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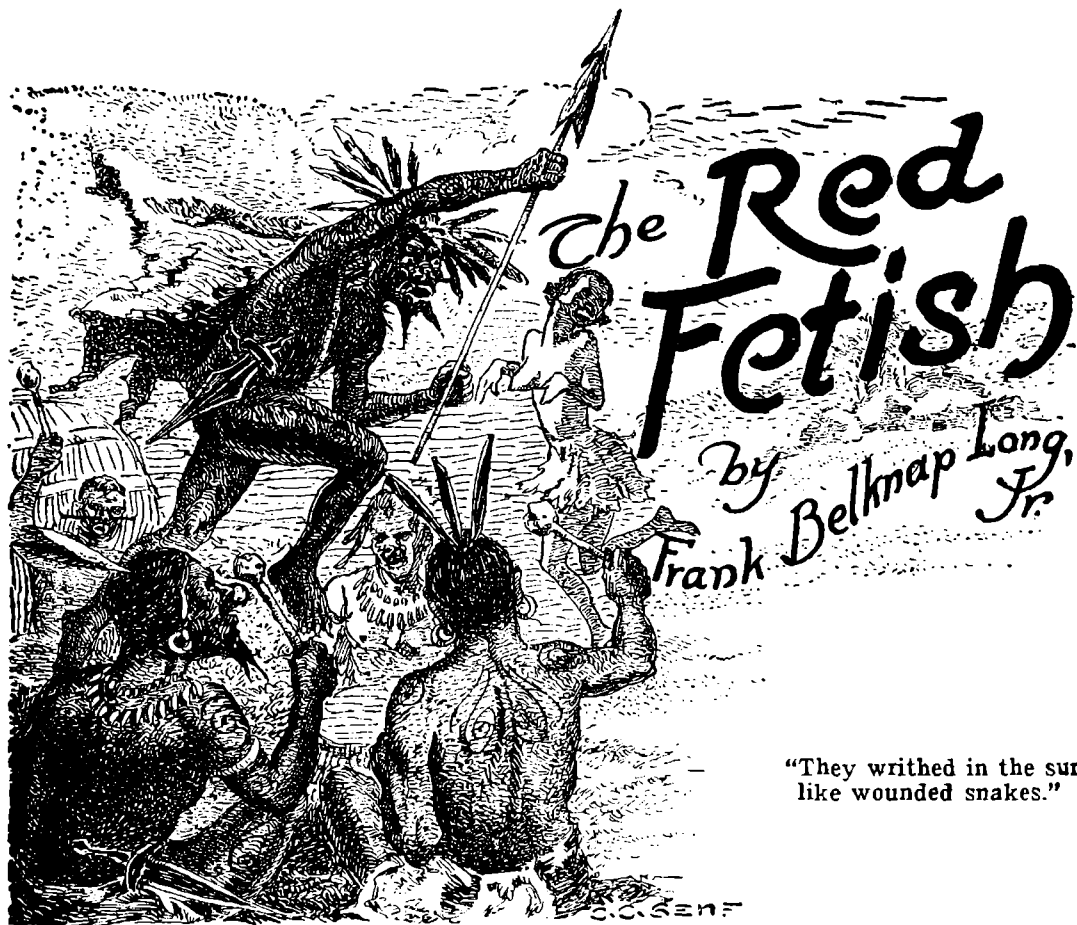
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"They writhed in the sun
like wounded snakes."

BILL CULLEN shaded his eyes with his hand and stared at the empty skyline. His arms, as he stood in the glittering light, showed scraggy and emaciated and his features were pinched and black. There had been strong winds blowing and enormous seas thundering on the beach, and the ferocity of the elements had accentuated his helplessness. He turned to his companion with a gesture of despair.

"Look here," he said, "you know as well as I do that it is physically impossible for us to hang on without water. What do you say to a swim?"

Bill's companion groaned and shook his head. He was a frightened, nervous little man with pointed fox-like ears, and people who knew him were prone to brand him a coward. His name, Wellington Van Wyck,

did not raise him in the estimation of his friends.

Bill studied regretfully the thing that Van Wyck had become. It was not the lack of water that gave him discomfort. His sorrow lay in the fact that Van Wyck did not possess a capacity for blind enthusiasm.

"It's only six miles," he urged.

"There are cannibals on that island," replied Van Wyck. "It's down on the chart."

