smiled thinly. “My thanks,” he said politely. “But I can’t leave now. Not for another eighteen months. Come around then.”

Garnier opened wide his closely set, intensely black eyes.

“You crazy!” he yelled. “Another eighteen mont’—you be dead. The black man take your head for dry.”

Warrington leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs into his gun belt.

“They had one try for it, the other night. I expect they’ll call again—if you sell them the idea.”

The wide grin whipped from Garnier’s harsh, stubbled face. For a moment he sat quite motionless, as if stunned. Then Warrington saw the almost imperceptible gathering together of tightening muscles as the big man tensed himself. He demanded roughly:

“What you mean, eh?” And Garnier swore.

“You were behind that attack the natives made on me the other night,” Warrington declared coldly yet angrily. “I wondered where Barri got that new tin he brought for his rum. Now I know. You gave it to him. He couldn’t have got it from anyone else.”

He went on, cold with fury:

“You damn’ murderer! You set the blacks on those three boys buried at the edge of the bush!”

Garnier’s stubbled face turned dark as a squall cloud, and the light in his narrowed eyes gleamed with the lightning of an inner storm. His big right hand slid slowly along his thigh toward his right hip.

Warrington snapped the revolver from its holster.

“Keep your hand away from that knife,” he snarled. “Pick yourself up out of that chair and get to hell off this island!”

Garnier got up. Without a word he went down the steps from the veranda, moved a few paces away from the bungalow before he stopped and turned.

“One day, *m’sieu*,” he said in a quivering voice that did not shout, “I come back an’ spit on your grave.”

Warrington received the threat with a short, ugly laugh.

“Just make sure I’m in my grave. Now scram,” he said savagely, and he clicked back the hammer of his gun.

“YOU’D better pull out,” Hannery advised a week later when the *Grace* made her semiannual call at the island. “I don’t like that threat Garnier made. He’s a tough egg, that boy.”

But Warrington would not listen to any suggestion that he quit.

“I’ve gone halfway,” he said, and he added stubbornly, “I’m going the other half. Garnier will have to think up a better one than he did the last time before he can scare me out.”

“He won’t try to scare you out. He’ll rub you out, or have the black boys do it for him. I heard that he made some bets at Vila he’d have this post before another year is up.”

“Don’t cover any of his money. Just leave me some more cartridges, and some rockets if you have any to spare.” Warrington added thoughtfully, “And I’d like a shotgun and plenty of buckshot. You can bring those next trip.”

The next six months passed without incident. Barri came every morning for his quart of rum. During the day occasional pairs of natives put in an appearance to do small trading. Nights the bush lay quiet, almost too quiet. The pulsing silence kept Warrington restlessly wakeful most of the time.

The fierce heat of the day, the terrible stillness of the nights, the awful loneliness of the endlessness of time—it took its toll. Warrington

spent most of his time just lying on his cot.

"If only I had something to do, some little thing to take up my time," he said to Hannery the next time he saw the supercargo. "It's the enforced idleness that is the most maddening thing of all. Just to sit here or lie here and think of nothing but the heat and the solitude, to hear nothing at night but silence—"

"Which I'd rather hear than the drums," Hannery declared. "When you hear those things pounding you know the blacks have a yen on for your head and are coming out of the bush to try to get it."

He wagged his own closely cropped head.

"Maybe the poor devils get that way because every once in a while they have to have something to do. Instead of going off their own nut, they knock off somebody else's."

Warrington smiled. "Maybe I'll try it."

The supercargo stared at him blankly. "Try what?"

"Collect a few heads. And dry them. That would be something to do—a sort of hobby."

"My aunt!" Hannery exclaimed. "I'm getting out of here before you start on me! You've been two years on this hell-rim and you've got a wild look in your eyes."

He started down the veranda steps.

"I'll start the boys bagging copra. The skipper wants to clear by sundown as usual."

"Did you bring me a shotgun and some buckshot?" Warrington asked.

"Yeh. Two double-barrels and a couple cases of shells."

He brought in the guns when he came ashore with the last boatload of supplies for the store; and he brought in too a large coconut carved to resemble a human head, the face grotesque.

