

The Drums Drone Death

by J. Allan Dunn

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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.

Kariteri had a mana--a psychic force--that enabled him to tell when Futu was lying, and further compelled his respect.

Moreover, Kariteri might give him a couple of shillings, and help him fix matters with the police chiefs and the judges.

Outside the bungalow, in the garden, he spat twice, blew his nose violently between thumb and forefinger, carefully buried saliva and mucus, treading down the dirt.

Now he stood before the presence.

HE SAW Carter's gray eyes fixed upon him, noted the clean line of the Amerikani's jaw. He was stern, this boss polisimani, but he was far more human than the stolid Beritani--Britishers-- or the excitable Manaweewees--the French, so dubbed by the natives as the men who were always saying "oui, oui."

"Come in, you rascal. Shut the door. Now what is it?"

Futu grinned, scratched the calf of one bare leg with the prehensile toes of his foot.

"I catchum drum talkee. All same talkee come from Mallicolo. I think mebbe plenty trouble walk along that place."

Carter was studying native customs as well as the language. He knew far more than Futu, or anybody else, guessed. To all intents and purposes he was, as police commissioner, head of the detective bureau, and such information was vital. He knew about the sending drums, bowls of exact size, filled with precisely the same amounts of water, used for inter-island communication. He was trying to master its code--or codes, for there seemed more than one.

"Get on with it, Futu."

Futu rolled his eyes in the effort to translate.

"White Mary, she speak too much trouble along Tomasi place, all same Mallicolo. She say boss polisimani come plenty quick. She say maybe matemate too soon."

It was plain enough. Carter knew "white Mary" meant any white woman, and that matemate meant killing, probably murder.

"Who sent that drum talkee, Futu?"

Futu rolled his eyes once more, scratched his fuzzy hair, bleached rusty with lime to keep down its

population. His gaze fixed covetously as Carter brought a bright silver florin from his pocket.

"I think Lasi send. Him big tindalo. I think, suppose you go along Mallicolo, better you take me--"

Carter looked out the window. Shadows were lengthening, the land wind stirring. Sunset was near, and sudden tropic, moonless night.

He meant to play this solo. It was inside information, it looked like real trouble, it seemed his first real opportunity.

"Tomasi" would mean Thomas, he knew; no doubt a Britisher. Carter got along fairly well with the British resident commissioner; better with his secretary, Aylwin, a good egg, if somewhat quaint in his ways.

There was a mystery here, Carter fancied-- murder pending or already done. If he could clean it up--

"You like to ride in aitumanu?" he asked. Futu shuddered, his brown skin grayed and goose-fleshed. He spat furtively in the palm of his hand, to bury the spittle later.

The aitumanu--ghost bird, in native--was Carter's amphibian, bought by the government for his use. Above all things Futu craved to ride in it. It would give him

immeasurable prestige, but-- His belly twisted; it seemed filled with the black and yellow boas of the bush.

The aitumanu was white man's mana. To fly with the ghost bird would place him altogether and forever in the power of white spirits. It was like answering the ghosts that prowled after nightfall and whispered to a man, seeking to supplant his soul.

"No can do," he answered sorrowfully. His eyes brightened as he deftly caught the coin Carter tossed him.

"Wait," Carter said. "I write chit. You take along Aliwini. I think you catch at club."

II.

AYLWIN was, to resident commissioners, what first secretaries of legation are to ambassadors. They might have the drag, but he did all the hauling. He was indispensable. Commissioners might--and did--come and go, but Aylwin, like the brook, went on forever.

He was a tall, gaunt, elderly, baldish Englishman with a straw-colored mustache, pale-blue eyes, and an Adam's apple that bobbed up and down when he ate or

talked, like a fishing float when a perch is making up its mind to swallow the bait.

He was a living encyclopedia of everything that had happened in New Hebrides on the British side since his arrival. A good deal about the French and native sides, and some of what had gone on before his time.

Carter had a liking for him, on account of his efficiency and readiness to help the newcomer, at first; afterward for Aylwin's self. He was shrewd, thorough, conservative, and eccentric, but he was human enough, especially after a few drinks.