Van Wyck was a little wild and he imagined that cannibals tore themselves to pieces over their ceremonies. Bill knew that cannibals were decent and clean and orderly; but there was no explaining that to Van Wyck. He dealt with him in another fashion.

"You're as weak and flabby and spineless as a jelly-fish with rheuma-

tism," said Bill. "You're so unsavory that the cannibals wouldn't eat you. Why don't you kill yourself now, and be done with it? 'Twould be a good way to economize on food!"

Van Wyck scowled and sat down upon the beach. His eyes narrowed. "We are safer here," he said. His lips were swollen and cracked and he spoke in a thin, small voice. He assured Bill that he could survive without luxuries. He said that two men could go three days on one pint of water, and that in three or four days anything might happen.

Nothing did happen. The three days went by like great white birds at sea, and the merciless glare of the sun made life a perfect misery. Bill looked grim. He squatted on the sands and watched the pale blue water foaming and bubbling in the lagoon, and his eyes glittered. Once he turned to Van Wyck and laughed. "It has green eyes," he said. "I saw it watching us on the beach. It plays with the moon and its tentacles are long and gelatinous!"

Sea water affects some men like hashish. That morning Bill had crawled to the lagoon on his hands and knees and swallowed more salt than was good for him. Van Wyck had warned him that it wasn't done, but Bill was of the disbelieving sort.

Bill's clothes were in tatters, and he found no satisfaction in contemplating the leanness of his wrists and ankles. Whenever he held up his wrists for inspection they shook so violently that he let himself be guided by sentiment and wept. His ankles were no wider than broomsticks, and when he tried to walk he could hear them crack. He didn't want to turn them, so he sat down and talked to Van Wyck. He made an effort to be agreeable.

"I'll concede that the cannibals may eat us," he said. "There is always that risk. But I don't see why they should; and it's only a six-

mile swim. If we stay here I can't trust myself."

Van Wyck recoiled and his under lip trembled. Bill laid a merciful hand upon his emaciated shoulder. "There isn't anything that I want to keep from you," he said. "I'll tell you the truth. For three days I've been planning to kill you. I lay awake last night and watched you. I thought: 'This thirst—this dreadful thirst'—~~he~~ would put an end to it!"

Van Wyck shivered, and tears ran down his face and dampened his brittle red beard. His small blue eyes dilated with horror. Hot shame flushed red over his throat and ears. "But you wouldn't really eat me?" he moaned.

"I don't know," replied Bill. "That's why I suggest the swim. It's six miles and we're atrociously weak; but anything to keep from thinking of *that!*"

Bill knew that Van Wyck understood and sympathized. Van Wyck had a knife, which he kept hidden, but in his sleep he frequently took it out and felt the edge of it. Bill had been very much horrified, and he had not pretended to misunderstand the expression on Van Wyck's face. There was something brazen in Van Wyck's affrightment when he discovered that two could play the same sinister game.

The sun was setting and a few gray wisps of clouds were fleeing like flakes of snow across the blue sky. A single gull careened and dipped far out in the tumbling black immensity of ocean. A great silence had fallen upon the atoll, and the stubborn struggle between the two men drew to an issue before the first wild rush of stars. Van Wyck felt unsafe in the presence of Bill Cullen, and he made no effort to conceal his fear.

"Let's get away from here as quickly as possible," he pleaded.

"You were right. Six or seven miles isn't a long swim. If we strip, we can make it."

Bill extended his hand. It was like a dead thing, but Van Wyck seized it and wrung it warmly. His voice quivered. "It isn't a long swim, old fellow," he repeated.

Bill made a grimace. "It might rain," he said.

"It won't rain," responded Van Wyck.

That settled it. They spent the evening getting ready. They hid their anguish in a bustle of preparation. Bill scurried about and secured three clams. The unfortunate bivalves were devoured with immoderate ferocity. Even their stiff, rubber-like necks afforded grist for the mill of Van Wyck's teeth. It grieved Bill to see the shells go to waste. They sat down and congratulated themselves for the first time in a week. The clams seemed to make their situation less hopeless, but they did not on that account decide to remain on the island. Their thirst was abnormal and monstrous. It was not a thing to be talked about.

THEY managed to get some sleep; but they awoke with their throats on fire. The game that they had played was over. But they avoided the thought of their new plan as much as possible, since they did not want the possibility of fatal consequences to look them in the face.