"Speaking of heads reminded me of this. It's been kicking around the schooner three or four years." He handed the coconut to Warrington. "An old coot on one of the Solomons—his name was O'Brien—used to put in his time carving these things. Myself—I prefer them to the kind the black boys hang up."

"It's an idea, anyway," Warrington said. "It's one way of killing time. I'll have to try it."

AND he did. The next few months he spent the greater part of the hot days carving nuts which he gathered from the clump of palms behind the

bungalow. The long hours he put at the new hobby made his hand clever with a knife; and he began to turn out heads realistically like those of the natives who came to the store to trade. One he made of Barri was so startlingly lifelike in the scowling expression of the face that Warrington wrapped it up and put it out of sight.

"If I should come out of a bad dream one moonlit night and see that thing looking at me from the table—I might forget myself and waste some ammunition."

He carved a number of the heads, fashioned baskets for them, stowed them away against the day Hannery would come to Vao again.

But the big supercargo never did come again. The day the *Grace* was scheduled to arrive came and went without the grimy hull of the schooner sailing into the bay and dropping an anchor. A week passed, part of the second week. Warrington grew uneasy. He put aside his carving, spent his time anxiously watching the entrance to the bay.

Then Jacques Garnier made Warrington his second visit.

The big, loud-voiced Frenchman put into shore in a whaleboat manned by four black men. Grounding the boat as near to the bungalow as he could, Garnier, before he stepped a foot on the beach, hailed Warrington who sat on the screened veranda and held his rifle across his knees.

"Ahoy!" Garnier shouted. "I 'ave news for you about the *Grace*. I 'ave a letter from Lynn."

Taking his rifle with him, Warrington hurried to the beach.

"What about the *Grace*?" he demanded hoarsely. "Why hasn't she come? What makes her so long overdue?"

"That schooner she don' come some more," the Frenchman swore, stepping overside and wading ashore. "She be wreck'. 'Annery be drown'."

From a hip pocket of his dirty white trousers he drew out a crumpled envelope.

"I bring 'im from Monsieur Lynn."

With a trembling hand Warrington tore open the envelope and extracted a brief note hastily written in lead pencil. Lynn explained that the *Grace* had been caught by a squall off the west coast of Malekula and wrecked. Hannery had been drowned. Captain Rann and the rest of the crew had managed to get off in a whaleboat and make their way to Vila.

"I haven't a schooner to put on the Vao run," he

wrote. *"I am looking for a suitable craft now to replace the Grace. Probably I shall have to go to Sydney to find what I want. That means seven or eight months more before I can get a ship to the island."*

He concluded:

"Garnier has offered to deliver this note. Of course he is hoping you will throw up both hands and quit. That will mean he can grab off the post, because it will be impossible for me to get another man to the island in time to hold the concession. I hate to admit we are beaten now that you have hung on for so long; but I think it wise for you to go with Garnier. As things stand I am unable even to send you any supplies."

Warrington folded up the note and crammed it into a trouser pocket. An over-taut string seemed to have snapped in his head, behind his sunken eyes. It hurt, and he laughed, an insane, hysterical sort of laugh that made Garnier stare at him and exclaim:

"*Sacré!* I think maybe you be a little crazy!"

"Crazy?" Warrington laughed more, louder. "I'm mad—utterly mad! Two years and a half—of heat, of loneliness, of death hiding over there in the bush! All for what? All for nothing," he shouted. "For no reason but to break me, drive me insane, to give the black men my head to hang in their *hamal!*" And he laughed again.

Plainly it made Garnier uneasy, for he shifted his weight from one bare foot to another. With visible effort he kept his loud voice subdued when he spoke, as if he would make his words soothing.

"Don' laugh like that! You be a'right. I take you away from this damn' place. The 'eat don' make you sick some more. You don' be crazy from be alone so much, an' the black fella don' get your 'ead. I take you to one islan' like paradise."

Warrington drew a bony hand across his sunken eyes.

"Oh, hell!" he groaned; and then he was sane again. He growled. "Let's go up to the veranda—get out of this sun."

ON THE veranda he set drink on the table, and when he had poured a cupful of rum for the big Frenchman, he poured one for himself.

"Your 'ealth!" the Frenchman toasted him.

"Blast your eyes!" Warrington growled and gulped the fiery liquid down. The unaccustomed jolt of it buckled his knees and he sank into a chair.

