

# SPICY 'ADVENTURE' STORIES



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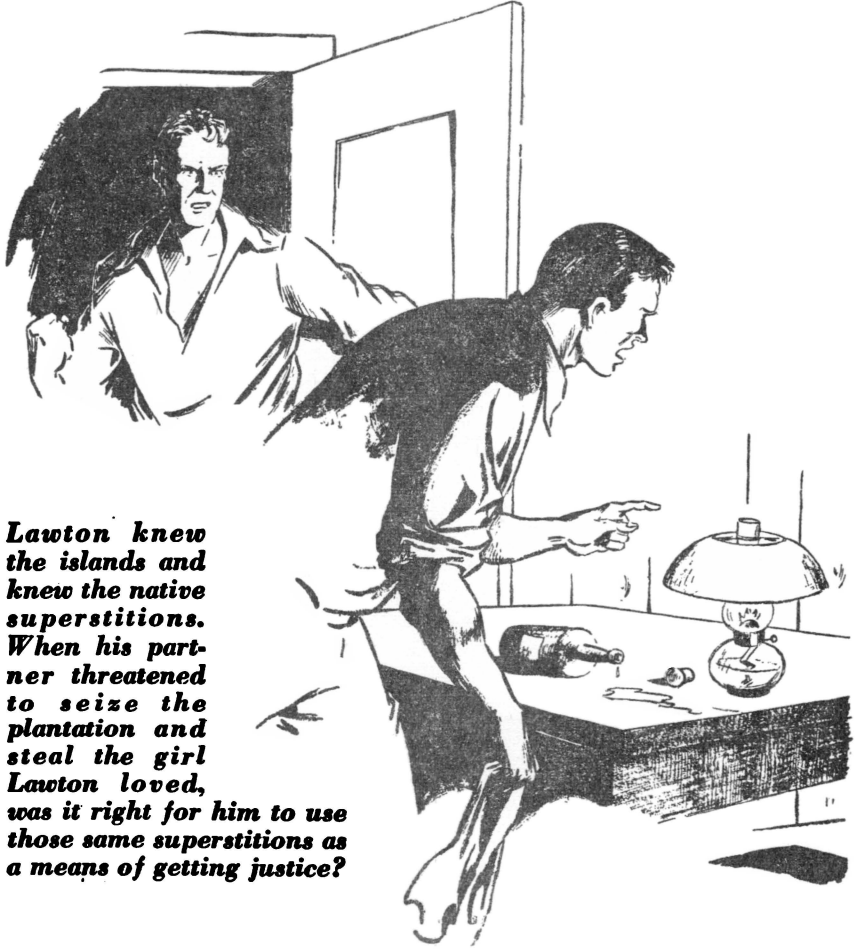
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# SOUTH SEA

THE whisper of bare feet on coral strewn sand made "Red" Lawton whirl and reach for the revolver thrust into his sash; but he relaxed when he saw the luscious Marquesan girl who had followed him to the beach.

"The little master," Vikahue said, as though she had guessed why Red had a bad case of jitters, "went over the hill, that way. It is dangerous, if he comes back by night. Some of the way is *tabu*." Vikahue was as tall as Lawton,



***Lawton knew the islands and knew the native superstitions. When his partner threatened to seize the plantation and steal the girl Lawton loved, was it right for him to use those same superstitions as a means of getting justice?***

**By E. HOFFMANN PRICE**

# JUSTICE

and he was no midget in any man's company; she was shapely as all Marquesan girls, generously built, with large eyes, and a crimson smile. All she wore was a *lava-lava*, which reached from hip to knee, and a rayon shawl bound about her breast. Little enough to wear, with her ripe curves; but the overseer's daughter would have been elaborately dressed even without those two garments.

She was tattooed, in the ancient fashion; an intricate blue lacework decorated the pale brown of her thighs, and shaped a girdle for her waist. At first Lawton had thought it was barbarous, but now those tattooed legs fascinated him.

"I was just going out to look for the little master," Lawton answered, frowning a little as he pondered on the chances of his partner's prowling in spots the



"You damn' fool!"  
Lawton cried.  
"You don't know  
what you're  
doing."

native devil-doctors said were sacred; Vince Durbin, Lawton's partner, was too cocky and reckless.

