



"BATTLESHIP ISLE"
an offshore reef, as seen
through a wind-hewn
rock on the shore of
Orchid Island.

ORCHID ISLAND

by Jack Goldfarb

Out where the far Pacific washes into the South China Sea, the island-country of Taiwan charms travelers with its poetic place names like Love River, Sun Moon Lake, Jade Mountain, and Orchid Island. But tiny, primitive Orchid Island, 42 miles east of the southernmost tip of Taiwan, has borne many other names in its murky past, some of them far less romantic.

The rock-fringed, verdant isle was once known as *Death Island* because it was believed that an insect with a fatal bite bred there. Later the island was called *Keinatu* (Turtle with a Burned Head) and *Botel Tobago* (Snuff Bottle). Today many

Taiwanese refer to it familiarly as "Tobacco Island."

The craving for tobacco by the 1700 Yami aborigine tribespeople who inhabit Orchid Island has become a legendary characteristic of the place. The Yami men, staunchly surviving without most of the blessings of modern civilization, including clothing (they wear only loin-cloths), electricity, and even toothpaste, are also ignoring the current widespread warnings on smoking—whether or not they have ever heard of them.

Many Yami women (they go fully dressed, trinkets and all) and youngsters

too, hanker for the "pernicious weeds." As no tobacco grows on the 20 square mile island, travelers from Taiwan have been the customary importers, and it is quite common in business transactions for the Yamis to refuse money and insist on tobacco instead. One Taiwanese archaeologist on a recent expedition took along four thousand cigarettes to help get his digging done. The local excavation workers pitched in at a brisk pace until his cigarette stocks ran out, whereupon he was literally left in a hole. Lately the Taiwan police stationed on the island have been urging visitors to cut down on their fostering of a nicotine economy.