

Title

THE DRUMS DRONE DEATH

By

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Contents

Title 2
About this eBook 3
Copyright and license 3

Contents 4

The Drums Drone Death 5

I. 5

II. 8

III. 12

IV. 20

V. 28

VI. 31

The Drums Drone Death

I.

JOHN CARTER, lean, long, redheaded American, clean-shaven and immaculate in whites, sat at his desk in the bungalow that was his official residence, conning his daily list of Melanesian words.

Without doubt the youngest man ever to be appointed to the rank of police commissioner, it was no easy job he held in the New Hebrides, where a dual British and French government holds sway over that archipelago of far-flung, savage isles, where the bushmen still serve man meat baked in the ovens and call it "long pig."

At Port Vila, on the island of Vate, are two resident commissioners, two judges, British and French, to administer respectively the affairs of their own countrymen, while the high commissioners have control over the native chiefs - at least nominally. A president, chosen from a neutral race, preserves impartiality in the courts, and Carter held the same relationship to the two chiefs of police, outranking them.

There had been much consultation between consulates and even embassies before he had been selected. The qualifications called for were stringent. Eventually, the United States agreed to give indefinite leave to a junior officer of the customs service - and John Carter was the man.

French he knew from his mother, a Quebec Canadian. He could fly an amphibian, and he had had varied experiences with smugglers and illicit immigrants, with rumrunners and passport fakers. His I. Q. rated high and his physical test was tops.

Carter's girl was back in the States, waiting for him to make good. She came of a wealthy family and while love overrode social standings, the pay of a junior in the customs service fell far short of what Carter - not the girl - decided was necessary before matrimony could be definitely contemplated.

They were not even engaged, although that did not matter. Doris Ogden was a girl who knew her own heart and mind; while she did not entirely disregard conventions, she was very much in love with the tall, virile Carter, not precisely handsome from a Hollywood standpoint, but all man.

She respected his principles about marital income from his standpoint, but not from her own. They had agreed upon a compromise. The New Hebrides appointment might lead to something well worth while and she was coming out to him when that end was in sight; thrilled with the thought of a tropic honeymoon, of life with John in a wildly foreign land.

Carter told himself he had to make good. He had the incentive and the enthusiasm, he believed he had the ability; but things had not run too smoothly. There had been some jealousy among his fellow officers, but that was nothing to the attitude of the chiefs of police, French and British; the judges.

The resident commissioners had received him affably, but he had still to prove himself. The chiefs of police, over whom he had nominal jurisdiction, would be glad to see him turn out a failure. They resented his appointment, and they did not cooperate.

So far, no important assignment had come his way. He would have to carve that way for himself, he saw, make himself indispensable. If only -

HIS GAZE wandered from the list of words to the portrait of Doris on his desk. Dark-eyed, dark-haired, winsome and wistful - to John Carter

... the face that launched a thousand ships,

And burnt the topless towers of Ilium.

Not that he felt himself another Hector, or an Ulysses. His duty ranked high with him, united with his love and all his ambition for Doris and himself. In many ways John Carter was single-minded, as he was clean-minded. He was a born executive, blessed with intuition toward human beings - very human himself - and Doris was his guiding star, his mate. They thought and saw the same way about things. She was, he told himself, so charged with feeling, so damned sensible about main issues, and with a romantic streak that tied up with his commission at Port Vila.

What a wife she would make - to help him handle problems - to -

He knew himself getting sentimental as he visioned Doris with him - Doris at Government House - mistress of the bungalow - and of him. Things got a bit mixed when he considered Doris. He applied himself to the list. Melanesian was not hard to master. Mostly nouns, strung together in various meanings and combinations. If a man learned five hundred basic words -

Futu stood in the open doorway, saluting punctiliously.

Futu was a sort of bush wizard, attached to the courts as interpreter. That called for certain fees and privileges that gave him importance among the natives.

He was dressed officially in white Sulu skirt, drill monkey jacket and red sash, plus a secondhand Sam Browne belt.

He was intelligent enough though his eyes were like those of a monkey, bright, shallow, and shifty, seeming to swim on the whites, like a compass card on alcohol. They held native cunning rather than any deep reasoning faculty.

At the present moment he was in a little trouble with the courts, under suspicion of suppressed evidence and the possible sharing of stolen goods.

For that reason, when he had received, by bush Marconi, a message boomed across the miles by a sending drum manipulated on Mallicolo by Lasi, ancient tindalo, or witch doctor, Futu had decided to bring it direct to Kariteri - the native rendition of Carter.