Garnier grinned at him.

"That rum make you feel better. 'Ave another drink."

"Why not?" Warrington wanted to know, and he drank another cupful.

Since his first coming to Vao, Warrington had not touched the stuff. Now it lay like fire in his stomach; and then it started to flow through his veins, downward into his legs, upward to his brain. He began to feel light; as if he had but to move and he would float.

He laughed.

"So you're going to take me away—to a paradise island!" He lighted a cigarette. "That the island you were telling me about—the one with all the pretty girls?"

Garnier slapped a thigh.

"Plenty girl," he shouted. "An' she make plenty love for white man. You get your things an' we go."

Warrington drank another cup of rum.

"If I go away with you, what'll old Barri do for his daily snort? Who'll hand him out his morning's jolt of rum?"

"I fix for Barri."

"What about the store here, the stuff in it? If I leave it, the natives will break in and help themselves. That will be a loss to Lynn."

Garnier shouted out a great laugh.

"That be—'ow you say?—Monsieur Lynn 'is 'ard luck."

"There's quite a lot of copra in the sheds. How about that?"

"I take care for that."

"You'll take care of everything, eh? I've taken in a few pearls." Warrington's sunken eyes glowed bright with the fire of the rum. "I guess I'd better take care of them."

Garnier's cruel line of a mouth drew straight.

"'Ow many pearl you got?" he demanded harshly.

"Half a dozen. A couple of them are pretty good."

Garnier's intensely black eyes sharpened to points of beady light.

"Where you keep?" He gulped a cupful of rum.

"In the front room," Warrington told him. "I've got them put away with my money."

"Money?" Garnier leaned forward. "You got money?"

"Three thousand dollars in gold. The price of the sweat stewed out of me the first two years on

this island! I'd have three thousand more coming if I'd stay here six months more."

Garnier swore. "Six mont' more you 'ave nothing, not even your 'ead. Somebody else she 'ave the money." He added quickly, "You'd better get 'im an' the pearl an' come along with me."

He stood up.

"You get that money an' pearl now," he commanded.

Warrington laughed. "What's the hurry?" he wanted to know. "I've been here thirty months. I can stand it for a few minutes longer. Sit down. Have another drink."

"*Non*," Garnier refused, and he scowled. "We go. I be in big 'urry. Get the money an' the pearl."

WARRINGTON after a moment heaved himself up out of his chair. When he moved toward the door, he lurched, staggered drunkenly.

"Drunk, by glory!" He laughed foolishly, and he went staggering into the front room.

It was a room bare of any furnishings. In it were stored a number of boxes, most of them with the covers broken open. Warrington lurched against one that contained bush knives, and with an effort he moved it, revealing a small trap door set in the floor.

"The ol' safe," he declared a bit thickly. "Here's where I hide the gold and jewels."

Down on his knees he pulled open the door, and he thrust a hand into the black opening disclosed. In that position, on his knees, leaning forward braced on one arm, the other arm in the hole under the floor, he froze.

The room, because the windows were closed with steel-covered shutters, received its light from the door leading on to the veranda. In that doorway now, shutting out most of the light, loomed the hulk of big Jacques Garnier. His shadow lay across the floor, reared on the wall opposite the door—and that shadow from its belt had drawn a knife.

Warrington saw it. He snatched back his arm from the hole in the floor, and he threw himself to one side, against the box of knives which he had moved. And then he jerked his revolver from its holster.

With a thud the knife struck and stood quivering, its point deep in the wood of the side of the box. Almost at the same instant Warrington's gun blasted the shadows of the room.

GARNIER shouted out an oath that was at once both surprise and pain. He sagged back against the side of the door and tried to brace himself there. His right thigh gushed red until much of the dirty white trouser leg was soaked with it. Then he slid to the floor.

Warrington snarled at him, "Thought I was drunk, eh?" He laughed, a short, ugly laugh. "Well, I am drunk. But not drunk enough to be caught by any cutthroat swine like you! Just drunk enough to be wobbly with a gun. I meant that slug for your belly instead of your leg."

He staggered to his feet, cocked the gun.

"Throw a knife into my back, would you! Rob me of the few dollars I've sweated away most of my life to earn! Rob Lynn of his pearls!" He said savagely, "I've a mind to put another slug into you, just to see you kick."