Carter had Scotch and soda ready for him when he arrived from the club where Futu had found him. In the chit Carter had included the drumgram message.

Aylwin said nothing until he had sizzed half his glass, with a "cheerio" to Carter. Then he had plenty to say, but did it succinctly, as if he had assembled certain facts in his orderly way.

"I say, look here, Carter. This is all a bit odd. I don't like that message. No doubt it's authentic, though Futu is a bit of a faker, y' know. Doubt if he'd cook up this. But I can't quite see the girl--'white Mary' means any white woman, of

course--I can't quite see the girl at Thomas' place getting a tindalo to boom off a message for her."

"There is a girl, then."

"Yes, and she's an American, by the way. Matemate means killing, possibly murder."

Aylwin drank again with his absurd throat working. Carter knew what "white Mary" and matemate meant well enough, but he did not say so. Aylwin continued:

"It's a strange thing, Carter, but we got a letter on the last mail from home, inquiring about a chap named Burton--two letters. One from his family, another from his fiancée. Said he had suddenly stopped corresponding and they wanted us to investigate. I imagine they thought he might have been bushed by natives. But chaps do get careless about writin' out here, y' know. We looked at it that way. I meant to see Thomas the next time he came to Port Vila--had a chap on the lookout for him--and find out about it.

"Now"--Aylwin tugged at his spindling mustache, while Carter replenished his drink--"it looks a bit fishy, almost as if the chap might be missing, what? In which case, Thomas should have reported it."

"What's he like--Thomas?" asked

Carter. The hunch that had started with Futu's delivery of the drumgram--that here was a serious case at last, a mystery to be solved, perhaps a murder, was steadily strengthening.

"Thomas came here about three years ago;

I've got the date in our files. That was under the last resident commissioner. He had a chap with him named Shields--Scotchman, with a dog, quite a decent Cairns--and a Filipino, at least he was entered as that, and Thomas came by way of Manila. Sort of handy chap who can be valet, cook, butler--sort of general factotum, if you get what I mean."

Carter nodded. He knew the type in the States.

"We gathered that Thomas was going to run one of these mutual colonization projects--where they advertise for working partners, with some capital, to engage in a promising enterprise. Popular enough, with the lure of the tropics and all that, but not so often profitable. He has paid the commercial license for that, general permission that covers pretty well everything-- crops, like cotton, copra, cacao, and vanilla; hardwoods, sandalwood prospecting for copper and iron, sulphur and all that. Their prospectuses are pretty

voluminous, though I don't remember seeing one by Thomas.

"He bought a secondhand cruising launch, and a small electric plant. Comes in every five or six weeks for mail and supplies. A year later Burton came out to join him. Jolly decent sort, had an idea he'd get a lot of huntin' an' fishin'. Good family, might have been a younger son, at a loose end, shipped off with premium money.

"Then the Americans came, brother and sister--Hallidays. She was a bit the elder, I think, round twenty-three or four. Nice girl, tallish, slender, good figure. I have a notion she put up most of the money. I had a bit of a talk with them on the boat, before Thomas showed up for them.

"Fourth chap was Taylor. Nice enough feller, short, stocky. *Not* a public-school man, like Burton, but a solid sort. Asked me a lot about the proposition. I didn't know much, and naturally I wasn't talkin'. I gathered he'd invested all his savings in the biznai."

"Seen much of them since?"

"No. I say, Carter, you're a jolly good judge of Scotch, y' know."

"Have another."

Aylwin was a good consumer.

Carter had an idea, from seeing his capacity at the club, that he had a wooden head for liquor, plus a hollow leg.

"I mean," Carter went on, "does Thomas bring them to Port Vila much?"

"I think not. I doubt it. I get to know most of what goes on. This is a gossipy spot. Not so much news going."

"How do you figure Thomas, yourself?" The secretary fingered his mustache, sampled his highball.

"Financially--Ah, my error; an American idiom. Well, Carter, this is official, of course. I don't like him. Got nothing definite against him. He hasn't shipped any products, but that often happens with these organizations. He's practical, plausible, quite a pusher. He's got magnetism, talks well, force, and all that, but I wouldn't imagine him too scrupulous, serving his own ends."