A chill in the atmosphere generally preceded the customary heat of the day; and the coldness now seemed unusually severe. They got together a few sticks and built a fire. The sun had not yet risen, but the island was immersed in the ghostly gray light of early dawning. They saw everything vividly. The boulders on the beach seemed alive. A light wind furred the steel-gray sea with tiny ripples.

"We mustn't waste time," said Van Wyck. It was obvious that his

dread of Bill had grown in the night. Bill's threat had taken complete possession of his shriveled, selfish little brain. His teeth chattered over the fire and he planned a thousand assaults on the man beside him. His fingers clutched frantically at the knife which he kept hidden; but he lacked the stomach for malicious manslaughter. He feared that his cowardice might betray him into a false or dangerous move, and he endeavored to conquer his hysteria with loud boasts.

"It was all poppycock, our worrying about the cannibals," he announced. "The thing for us to do is to put on a bold front. They'll make gods of us!"

In the present condition of his mind these words produced a curious effect on Bill. He waved his arms wildly, and swore at the sky. "Yes," he shouted, "they'll do that. But sometimes they're not satisfied with a living man. They're head-hunters, you know. They have a way of removing the skull from a man's head, and drying it up, and worshiping it. They have a predilection for red hair and beards. When they find both on one head they go wild."

Bill looked directly at Van Wyck. The latter could scarcely stand. He was swaying hysterically back and forth and running his fingers through his bristling red beard. "Perhaps I could shave it off before we start," he wailed.

"With what?" demanded Bill.

"With the clam shells," cried Van Wyck, dejectedly seeking to grasp some straw that would save his head.

"I refuse to permit it," said Bill. "It's time we started. It wouldn't be pleasant to swim in the full glare of the sun."

They stripped and rolled their clothes into neat, round balls. Somehow it did not seem right to abandon them helter-skelter on the beach. They had a vague idea that they might return for them. They de-

posited them gingerly beneath the one coco palm, and walking solemnly to the water's edge they scowled into the clouded mirror of sea before them.

THE water was like ice, and Bill shivered and stood on one foot. "Walk right in," said Van Wyck. "The cannibals expect us!" His smile was ghastly and indescribable. The blue veins stood out on his scrawny neck, and his forehead was covered with globules of perspiration.

Bill was the first to go into deep water. Van Wyck stood with the icy current swirling about his ankles, and watched him wade out until he stood waist-deep. Bill turned and looked back reproachfully. "You're coming, aren't you?" Bill's disdain and distrust of Van Wyck were forgotten in a momentary need for companionship.

As Van Wyck stood with the cold water numbing his toes he had an irrational desire to turn back and run wildly up the beach, and to stay on the island until thirst finished him off. The risk of the swim seemed suddenly displeasing to him. A mist passed rapidly before his eyes; he ran his fingers through his hair and gulped. But when he saw the pitiful, hurt expression on Bill's face he put aside unworthy thoughts. "I'm coming, Bill," he said.

He walked forward until the water eddied and swirled about his chin. His face was hideously drawn and his eyes bulged, but a forlorn ray of sunlight filtered through the clouds and played about his head, bringing out its latent manliness.

"It's deep, out there," said Bill.

They both lurched forward. The sudden loss of footing accentuated Bill's weakness, and he went under. He felt that his arms and legs were incapable of sustaining him, and he wondered if Van Wyck would try to save him.

He came up and struck out, his mouth full of water. The salt burned his throat and he swallowed. The water went into his stomach. He shivered. The sun beat mercilessly down upon his naked body.

He swam boldly, with a brief sense of triumph. He had conquered his physical weakness. He knew that his strength might not last, but the thought that he had not depended upon Van Wyck gave him secret satisfaction.

He could see Van Wyck's red head on the water several yards ahead of him. The little wretch had evidently made good use of his legs and arms. "Slow up, Van Wyck!" he shouted.

"I don't dare to!" Van Wyck called back. "If I stop I might sink. And think how deep it is!"

Bill resented Van Wyck's reminder. "If you don't ease up," he shouted, "you'll surely go down. This isn't an athletic contest!"

"It is," cried Van Wyck. "It's the greatest ever—even if there are head-hunters at the goal. I advise you to talk to me. It keeps me from thinking. If I think I shall go down."