Garnier, sitting on the floor, his back against the side of the door, threw a protecting arm before his face. He exclaimed hoarsely:

"*Non! Non!* I los' my 'ead! I los' my 'ead, *m'sieu!*"

"Your head?" Warrington lowered the revolver. He grinned wickedly. "Now that's an idea—your head. I've been carving them from coconuts the past six months. And I haven't had a model. That's been a handicap. Now if I had your head for a model—"

He reached into the box he had moved and pulled out a long, stout bush knife.

Garnier cried out, hoarse with horror:

"*Mon Dieu!* You crazy!"

He tried desperately to get up, but his wounded leg would not support him. To get away, he went scrambling across the veranda on his hands and knees, leaving a smeared trail of blood behind him.

He butted the screen door open, plunged headfirst down the veranda steps. Then, much like a big turtle in great haste, he dragged himself across the beach sand.

"My head! *Mon Dieu!* The man he be crazy!"

He yelled for his black boys who came on a run. They picked him up and carried him to the whaleboat. Hurriedly then, urged by Garnier's curses and shouts, they rowed to the schooner which promptly weighed anchor, hoisted sail, and cleared from the bay.

WARRINGTON got very drunk that day. The next morning he was sick. It nauseated him

when he drew Barri's quart of rum. To sink his stomach back into place he ballasted it with a dram of the black man's medicine.

Rum and more rum was the order of the day after that. Warrington stayed mostly drunk. It was, he realized those moments he was sober enough to realize anything, the beginning of the end; but he had gone beyond the point of caring for himself. Drunk he forgot the heat, the awful loneliness of Vao. Nor did the uncertainty of the blacks stay in the fore of his mind.

He no longer carved heads from coconuts. He gave up his morning swim, neglected to shave and trim his hair. For days on end he did not change his clothes which became filthy and sour-smelling with sweat. Every morning he served Barri his quart of rum, and he traded with the other natives that at times came in during the day. He observed foggily one morning that the black men brought their weapons nearer to the store.

Weeks dragged into months. Supplies began to get low. Warrington sobered up long enough to take a rough sort of inventory. He had, he discovered, food for about another two months, no longer than that.

The supply of rum gave him the most concern. With what he drank and the daily demand that Barri made—

"There's just about enough to go little more than a month."

Through force of habit that made the act mechanical he had checked off the days on the calendar. He consulted that record now and counted the days that had yet to go by before he could look for a call from one of Lynn's schooners.

"Four months yet."

Warrington laughed. He laughed much these days, laughed at everything, as a person very weak or very tired sometimes laughs.

"I'll be dead by that time. I'll go raving mad for want of a drink. Then one day Barri, or one of his crew, will bring a knife into the store."

A black man tried just that a week later. Warrington felled him with a club he kept handy, and he took the fellow's knife. When, later, the native came back to the store and demanded the weapon, Warrington angrily refused him.

"I'm not that crazy yet," he declared. "If you want another knife you bring in some copra and buy one."

A few days after that, while Warrington dragged

some copra to one of the storage sheds, an arrow shot at him from the bush. It fell short of him and he picked it up, a barbless, unfeathered shaft pointed with a needle-like bone from a fish spine.

"Poisoned!" Warrington recognized the deadliness of the barbless thing. "A prick from that—I wonder if it would be tetanus?"

The incident gave him a night of some soberness.

"They're going to get me if I stay on," he thought. "They know I'm drunk most of the time and they're getting bolder. One of these days they're going to catch me with my guard down."

He laughed.

"If they don't get me, I'm going to starve to death—so what's the difference?"

THEN food supplies ran alarmingly low. Warrington became acutely aware of that one day when he wanted a tin of beef to eat. There was none in the store.

"Damn' queer," he swore.

It occurred to him out of the foggy memory of the several weeks passed that the natives had been more than usually active in their trading.

"And I've been just drunk enough all the time to keep on handing out stuff until now I haven't enough left for myself. It's a plot, and that Garnier's back of it! I should have shot him when I had the chance."

The shortage of supplies worried him, enough that he refused to trade out any more food. Without food in the store he could not hold on, for he could not go to the bush for his living as the black men could.