Vikahue came closer. Her large eyes were all aglow, and Lawton's heart began to thump; Vikahue had grown up during his five years on the island, and her smile, the luxurious sway of her hips, her very voice told him that she was no longer to be treated as a child. And then she was pressing against him, and one hand ran caressingly down his back.

She was so close that he could see some of the fine blue tracery tattooed on her bosom, and for an instant, he could hardly keep from unwinding the red shawl. Vikahue said, "The little master is not your friend. Sit down, I will tell you."

She sank to the sand, and her clinging weight drew him with her. "Vince Durbin, he walks in the hills, he goes to the holy places, the *tabu* places. The priests will kill him. That will make trouble for you, trouble for my people. The French police will arrest us."

VINCE DURBIN had put up all the cash for the cocoanut plantation which Lawton had developed to full bearing, in the past five years; Durbin had just come from the States. Lawton, though aware of the truth that Vikahue was telling, knew that she had more on her mind than warnings. And then she caught him with both arms, pressed her warm mouth against his, clung to him, ardent and eager.

Those tattooed legs; they had become alluring, a bit more fascinating each day, And now, as the

sun's red rays slanted through the palm trunks, Lawton almost forgot Irinea Salazar, the lovely daughter of the neighboring planter. Almost. . . .

"Viki . . . ," He managed to twist free from her supple arms. "Cut it out—you're almost one of the family—I am, I mean—"

"You mean," she cut in, "it's that Salazar girl. She's white, and just back from a school in Paris." Vikahue wasn't angry; she was just sorry. "But listen, Red. The little master goes to see her. She doesn't love either of you."

Vikahue's logic was tempting. But Lawton finally convinced her that while she was as good as Irinea, a white man couldn't get a very nice reception for a native wife, back in the States. "But it'd be nice while it lasted, Red," she urged, and then, though she could not understand his unreasonable scruples, she sighed and went toward the native village.

Lawton was raw boned and angular; he stood there, shaggy brows puckered as he watched Viki's tattooed legs twinkle down the trail. Then he turned to resume his interrupted walk to the pier. Vince Durbin might be snooping around the *Paepae*, the temple platform where a hoard of sacred pearls was supposed to be hidden; but the first place to look was the Salazar plantation.

Lawton started the motor. It backfired, rumbled, then settled down to a steady drumming as the prop bit the water. The next few minutes kept him busy. The reef was a tricky barrier; when the tide was right, the trading boat would clear it, but now, even a launch



required careful handling. He made it without scraping the keel, and he relaxed when she passed the white water and slipped into the smooth swell of the Pacific.

He found Durbin at the Salazar plantation pier, just beyond the towering headland that rose like a fortress. Irinea Salazar and her father were with Durbin.

**T**HE rising moon gilded Irinea's bare shoulders. Though strongly contrasting highlights and shadows blocked out all details of her face, her small, straight nose and the contour of cheek and chin were clearly modeled; her loveliness made Red grope for his tongue.

She wore a dinner gown of pale coral net. The breeze dragged at the skirt, and from knee to bodice, the moon sketched the outline of her shapely figure. There was no island blood in her veins, though since her mother's death, Hernan Salazar had plenty of Marquesan sweethearts. In the same proportion, he kept Irinea under his eye.

Salazar was slender and gray haired. His bow was formal as his greeting. Lawton said to Durbin, "Prowling around at night is dumb. Places along that trail are *tabu*. The natives get griped at such things."

Vince Durbin was tall, but he did not look it beside his partner. His sleek black hair gleamed in the moonlight. His sharp face, not yet tanned by the tropical sun, twisted in a mocking little smile. He gestured at Salazar and the planter's launch, and said, "I was well taken care of, thanks. You didn't have a

date here tonight by any chance, did you?"

Lawton reddened. Before Durbin's arrival, Irinea had expected him whenever he could get away from his plantation.

Salazar and his lovely daughter exchanged glances. The Spanish planter cleared his throat. "Mr. Lawton," he formally began, "Mr. Durbin has asked permission to marry my daughter."

It sounded stagey and absurd, in the free and easy Marquesas, but Salazar carried it off with dignity. Lawton exploded, "That leaves me out, of course! And I guess you're forcing her into it!"