But Bill did not feel like talking. The water was cold and he had no stomach for repartee. He felt the chill of the depths beneath in his nude limbs. He swallowed great quantities of sea water. He knew that he might suffer eventually, but he did not care. He wanted to reach the island. He had never shared Van Wyck's dread of cannibals, and the thought of the island, with its crystal-clear springs and refreshing fruits, was a precious balm to him.

He wondered if Van Wyck would survive him. The latter was swimming with frightful rapidity, leaving him definitely in the lurch. Bill envied and pitied his little companion. Van Wyck might survive to view the island, with its green, welcome frondage—but would he ever reach it?

Bill had an uncomfortable suspicion that he might sink. His initial courage threatened to give out. A mounting hysteria surged through his brain. He closed his eyes and tried not to think. There was nothing before him but a limitless stretch of malachite sea. He was fascinated and horrified by his isolation. A cold, brilliant sun blinded his eyes and dried up the sap of life in him. The water seemed to thicken, and he had great difficulty in moving his arms and legs.

BILL never knew how he reached the island. For a starving, emaciated man to swim seven miles is tremendous, and deserves some reward. Like most valiant men, Bill was conscious of his own worth. When he sighted the island he said nothing, but he thought: "This is only just. I have paid the price, and I deserve this."

He had also caught up with Van Wyck. The awful glare in the despairing eyes that Van Wyck turned upon him told of a fatigue immeasurable and a desire for water that had passed the bounds of sanity. Van Wyck's eyes were living pools of liquid fire. His voice was hoarse and rasping, and he turned over and over in the water; and twice his head went under.

They were horribly near when they sighted the cannibals. Van Wyck saw them first. He was puffing and wailing, and he had been swimming on his back, and when he turned over and sighted them his face took on the aspect of an open wound. His mouth became an awful gash in a grotesque, streaked horror of countenance.

"Bill," he called hoarsely. "It's worse than we thought. There are hundreds of 'em!"

Fixing his frightened and horrified eyes on the shore, Bill trod water, and became suddenly very angry. The scene before him burned itself

on his brain, and robbed him of his victory. He felt that the fates had taken an indecent advantage of him. His anger mounted, and flushed his neck and throat. "Damn their black hides!" he muttered.

A clamor and a stench arose from the rocks. The cannibals seemed to be recovering from a drinking-bout. They writhed in the sun like wounded snakes. Bill counted sixty or seventy. Their bodies were hideously tattooed, and they wore monstrous shell rings through their ears and noses. The women joined with the men in dancing and spitting venom. The hubbub was deafening. Ages of savagery and blood had shaped them into capering devils. They were all the more terrible because they had seen other white men. Bill did not expect much from them. He confessed a frank horror at the situation.

"If we only had something to give 'em," he groaned.

Van Wyck had somehow expected Bill to rally and come to his support. He needed a moral prop and he noted with horror that Bill had lost his solid, comforting manner. Van Wyck's lips were so dry that he could scarcely get his tongue to shape words of rebuff.

"I don't like it," he finally blurted out. "They certainly mean business. You might swim in and test 'em!"

"Don't be an ass!" roared Bill.

"All right, then. But if one of us doesn't swim in, both of us are goners. And since I've never talked with savages I'm hardly the man. You have a way with you. You could pacify a Java ape-man! Get 'em laughing—tell 'em a funny story!"

Bill protested venomously. "Those cannibals aren't children," he groaned. "You can't spoof 'em. This is serious business, Van Wyck."

Van Wyck refused to be convinced and he would have gone on urging Bill to commit suicide to save his own precious skin if something had

not made all conversation ridiculous. They both saw it at the same time. They looked at each other and said nothing. Then Van Wyck began frantically swimming toward the rocks.

The fin divided the water into two glassy walls. As it passed along it turned the dark surface to shining quicksilver. Bill had barely grasped the meaning of it when something touched his ankles and he knew that the water was infested. He gave a sudden, defiant shriek.

But the sharks did not molest him. They made straight for Van Wyck. They approached in vicious circles, and Bill saw the whites of their stomachs through the dark green water. The mouth of the largest opened and closed; and then there followed a clashing of teeth that sounded like the clanging of of iron-clad porteullises.