"And I've got to stay," he reminded himself. "I've got to hang on until a schooner puts in. I've got to beat this island. I'm putting an embargo on trade."

Restriction on trade was a trick of the white man that the blacks could not understand. Tinned beef they wanted, and tinned fish. They became insistent. One morning three of them without laying down their arms tried to force their way into the store.

Warrington had to draw gun and shoot.

That night the drums throbbed again in the bush. They throbbed on and on, until well after midnight—and then the attack.

A late moon made gleam white the sand of the crescent beach, so white that each man who

ventured upon it became a moving blob of black, an easy mark for Warrington's rifle. The gun grew hot in his hands; but the black men, like ants swarming from a disturbed nest, seemed to come in countless numbers from the bush.

"They've got me this time," Warrington thought, moving away from a loophole in the double screening of the veranda to reload his rifle and gulp down a cup of rum. "It's gala night on Vao and everybody's out to be on hand for the grand finale."

THERE were, he knew, several hundred black men living on the island, and he thought that all of them had joined the attack on the bungalow. He had never seen so many of the natives together before; and when he knelt again at a loophole in the screen, he laughed, loudly, madly, and he shouted drunkenly:

"Come and get it, boys! It'll keep better than any head you've got in the *hamal!* I've had it pickled in booze the last four months!"

He shot down a running blob of black, missed another; and he both swore and laughed when he burned a thumb on the hot barrel of the rifle. Mad he was, he knew, for he was drunkenly hilarious—and within the hour the black men would have his head. They were too many for him; he could not stop them when they bunched and rushed the bungalow.

"It'll be over with then," he shouted, and he blazed away with the rifle. "It'll be all over—the heat and the loneliness of this island hell. Why shouldn't I be drunk and hilarious? Three years or bust! It's bust tonight—but I've kept my word."

He stood up and yelled:

"You hear that, Lynn—I've kept my word!"

Mad—and drunk. He had to keep drunk to stay mad. Another cupful of rum he gulped down like so much water. It would be easier to die drunk.

"Come and get it, boys! You won't have to dry it—it's pickled in rum!"

The black men had fired the copra sheds. The skyward roaring flames flung back the night crimson to the edge of the bush. The froth of the sea washed like the froth of blood on the crescent beach; and Warrington added hot blood to it when he poured five stinging shots from his rifle into a group of howling natives.

Hoarsely a boo-boo called.

Warrington yelled in answer, "Come and get

it!"

Howling, dancing, brandishing spears and bush knives, some bearing burning brands, the black men rushed toward the bungalow.

Warrington threw down his rifle and picked up one of the shotguns. Shoving the muzzle end through the gun port, and without taking time to aim, he discharged both barrels, reloaded, fired again. When the first gun became too hot to hold, he dropped it and took the other one.

The buckshot tore gaps in the mob of natives, gaps that filled as quickly as they were made. Black men fell and were trampled as the living surged in a wave against the veranda. With their knives they hacked at the screens.

Warrington could man but one loophole at a time. When he had to stop firing to reload a shotgun, spears thrust through the gun port at him. He avoided the thrusts by throwing himself to one side; and he drew his revolver, sent the slugs crashing through the screens and into the nearest of the faces of the yelling savages.

HACKING knives cut a hole through the screen at the opposite end of the veranda from Warrington. He snatched up a bush knife of his own and cut down the first black man to force through the hole. But another and yet another attacker pressed against the opening from the other side; and near the door other knives cut a second hole. The slobbery-lipped Barri crowded through there. With a strong black arm he swung a knife.

Warrington lurched to the table. He had laid out rockets there, the sticks broken off short. Hastily now he struck matches, touched flame to two or three fuses, flung the hissing things down among the several natives who had forced through to the veranda after Barri.

Barri grunted, "Wah!" and he struck at Warrington's head.

Warrington turned the blow with his knife, and he grappled with the black man. Locked together in each other's arms, they fell through the doorway and rolled on the floor of the front room.

On the veranda the sizzling rockets caromed everywhere at once. One leaped to Warrington's cot where it exploded and set the mattress on fire. Half a dozen black men in howling panic fought one another to be first to flee through the holes cut in the screens. A felled man overturned the table and spilled the rest of the rockets onto the blazing

cot.