Salazar shrugged and stroked his gray mustache. And when Lawton caught Irinea's eye and saw her smile, half regretful, he knew that she was sorry for him, not for herself.

Durbin cut in, "Now that you're here, let's go! The launch is half mine, after all. Or are you forgetting that I took you off the beach in San Francisco?"

That last quip was too much. Lawton's hard fist lifted Durbin off his feet, laid him on the sand. "This is all mine!" he growled. "How do you like it?"

Irinea cried out in dismay, and knelt beside her groggy suitor.

"I'm okay," Durbin assured her, and sat up.

Irinea turned toward the verandah steps; their good nights were spoken in a way to show that they ignored the clash and the man who opened it. On the way to the launch, Durbin laughed and said, "I was going to tell you about me and her. And you needn't have

come with a gun. Mine's still in my suitcase."

"I'll tell you why I brought it! The French government hasn't enough gendarmes to waste on Ua Paepae. The natives look tame enough to boobs like you, but they're dynamite."

"You told me all that!"

"I'm telling you some more."

Lawton raised his vice above the rumble of the motor. "The trails through the mountains are safe enough by day, but at night, it's something else. Old village sites, ruined temples—they're all *tabu*, and anyone even seeming to monkey around is likely to get speared or clubbed to death."

"So," Durbin sceptically cut in, "You came to Salazar's place."

"Why not? You hadn't taken the boat. I figured you'd been prowling around the old *paepae*, on the back trail to Salazar's. Snooping around to see if there was any truth in those rumors about loot from pearling ships. You've had that on the brain."

"Sure I have! You would too, if you weren't a chump!"

**L**AWTON realized that there was no arguing with his unpleasant benefactor. When he crossed the tricky reef, and moored the launch at the pier, he demanded, "Why did you take such a sudden notion to come out here and work on the plantation? I was doing pretty well."

Durbin did not answer until they were in the bungalow. There he put his cards on the table. His china blue eyes were cold when he began "You were a bum in Frisco and I staked you. My dough

against your time, fifty-fifty. Now that you've worked your way into a half interest, you want Irinea, too?"

"She's not part of the plantation." Red rose suddenly. "If you're taking her to the States, I'll buy your half of this plantation. From my share of the profits."

Durbin shook his head. "Don't be silly, pal. We may look at Frisco, and then we're coming back. To her plantation and mine."

"So that's it? All right, you buy me out; I'll leave."

"What a chance!" Durbin deliberately lit a cigarette, then looked up, grinning. "I like it here. So does she. A quick look at the States will cure her."

Durbin went to his room, whistling. Lawton had to take that, too. In spite of the evening's bitterness, he could not forget that Vince Durbin had put him on his feet. He stared at his big fists as he sat there; they had betrayed him. Time might give him another chance with Irinea, but not if Durbin rushed her. And Durbin worked fast!

Then Vikahue came softly into the living room. She had a bottle of brandy and glasses, as though she had overhead none of the wrathful clash; but that did not fool Lawton. "Thanks," he said shortly and poured a drink.

But he did not taste it. The shapely Marquesan girl waited, watching him swirl the brandy against the sides of the glass. Finally she came closer and whispered, "He won't last. He doesn't belong here. My father says so, and he knows."



Durbin twisted, the blade held forward, and Lawton couldn't quite avoid the cut.

Lawton flushed; he resented having anyone sorry for him. Then her loyalty touched him. "You better run along," he answered gently.

Viki was too clever to force herself on a man who was disgusted and angry; Lawton knew that, but he knew also that she would bide her time, patiently waiting for tattooed legs, for that shapely, palm-oiled body to tempt him away from any hope of Irinea. Lawton knew, and so he thrust his brandy aside. One drink too many, and he'd follow her to the village.

Having made a spectacle of himself, Lawton could not return to the Salazar plantation to see Irinea. All he could do was wait, stand fast, and resist Vikahue's fascinations. It was not until the trading schooner cleared the bar

and anchored in the lagoon, a few weeks later, that Lawton found an unexpected weapon and fresh hope.

**B****O****T****H** partners had made their morning rounds; they sat on the verandah, ignoring each other, and watching the pirogue that came skimming across the lagoon. The Marquesan's gleaming body rippled in the sun as he plied his leaf shaped paddle. When he beached his pirogue, he came running up with a bundle of papers for Lawton. There were no letters; no one remembered him in the States. As he ripped open the newspaper wrappers, he decided to cancel his subscriptions. What the hell!