CARTER pushed a tin box of cigarettes across the desk. Aylwin selected one with apparent care, lighted it, puffed out a smoke circle.

"I can't quite imagine him doin' the usual. I mean advertisin' for partners and being satisfied to go along with what capital they brought in. It wouldn't be worth

while, for Thomas. Of course there are a lot of chaps who do just that thing. But Thomas is deeper, to my mind, though I don't see what his game might be. Not quite cricket, I think.

"You knew, Carter, the chap is a bit of a bounder, some ways. Too chummy with that Filipino of his. I noticed that. They talked Spanish and I overheard a bit of it. It was conversation, old boy, not master-and-man stuff at all."

The "old boy" denoted that Aylwin was mellowing a bit. He appeared to realize it.

"That's about all I know, offhand. I've got to toddle along and change. Dinner with the commissioner. Thanks for the hospitality. Anything I can do, call on me. Are you thinkin' of goin' to Mallicolo?"

"Tonight." "My word, you Americans are expeditious, what? You may be right. But night flyin', no moon, hopping over the volcanoes, a bit risky, eh?"

"It's a short hop. I've got my radio. I may communicate with you. I'm doing this solo, Aylwin, at the start. Mind keeping it under your hat, as to where I'm going, and the message? Muzzle Futu, if possible."

"Can do. He's under a cloud, that chap." He shook hands with Carter

as he stood up to go.

"Good man," he said. "Best of luck. And toodle-oo."

Aylwin was a bit under. But a change to dinner things and a shower would clear him up, Carter knew. Aylwin was sound.

Carter ate at the club, went back to the bungalow, changed white shoes for field boots, inspected his gun--a Luger he preferred because of its high velocity and heavy impact, and because it could be changed quickly to a rifle by clipping on its skeleton stock.

He took extra clips for it. Went over the kit he was going to take along.

He had been studying hard, just before he left, and on the trip. Fingerprinting and camera work, criminal psychology and evidence, the work of medical examiners. He had the equipment and the theory; all he needed was practice, and his hunch proclaimed he was going to get that.

His small, compact amphibian rode at mooring outside the official dock basin. He got a lounging native to paddle him off. The man backed hastily away as Carter cast off, and the aitumanu sputtered into life.

There was no reef at Vate, and the plane taxied over the still water of

the landlocked harbor, breaking up the reflected pattern of the stars, sending off blue and green swirls of luminifaræ, the fireflies of the sea.

The floats lost suction, the plane scuttered like a rising duck, lifted, gaining elevation, the land wind tailing.

Carter flew nor'-nor'east, over two small islands, then banana-shaped Api. The grim bulk of Ambrym loomed with its twin craters, active night and day. Over them the shifting vapors pulsed like the aurora borealis, in the steady rose-colored flame.

He flew high to pass above the smoldering cone of Lopevi, saw the outline of Mallicolo, lace-edged with its reef, shaped like a thigh bone. Mallicolo, the "Missionaries' Graveyard"--and the "Traders' Tomb." Those were old names, he knew, but they still applied, only there was no longer a mission on Mallicolo.

It seemed to him as he flew, translated from the concrete world on a modern magic carpet, as if Doris were beside him in the plane, urging him on, but warning him to be careful--as she would.

And the night, serene as it was in the heavens, with the Southern Cross shining like a crooked pendant, held mystery. He was

flying into it. This was his try-out. Mystery, a missing man, maybe murder!

He told himself to have done with fancies, moods born of romance and mystery, to refuse to try to assemble the few things he knew into any pattern, before he arrived.

"Facts are what you are after, John Carter," he told himself, as he diagonally crossed Mallicolo, silent and sinister, with its bristling bush of giant trees, interwoven with lianas and thorny brush--where anything might happen, or have happened.

He planed down, marking the surf line, the quiet lagoon within. The Thomas mutual Colonization project was in a little bay below the top, northwestern knuckle of the thigh bone. His official map of the group, furnished by Aylwin, told him that.