Once the horrible gray back of the fish showed above the surface, and glittered lethally in the sun, and Bill knew that Van Wyck was done for. Van Wyck was almost near enough to the rocks to climb them, and he might reasonably have pushed the shark off with his foot, but Bill knew that he wouldn't. Bill knew that Van Wyck was as good as eaten, and he thought: "That shark will hardly be content with Van Wyck alone!"

A dozen fins intersected on the surface and occasionally one of the ravenous monsters would jump clear of the water in its eagerness to taste satisfying human flesh.

The sight got in under Bill's skin and hurt. He closed his eyes, and endeavored to think of the grinning, leering savages on the rocks. The sharks made frantic dashes at Van Wyck and came away with something in their mouths. They would rush forward, their great jaws would snap—and there would be less and less of Van Wyck.

Bill was unable to keep his eyes shut. He tried to cover them with his

hands, but then he would go under and get an extra mouthful of salt water. He came up gasping, and saw that the sea was streaked with crimson.

As the sharks darted away from Van Wyck they left dark red trails behind them. Bill heard Van Wyck's screams distinctly, although the latter had reached a point where screams seemed futile. They became less and less coherent. Perhaps Van Wyck realized the absurdity of protest. Perhaps he realized that all things eventually work together for the best. Certainly the cannibals would have treated him worse. It is not pleasant to be boiled in oil or hacked to pieces with little knives.

Bill saw the last of Van Wyck disappear in the maw of an enormous shark. The water turned a deeper red, and for a moment the sky and sea and even the naked, gesticulating savages seemed bathed in a crimson aura. It may have been an optical illusion, since Bill's eyes had ceased to function with clarity. Bill knew that the sharks would look about a bit after finishing Van Wyck, and the thought gave him no satisfaction. "You're next on the list," he told himself.

But somehow the sharks seemed satisfied with poor Van Wyck. Perhaps they found Van Wyck so unsavory that they did not care to risk tackling another of the same breed. They circled about for a few minutes after the last of Van Wyck had disappeared, and then they passed solemnly eastward, their fins glistening in the brilliant sunlight.

Meanwhile Bill trod water and shuddered when he thought of Van Wyck. But he didn't let himself think of Van Wyck much after that. Van Wyck, he argued, was no longer in need of sympathy. "It is the living who have to suffer," he thought. It was patent that he could enjoy no security in waters infested with man-eating sharks.

He shouted with delight when he discovered that the cannibals had disappeared from the rocks. He was forcefully tempted to swim in and take advantage of his amazing good fortune. But he thought better of that when he calmly considered the nature of cannibals. They were probably waiting behind the rocks for him to swim in, and he didn't care to be boiled in oil when there were sharks to make a quicker, cleaner job of it.

He decided to attempt to round the island. His ability to keep afloat amazed and frightened him. He had evidently drawn upon some reserve strength that nature had hitherto wilfully concealed. Destiny had played him a new hand. He secretly congratulated himself, although he continued to curse fate for the cannibals.

HE GOT around the island somehow. The current set to at the northern end and he had some difficulty in surmounting the backwash of black tidal water; but he finally reached a beach so clean and white and refreshing that he shouted with boyish eagerness and gratification. He swam in without reckoning consequences, for in his exultation he had forgotten or overlooked the cannibals.

He would build a fire and warm himself, and he would eat nothing but fruit. It needed but a momentary inspection to convince him that the island contained an excess of fruit. And there was water! A tiny streamlet came out from the woods, between the boles of fabulously ancient trees, and ran down the smooth white beach.

Bill swam in and clambered up the beach. He sat down under a hotoo tree, an absurd horror of bones and wet, clinging sand. He was a living scarecrow come out of the sea with the wisdom and weariness of ancient ocean upon him. He could scarcely open and close his

thick, black lips. His sun-baked skin was drawn painfully taut over his protruding ribs.

A steady surf was crashing on the beach, and he paused while he listened to the roar of the breakers. He reposed for a time; then he got up, and a peal of wild laughter came from between his swollen lips. He had won out! He had hoodwinked the cannibals and sharks! In that blazing crystal world of sunlight and water he came to life again.

The sun dried him. He gulped up gallons of water from the tiny streamlet. It was fresh and clear. He was genuinely elated. The wind swept in from the sea in great, steady gusts, and the flapping breeze whistled through his hair and under his armpits. He shouted and danced in sheer joy. The cannibals, he assured himself, were on the other side of the island. It was a large island, and he could hide. The chances against him, he thought, were negligible.