Then he saw an item which must have been front page news about

the time Durbin had flown from San Francisco on the clipper. "*‘Shorty’ Lane, supposed to be an associate of Vincent Durbin, Los Angeles racketeer, was found dead of bullet wounds along the Embarcadero . . . Police think that this indicates a resumption of the underworld feud which led to the mysterious disappearance of Durbin, some months ago.*"

So that was the background of his partner and benefactor! A racketeer, who had finally taken a powder!

Before Lawton could piece the details together, Durbin was at his side. "Lemme see that rag!" His voice was brusque now. "What's new in the States?"

Durbin's smile was thin and defiant as he plucked the sheet from his partner's hand. He said, "Wise guy, maybe you think you've learned something. Can't make anything of it. I'm not wanted—except by private parties."

Lawton rose. "You did me a good turn, all right. And at the same time, made yourself a hide-out for when it'd get too hot. No wonder you won't buy me out. You're busted, and your racket, whatever it was, is washed up. You're afraid to go back, huh?"

Durbin stood there, arms folded. "The cops don't want me, I told you. Whatta ya doing about it? Spilling to Irinea?"

Lawton laughed harshly. "If she'd believe me, I would."

"Another rat, huh?"

"Call it that. You gave me a lift, and now I'd give you a black eye if I could. Only I can't. I'd give myself a worse one. With her, I mean."

"Don't take it so hard. Hell, if she'd really liked you, it'd been too late for me to cut in."

That hit Lawton between the eyes for a second. Then he flared, "I was waiting until my half of this plantation gave me a start. I didn't build myself up with her, like you did. Do you like her or the Salazar property?"

Durbin was a little more at ease, seeing that Lawton was not going to clean house. "Just between an old tramp and a new one, pal, I like both. I'm getting both. Tell her I'm a retired racketeer. They know how I staked you, so you're sunk, even if you do prove what I am."

"Don't I know it!"

"You don't want to save her from me. Just save her for yourself, which is something else. Hell, I've been a right guy with you."

"That's the tough part of it," Lawton said, very slowly. "If you hadn't been, I could handle this in a lot of ways."

Durbin chuckled and jabbed a derisive finger at the newspaper item. "Not like *he* got, pal. You know it, too. Ain't your style."

The conflict of gratitude and resentment weakened Lawton like a blow in the stomach.

Durbin went on, "Hell, I'm a right guy, and I couldn't help it she likes me. Listen, fellow; as soon as I can I'll buy you out with my cut of the profits of our plantation. Like you were going to buy my share."

Lawton took heart. "I'll stay here and like it," he said. "I'll stay and we'll see who's who."

"You're asking for grief, pal," Durbin retorted. "We'll be gun-

ning each other out. And the French are strict about such things."

But his face had changed perceptibly. He was worried.

**I**N Ua Paepae he was on his own, and without any henchmen to do his work for him. Lawton sensed that weakness; he was convinced that the sudden offer to buy him out meant that Durbin had been shaken when news from the States reached this isolated island. Lawton pressed his advantage. Durbin had run out once, and he would run out again, under pressure. So give him pressure—now!

"Get your gun, buddy," Lawton quietly said. "I like your idea."

Durbin's jaw sagged. "Huh—you mean—?"

Lawton moved swiftly. A side-step brought him to the cabinet in the corner, and the revolver flickered into view, sitting easily in his big brown hand. Durbin's hands rose. Lawton snapped, "Get your gun. I'll go with you."

"Listen—for God's sake—"

"I never plugged a man in the back. Nor hired one to drill another man. Turn around and walk."

Durbin obeyed. He strode down the hall, fingers closing and opening, nervously. He fumbled when he struck a light to the kerosene lamp. As he reached for the knob of the dresser drawer, he turned, eyeing his partner. "You damn' fool, you can't get away with this!"

"Open the drawer."

As Durbin did so, Lawton's hand flashed out; he scooped up the blued automatic. He nudged

Durbin with the muzzle. "Outside, buddy. I'm keeping this till you're ready for it."

Together they walked down the steps to the sand. The moon was high and white. The breeze now whispered in the palms, and the water rippled, sleepily. Durbin's voice quivered when he demanded, "How far do we stand?"

