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SINNERS IN HEAVEN

BY CLIVE ARDEN

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III

The flare of many torches illuminated the midnight darkness in the south of the island. Chromalod, priest and chief, sat in the leafy council chamber near the entrance of the sacred palm grove, surrounded by his trusted warriors. In the centre of the large clearing of squatting figures stood Rubeo Sun—next in rank to the chief—consulting, in his muttering, sing song dialect, the strange story which, among fragic memories, caused consternation and foreboding in every heart.

When he ceased, Chromalod sat silent, pulling his beard with wrinkled old hands that trembled. An agitated murmur broke out all around the barbaric circle blending with wails and distress.

The chief at last commanded silence and spoke:

"Whence came they, Rubeonus? Was there no strange canoe floating, like a leaf tossed, upon the lagoon?"

"There was not, O Chief. The white women appeared in my sight as if springing from the waving palm! The sun shone through them—it sparkled on—did fall from the skies, sending light but before him." He shivered, rubbing his sore shoulder. "The great white one is a ghost. O my Chief! I will not easily be killed!"

"How great is the tribe? Didst thou not see others Rubeonus?"

"None other did I stay to see, O Chief! Perchance they are evil spirits come to haunt the lairs where the bones—ghosts of our slain ones rot peacefully. They slay with bullets like those of those other evil ones."

The chief sat in deep thought for many moments; then rose and waved his spear.

"The Vow!" he cried. "Let prepara-tions be made, my warriors. Where dart darkness hides the earth, we will seek them, this white tribe, from the Sea Cave."

A confusion of voices resounded, accompanied by many furtive glances into the darkness beyond the fires. The barrage fire of revenge was yet tempered with wariness. Many a ghastly vision of warfare adjusted itself to more exact them to follow their chief in his still half-fearful excitement to the cursed palm grove.

Presently the sound of native voices rose once more, singing their song of Hate.

* * * * * * *

The hour-old setting smoke had by her raised his face, showing the soft beauty graceful for the refreshed child. All night he had sat motionless, head hidden in his hands, while Croft, nobody to see in his haggard features, that Barbara had come back safely.

Although his eyes had not closed this solitary night with its fears and fancies, had realized and intended the unsteady sufferings of the day before, nevertheless which he had attacked Burnham with such violence in the cabin room now attacked him. Again and again he saw the white face, the blood-stained hair, the wrenched mouth, and the dark eyes which, inferred "there is no use" more than ever now that the wretched man was dead. Again and again he heard the words, "I'll get you for this!" which, inferred "there is no use" more than ever now that the wretched man was dead. Again and again he heard the words, "I'll get you for this!" which, inferred "there is no use" more than ever now that the wretched man was dead. Again and again he heard the words, "I'll get you for this!" which, inferred "there is no use" more than ever now that the wretched man was dead.

Nonetheless, he spanned the floor and paced it, pausing now and then to recoil among the rubbish in the hut, and to hear the sleeping girl.

Save for the distant surf, no sound broke the night. Both the girl and Croft keenly sensed the fact; it was decisive. Had Burnham still been alive, dead. Flinging through the tall bamboo he came out upon the beach and stretch of water glimmering faintly, under the starry darkness. Here, then, throwing off his garments, he plunged into the lagoon and struck out, using a primitive delight in the cold water. His tired limbs responded gratefully, lying his shirt and breeches, which he had washed in the pool, on the grass.

When he emerged from the bath, the sound of voices fell upon his ears. Hastily dressing, he crept, silent, listening intently. The voices came nearer, then receded as the party left the outskirts of the palm grove. Croft took a few cautious steps in the direction, soon discovering the fire. Then he crept back to the hut, the trees soundlessly creeping in front of him. Barbara was still sleeping so near their speech, while they lasted, that he could hear her breathing.

Croft was now in the stronger light of the fire, which he knew still burned on the top of the hill. The voices seemed to be coming from the other side of the grove. Then he emerged from the bank