He decided to look about for a hiding-place. He knew that in the vast forest of tangled vegetation he would have no difficulty in achieving utter concealment. He could hoard up fruits and coconuts and live unmolested for days.

But when he turned he saw something peering from between the boles of the distorted, antique trees that made him change his mind. He stood still in the center of the beach, and stared, and presently he saw black, hideous figures come forward into the clearing. Others appeared crawling toward him on their hands and knees. He realized then the absurdity of attempting any sort of concealment.

He stood stark still while the cannibals advanced toward him across the smooth, white sands. He began to envy Van Wyck. He knew too much about savages. He had that and his imagination to blame for the little hell that he endured. How

could he guess that they did not want revenge? A savage considers everything an insult. He knew that he should not have landed upon their infernal island. He wanted to apologize to them, and to make them understand. He had no desire to lord it over them, and he admitted to himself that he had deliberately injured their sense of dignity.

At first he thought that they intended to make short work of him. They looked sinister. There were three dozen of them in the guard of honor that advanced toward him across the beach and he did not like their faces. Their faces were black and swollen and ugly and incredibly tattooed, and their cheeks were smeared with green and blue paint. One of them paraded a discarded panama hat. Bill could not imagine where he had obtained the hat. The wretch had probably repaid the owner by boiling him in oil. It was quite the thing twenty years ago to burn traders and missionaries in oil, although the custom has been outgrown among respectable savages. But the hat looked at least twenty years old. And one of the devils smoked a corncob pipe! They were tall, solemn-looking cusses, and Bill did not pretend to like them.

But when they got close to him they formed a circle, shutting him off from the sea, and he felt then that everything was worse than he had anticipated. When cannibals begin forming into rings it is customary to give up hope. They were grinning hideously and Bill could count the number of teeth in the rings which they wore about their necks.

Some of the leanest and tallest wore thirty or forty teeth. And Bill knew that a savage never wears more than one tooth from a single head. It is not considered decent. And each tooth means—but Bill never wept over spilt milk. He felt that his own head was in imminent danger, and the knowledge annoyed

and frightened him. But he did not dare let on that he feared them, and he stood up very stiff and straight, and scowled into their narrow, blood-shot eyes.

They seemed to resent his hostility. It seemed to hurt them, and Bill was amazed at the hint of reproach in their glances. A cannibal is something of a gentleman, and he would not deliberately hurt a man's feelings for the world. And Bill's resentment somehow seemed an insult to their hospitality. Bill understood how they felt, and he realized that he had behaved like a boor. But his teeth were knocking together like billiard balls, and a stern front was necessary.

But he could not look his captors in the face. They came close to him, and then one of them stepped forward and patted him on the back. He spoke and Bill understood him. Bill knew nearly all of the Bantu languages, and the savage spoke a corruption of several.

"We thank our brother for the very fine gift," he said. "We are indeed grateful!"

Although Bill could understand what the black devil said a reply was utterly beyond him. The grammatical construction of Bantu overwhelmed him. Bill kept his mouth shut and stared, pretending not to understand.

The spokesman turned and beckoned. A tall, lean youth with protruding yellow teeth came quickly forward. Save for a slight hint of pity in his small eyes his face bore no expression. He held in his right hand a large, round object which Bill did not immediately recognize. The spokesman nodded and took the object by its hair. He stroked it effusively, calling upon it to protect and succor him in war and in peace. He begged that the object's pity and benevolence would extend to the whole tribe. He praised

the object in terms that would have embarrassed any living man. Then he turned to Bill and made a very low bow. "It came ashore before you," he said. "And we are most grateful!"

Bill opened his eyes wide with horror. He sought to express his agony in words, but no sound came from between his black, swollen lips. A sudden shriek would perhaps have saved him, and Bill tried hard to make a sound in his throat. But his horror lay too heavily upon him. He made a wild, horrid gesture with his

right arm and collapsed in a heap upon the sand.

Three months later Bill was taken off by a trading-sloop. He blabbered idiotically about the right of a head to decent burial and made uncomplimentary allusions to the wearing of teeth. He evidently sought to stir up anger against the cannibals, but the traders ignored his insinuations, since he was obviously mad and since the cannibals had worshiped him and given him the run of the island. The memory of Van Wyck's encrimsoned head had addled his wits.