"This far, big shot." Lawton hurled the gun far out into the water. Once or twice its dark metal glinted in the moon. A bit of phosphorescence marked the spot where it sank. Then he threw his own weapon after it, and said, "That's all there is. We aren't shooting each other, neither in the guts nor in the back."

He stood there, arms folded, as Durbin walked back alone, and a little dizzily. The tough guy had a yellow streak. It was already working. The islands would crack Durbin. But suppose he married Irinea before that happened?

Lawton's next move was to let Durbin take active charge of the plantation. The passive resentment of the natives against a man who did not belong there would make Durbin reveal himself. And that would finally convert Irinea; so Lawton hoped, while he could not tell her, he could make her see and hear.

**W**HEN Durbin took over the active management of the plantation, that unfinished duel by moonlight showed its effect. Having been shaken by the prospect of a man-to-man encounter, Durbin tried to prove to himself and to his partner that there had been no shock. He would say, "You're too

soft with these big mugs. They're strong as horses. Prod 'em and get some action. Lucky I came along in time to keep them from walking all over you."

He had the big executive manner. Chin stroking, judicious frowning; a good front, too. Lawton shrugged. "I wouldn't, Vince. This isn't a go-getter country. You try it if you want to."

Durbin was not foolish enough to beat or kick the natives, but he cursed them, crowded them. And, sensing his contempt, they bucked him in ways whose result he could see, but he could never pin the responsibility on a man. Copra disappeared. A storage shed mysteriously caught fire. And while making a big show of work, the men soldiered on the job.

The plantation, just ready to make money, began to lose. Durbin knew that he was wrong, and his own bluster rang hollow. He accused Lawton of making trouble, but Lawton said, "I'm losing with you, Vince."

And then Durbin commenced to drink a little too much brandy. Time, and the islands, were dealing justice; but very slowly. And Viki, subtle, smiling, was slowly playing up her advantage.

When Lawton left his partner in the big living room, Viki was waiting in the hall, her brown body agleam with cocoanut oil, her dark hair glistening, a heart stirring fragrance of jasmine exhaling from the blossom behind her ear. Tattooed legs . . . and those sultry, clinging kisses, always with the excuse of telling Lawton, "The little master is losing; that gun you threw in the water will shoot him."

Once he went native, he would lose Irinea, lose what slender chance he still had. For, once he crossed the line, he could not abandon Viki for a white woman. His respect and affection for his native friends began to take the edge from his one weapon against Durbin: waiting for the ex-racketeer to sink himself, exile himself because of his own tactics.

Then Durbin proposed clearing more land, between the edge of the plantation and the foot of the steep slope which was crowned by the *paepae* of cunningly squared volcanic rock. Only the foundation of the holy place remained. Desertion and time had crumbled the *pandanus* timbers of the building that had stood on the high place.

Lawton shook his head. "Nuh-uh. It's *tabu*, coming too close. We'd have hell on our hands. I know you've got a good idea, setting out more trees and cutting them young. Canned palm hearts do bring money, but you're going at it wrong."

"Listen, you weak kneed chump!" Durbin flared. "Do you think this old-time rot still holds? Suppose they did keep their collection of skulls and that sort of tripe up there. If there's any loot from wrecked ships hidden, why don't they spend it for gin?"

**T**HERE were too many laborers at hand, industriously weeding spaces between the tall palms. Some of them understood more English than they admitted. Lawton cut in, "Because it is *tabu*, you fool! You could put a hundred cases of liquor up there and not a

man would dare touch it. A hundred years ago, these lads used to cook and eat birds like you and me, right up there."

He turned and walked away, frowning. Durbin was getting out



"They're crazy, fighting  
now!" Lawton said. "Get  
the shotgun."

of hand; the waiting game was working a bit too well.

Once, Salazar called at the plantation. He looked a little worried. Lawton offered greeting as formal as the old Spaniard's, and withdrew, leaving him with Durbin.

Salazar's eyes contradicted his smile when he finally descended from the verandah, to board his launch. Durbin looked perplexed. Whatever advice he had received, it must have been hard to digest.

"Salazar," Lawton told himself, "is trying to help Vince. They're still for him."