And then from the front room Warrington staggered, drunk and bloody, in one hand a red-wet knife, in the other—black Barri's head.

In his madness the white man yelled:

"If you don't want mine, I'll grab a few of yours!"

He laughed. Unmindful of the fiery, darting rockets, he crossed the veranda and unbarred the screen door. Wet knife in hand he stumbled down the stairs.

THREE months later a schooner strange to Vao sailed into the bay. Plump Daniel Lynn came ashore in the whaleboat, and when he stepped on the white sand of the beach he pushed his straw hat to the back of his head.

"What," he demanded, and in his amazement he stammered, "what in the name of Judas is going on here?"

Warrington, thin and clean-shaved, bright-eyed and clean, grinned. He waved a hand toward a dozen kinky-haired blacks busy tying together the frame of what evidently soon would be a shed.

"We're getting a bit short of storage space, so we're putting up a new shed."

"But—but—" Lynn pushed the straw hat back more on his head. "But those boys you've got working—they're Vao men."

Warrington nodded. "And good workers, too—when you know how to handle them."

Lynn squinted at his storekeeper.

"When did you learn?"

"Three months ago. We came to a complete understanding one night when I played their game with them and went them thirteen better."

"Thirteen?" Lynn shook a puzzled gray head. "I don't get it."

"Come up to the house."

Warrington led the way to the veranda. The screening had been mended with some remnants of the original screening. Warrington had found the pieces in the store.

He waved Lynn to a chair and then pointed to the rafters of the veranda roof. From those rafters dangled a number of baskets.

Lynn counted them. "Thirteen." Then, "My gad! They're head baskets!"

"Sure," Warrington said. "The boys lost that night we had our little game."

The trader gulped. He took off his straw and

began to fan his perspiring face that went suddenly bloodless.

"You mean—you took thirteen heads?"

"It was fair enough. They came after mine."

"Man," Lynn gasped, "you're mad!"

"I was," Warrington admitted calmly. "Also drunk—very, very drunk." He added, "I've been quite sane since—and cold sober."

THE plump trader gulped again. He said weakly:

"I need a drink. My stomach's a little upset. How can you stand it with those heads hanging up there?"

Warrington laughed.

"Oh, as to that—I keep carved coconuts in the baskets. The other trophies are buried behind the house. Of course the boys don't know it. And speaking of drinks reminds me—"

He took a conch shell from the table and blew upon it.

At the hoarse call of the boo-boo the black men at work upon the new building left their tasks and formed a file, and they came trooping to the store where Warrington handed each one in turn a tin cupful of rum.

Warrington offered Lynn a cupful when the natives had left.

"It's pretty well watered," he apologized. "Our supply is low and I've been stretching it. I hope you've got a barrel or two on board. Also plenty of tinned fish and bullamacow. We've been out of that for the past five months. We can't go on like that."

"Go on?" Lynn stared at the tall thin man. "I've come to take you away before Vao licks you."

Warrington laughed. He leaned on the counter.

"Vao can't lick me, Lynn," he told the trader. "I've licked Vao. I wouldn't think of leaving now."

"But the heat, the loneliness?"

Warrington shook his head.

"That never was the trouble. Nothing to do—that's what whipped the men who came here before me. It nearly got me—nothing to do but sweat and go nuts."

He shrugged and went on:

"But I've changed that. The boys and I find plenty to do. We built sheds to replace those that we burned the night we had our party. Those new sheds we filled with copra. We're making more, and we're fishing pearl and shell. We don't mind the heat much. As for the bogeyman of

loneliness—I tied his tail to a rocket and shot him into space long ago.”

“But—but the natives?”

“They’re all right,” Warrington declared with a wide grin. “I’m thirteen up on them. They made me their big chief. They respect me, and they trust me enough that they’d sleep with me if I’d let them.”

He laughed.

“I had to draw the line on that. I had them build a barracks behind the store. There is always a

king’s guard camping there, every night. I’d like to see Garnier come in now and try to pull some funny stuff.”

“Garnier’s left the islands,” Lynn told him. “He got hurt in the leg and blood poison set in. Had to have the leg off. It nearly killed him.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Warrington lighted a cigarette. “Now let’s see what supplies you’ve got for us for the next six months.”