He was wondering how long he

could endure Durbin's daily calls on Irinea. He had built this plantation with his own hands; inaction tormented him. She would soon marry Durbin, and still Lawton could not speak a word or lift a hand.

Each day, Lawton learned why military men say that troops who can advance and attack under fire are much easier to find than soldiers who can stand fast under punishment, taking and not giving. But he never allowed himself more than two sundown drinks, and of an evening, he walked up and down the beach.

These walks had a result that the most clever schemer could not have anticipated. It was late when he returned one night, but there was light in the front windows. "That bottle. Is he hitting it?"

Lawton had to know. Feeling himself cracking under fire, he had to see how his enemy endured. He needed some outside strength, for his own was failing. Too often, he had stepped to the launch, intending to go to the Salazar plantation to tell his story; damn himself, to save Irinea.

Lawton swiftly retraced his steps. He tiptoed, in long reaching strides, though there was no need of stealth until he came close to the verandah. Better, slip up the slope, where the windows were eye level. He dug into the rich volcanic earth of the knoll that supported the rear of the bungalow.

Then he heard the scream. A woman's voice shook the tin roof. Glass shattered as Lawton reached the crest, and a man snarled, "Shut up, you damn'—! What—listen—your—oooow!"

**L**AWTON burst in from the rear. He cleared the kitchen. As he entered the hall, he saw what he had expected, there in the indirect light from the living room.

Durbin's white duck out-lined him in the half gloom. Vikahue's brown skin reflected golden highlights as she screamed and struggled. If the light had been better, Lawton could have caught tattooed patterns he had never seen. She had shed her *lava-lava*, and the scarf that bound her breast was trailing, and so was her long gleaming hair.

"You damn' fool!" Lawton yelled. He caught Durbin by the shoulder. "If you have to make passes at a gal, pick one that likes you!"

Durbin whirled. He gasped, "That tramp's as big as I am—do you think I'd try—I tell you, she asked for it—she damn' near smothered me with both arms—and then yelled her head off!"

Vikahue fled. Servants were upsetting things in the kitchen. Lawton turned to them and raised one hand. "Go back. Everything is well."

They obeyed, but as they left, they began giggling and chattering. Though Durbin could understand only a few words, his face and ears were red.

"Listen, I'm no pig, and I didn't know she was yours."

"She's not mine. If you're telling the truth, and maybe you are, it's just too bad. You've made a show of yourself."

Lawton was certain that Vikahue had staged an act; a trick to discredit Durbin. Had she been genuinely frightened, she would have clung to her rescuer, but she had avoided this, to avoid putting Lawton in the false position of fighting about a native woman.

With shaking hand, Durbin poured a drink. He flinched under Lawton's appraising eye, misunderstanding what was behind it. "Uh—oh, all right. Here's exactly the way it was, so help me. I'd had a couple too many. She was pouring them, and getting closer every time. Jeez, I'm just human, ain't I? Sure I made a pass, but I wasn't—uh—getting rough."

Lawton said, "Skip it and watch



your step. The natives love gossip."

Durbin squirmed. "I never heard of a dame out here squawking."

"They don't. They're easy, and making a pass don't break any bones. Her screeching is what gives you a black eye. The whole damn' island is wondering why she would scream instead of smiling. Wondering and laughing."

Durbin could not endure the whispers, the glances that he could feel from the rear. Wits had always served him, but the heat that Ua Paepae turned on him was immune to cleverness. Lawton wondered what his partner was planning.

WHEN he found out, it was too late. That was one afternoon when Durbin was not at the bungalow; the launch, however, was at the pier. The servants were strangely silent. Lawton at first blamed that on the afternoon heat. There had been a stifling sultriness, and fitful gusts, chilly and twisting. The peculiar smell of the air had promised a storm; perhaps, sensing it, the natives were alarmed. But Lawton was not sure that this guess was right, that this accounted for the tension that he felt.

And Vikahue was not about the house. Another odd note. He sat there, frowning and moodily smoking. Trouble was in the air, lurking but certain.

Later he heard the familiar sound of a launch. He went down to the beach, expecting Salazar. He was surprised to see the planter's daughter. Irinea was too agitated for the meeting to be embarrassing. As she lurched from the boat,

he caught her by both arms; it was as a meeting of strangers, and when she recovered her balance, he let go her hands.

"Your father sent you to warn me of a specially tricky storm?" Lawton groped, nudging her elbow and turning toward the bungalow. "He's not sick is he?"

"No. It's not the storm. It's Vince. Where is he?" She caught his arm and he could feel her nails through his sleeve. "Where?"

Lawton shook his head. "I thought your father might have called here and picked him up, while I was making my rounds."

She sank to the verandah steps. "Oh, then it must be true!"

"What?" He jerked upright. "What's true?"

"What the servants were whispering. That he's gone to the *paepae* to look for the pearls that are supposed to be there."

"That's bad."

"Red, I've been terrible to you, but I couldn't help it. One can't, you know."

"That's all right, honey. You want me to find him?"

"Father doesn't know, and he mustn't, or he would go. And he's not strong enough for—" She shivered. "For trouble. Will you —? I hate to ask."

"Vince did me a favor once. And he's a white man. And you want it. There reasons."

The wind was freshening. No stars could reach through blackness that blocked the sky, and the reef was now a long white line. There was no telling whether this was a passing squall, or the fore-runner of a storm. Irinea's dress

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# South Sea Justice

(Continued from page 69)

was drenched with spray; it clung to her bosom and outlined her sleek legs.

"I'm not worried about our house," she said, as she went with him up the steps. "It's sheltered, and high enough above any tidal wave. And so is this one."

**H**E found boots, and brought them into the living room to put them on; also a canvas jacket, and a searchlight. It was unreal, facing Irinea again. Seeing her beauty was like contemplating the grave of a loyal friend a long time dead.

He put on his hat and turned toward the door. "With a rotten night like this, maybe no one has seen him."

"But they have! Our servants are gone. Oh—what's that?"

He cocked his head, and caught the tump-tumpa-tump-tump that the rustle of wind twisted palms could not muffle. Drums were throbbing in the hills.

"That means, time to go."

She stopped him at the door. "Where's your gun?"

"Shooting won't help this. Just make things worse."

There was a shotgun, taken down and in its case, but Lawton meant just what he said. He went to the rear. A coconut thudded to the ground, from one of the old trees that were scattered here and there. Falling from sixty feet, the impact would crush a man's skull. The walk ahead was no pleasure

jaunt. And a spear might interrupt diplomacy.

Then, before he was fairly started, Lawton halted. He turned his flashlight toward the white splotch in the gloom. It was Durbin, stumbling, gasping, clutching something. He fell face forward.

Lawton ran into the house and said to Irinea, "Don't worry. He's just returned. No, don't come. Stay out of sight."

Her face was pale and drawn. "But why?"

"If he saw you, he might not want to tell. But I have to know the truth."

She understood. If a *tabu* had been violated, Marquesan custom demanded punishment, lest the spirits be wrathful. Any white person would do, whether guilty or otherwise.

When Lawton half dragged Durbin into the house, Irinea was nowhere in sight. His head was bleeding. A saw edged sword had glanced, shearing thin strips from the scalp, and his hands were red. One still clutched a heavy knife; the blade, broken and nicked, was bloody.

Then Durbin opened his other hand. He had a small pouch of pearls, large and iridescent, perhaps bought or stolen by a trader, and later taken from the wreck of his ship. Whatever their history, they were *tabu*.

Lawton's guess was that the loot had belonged to a blackbirder who had won such hatred that

everything pertaining to him belonged to the gods; his skull included, and of course his flesh, eaten at a ritual banquet, years ago.

"You went and did it," Lawton slowly said. "You idiot!"

"I'm broke. I told Irinea I'd take her to the States, and I'm going to. Before—before I make a chump of myself, bungling things on this plantation. Sure I made a mess. I can't handle these natives, this place. I don't understand them like you do. Now I don't have to."

He gulped a drink. He was pouring a second when Irinea emerged from the hall. She reproached. "It wasn't money I was interested in."

He listened as she explained her presence. When she wiped the blood from his face, he blurted, "But I can't back down. One of them took a swing at me with a wooden sword, and I ducked and knifed him. I've got to get out. Before they catch up."

**T**HE drums were louder. Irinea recoiled. Like Lawton, she read the true story of Durbin's wounds. She slowly said, "*That sword came at you from behind. While you were stabbing someone in front of you. Someone who didn't have a weapon. You killed an unarmed man.*"

Irinea pointed at the clawed marks on his throat and chest.

"I couldn't help it!" he snarled, and leaped to his feet. "I found the stuff, and it's mine. I picked among old skulls for it. A crazy old fellow jumped me and I thought he had a knife, and I was

lucky the one in back didn't brain me."

"I'll take the pearls," Lawton said. "Maybe if they're returned, there will be less trouble with the French law."

"Oh, you will?" Durbin snatched the blade. "Back on your heels, you."

Irinea's eyes were widening. "But now that you know, you don't want them," she said. "Of course they startled you, and you struck."

"Baby, are you crazy? These are worth twenty thousand bucks!"

Lawton cut in, "They're waiting outside, getting up their courage for a rush. They think we have guns."

Durbin shifted, warily, so that his partner would have no chance of snatching his wrist. "I can run out to the front. She and I both can. We'll go in the boat. To the big island. To get married."

"Not with stolen pearls, Vince." Irinea said.

"So that's it, huh? Going religious on me? Okay, good-by—"

"Hold it!" Lawton snapped, and Durbin turned. "You can't go, even if you do want pearls worse than you do her. Someone has to square this with the natives. If you escape with the loot, Irinea or her father, or the old sunshiner in the next cove will be spared. Anyone at all."

"Vince, you're all excited. Calm down," Irinea urged. "You don't understand. You don't have to run. Just give up—"

"Bubbles like these? No. And if there's danger, why come along. You too, Red. I'll split the stuff with you. Those niggers won't hurt Irinea's old man, not after

all these years. Maybe me, maybe you because you're my partner, but not her father."

He thought he was smoothing everything over. Irinea said, "You're not so excited, after all. I have been foolish. Very silly, misunderstanding you, and your big city ways of thinking."

"'Bye, folks," Durbin had lost the girl, but he had the loot.

Lawton lunged. Durbin twisted, blade held point forward. Lawton tried to avoid the cut, but only half succeeded. He stumbled and Durbin bolted for the verandah. Irinea kept Lawton from rising when he tried.

"You can't chase him—he's got the motor going."

She was tearing strips from her skirt. Lawton thrust her aside. "I'm all right. For a while." He clutched his side, and managed to regain his feet. "I got to stop him."

The motor was sputtering. Lawton yelled above the wind, "You damn' fool, you can't go in this storm."

"What storm?" Durbin cried. "Seen worse on Lake Mich!"

Then Irinea's weight prevailed. She clung to Lawton, ignoring the blood that seeped from his shirt, and made her dress cling to her side.

"Stay here," she pleaded. "You can't get him—look!"

**I**N the thickening gloom, which blotted out the momentarily exposed moon, tall natives broke from cover and raced toward the beach. The bone spear heads and the teeth of the serrated swords were white. Hurling lances nosed into the wind, but their flight was erratic.

"Get that shotgun—in the case—shells—in the—trunk," Lawton choked, thrusting Irinea from him. "He's made it—they'll come for us now. They're crazy, fighting mad."

She ran into his room. Lawton watched the Marquesans retreating from the water. "Hurry, honey!" he croaked. "They're stalling, but it won't be long."

The wind was howling now. Cocoanuts, blown by the twisting gale, thumped against the roof. Then a moment of silence. The voices of the Marquesans were clear. And Lawton knew why they yelled.

The launch had struck the reef. Foam hid her. An expert swimmer might have saved himself, but Durbin could not. He was pulled under, and he could not come up. Lawton called to Irinea, "Never mind the gun. The boys are satisfied. Going away."

The gods, they reasoned, had settled Durbin; the sea had reclaimed her treasure. Thus, no man's vengeance was needed. Island justice had prevailed. And he was glad now that the girl with the tattooed legs had not quite succeeded.

"Did he make it?" she asked, kneeling beside him.

Lawton stroked her hair, and answered evasively, "They'll never catch him, and he'll never come back. Now, I need a drink, and that scratch—"

She made as if to rise, but paused to say, "Will you kiss me, later?"

"Now, and later, too. And always." In time, he would be sorry for Vince Durbin, who had gone to the sharks with his greed. But now he could think only of Irinea.

"Always," she murmured, "won't be half long enough."