The beach was black volcanic grit, not the white sand of travel agencies. Coco palms grew thickly along the beach, melting into the profuse jungle. A grove of trees marked, and hid, for now, the Thomas habitations.

Carter leveled out the amphibian, squatted nicely on even pontoons. The offshore wind was laden with dense fragrance of ilang-ilang and frangipani.

It was one forty by his cockpit chronometer. He had felt the urge for haste, but he did not mean to rouse the colony. He could hit the sloping beach on the last of the flood, anchor with a kedge in the grit, think things over.

In his hurry to make good, to get busy, he had lost no time. Mallicolo brewed its own land wind after nightfall, as did all the isles of the group. That, with the pounding of the surf on the reef, should muffle all sound of his arrival, he figured.

There was a pier. He saw the cruising launch at anchor, at the only mooring.

He shut off ignition, taxied in, with way enough for an easy landing.

Then he saw the light. Somebody was awake. There came the sound, like a dulled whipcrack, through the drum roll of the reef.

At the same instant, almost, the light went out, and another twinkled at the end of the wharf that jutted into deep water.

Somebody had fired a pistol.

III.

A SHORT, agile figure in whites came racing down the pier.

Carter, grounded, his kedge flukes buried, the line snug, jumped back aboard, turned on his spotlight.

The man was bareheaded, his hair black in a stiff pompadour, his skin brown--possibly Filipino or a Malay. He carried a double-barreled shotgun that he leveled at Carter.

"What you want? Why you come here?" "Lower that gun," Carter snapped, "I'm the police commissioner from Vate. Meet me at the shore end of the pier."

He whipped out his Luger, but the man obeyed. Carter met him, Luger still in hand. The man might be a watchman on the alert. But why? What did it have to do with the extinguished light, the muffled shot? This must be Carter's Filipino factotum.

"You come verree bad time of night," said the man. "Everybody in bed."

"You're not. Why?" "I Filipino boy. I study late." All dressed up like that? Carter could not see the picture. A Filipino might study, but not fully dressed, not ready to cope with rare intruders.

"Who is in the room where the light just went out, before you switched on the one at the end of the pier?"

"I not know. Stay in my cabana. No see light."

"You didn't hear a shot?" "No, señor."

Suddenly a dog began to bark, to howl. Carter thought of the Cairns terrier Aylwin had mentioned, brought by the Scotchman, Shields.

"What's your name?"

Mabini, señor. José Mabini. I am steward for Señor Thomas."

"All right, we'll go to the house."

Carter trailed the evidently reluctant Mabini over well-tended terraces, set with shrubbery, to the bungalow, a low building, one-storied, with wire-screened lanais surrounding it.

Inside, Mabini switched on a standard lamp and revealed a long living room, plainly furnished in tropical style. Midway, passages ran right and left.

Carter swung left to where the dog howled lugubriously. The passage led to where he had seen the light extinguished after the shot. Mabini hesitated, scowling, and Carter turned on him.

"Get Thomas," he ordered.

Mabini was ugly as he looked at the tall figure, topped with red hair, charged with virility and authority. His look took in the Luger and he

went slowly to the right-hand passage.

The light was none too good, but Carter saw the shaggy terrier, its head cast back, howling, clawing at the door. Once it stopped and lapped at a dark trickle that flowed over the low sill.

The door was locked. He set his shoulder to it. A panel cracked, splintered, made of light wood. Carter tore an opening through which he reached, feeling for the key.

The room was dark with some light probing in through two windows that opened on the lanai. He could vaguely make out the lower half of a huddled figure, apparently naked. He could smell newly spilled blood, the taint of powder gas, a combination unmistakable and sinister.

A WALL light flared up in the passage and a deep voice challenged:

"What's all this? Who the devil are you, sir, and what are you doing here?"

"Your servant could have told you. I am the police commissioner from Port Vila. Right now I want to find out what's been going on in this room," Carter said coolly, as he

turned the lock. "I take it you're Thomas?"

He pushed back the door against the inert bulk that resisted it. The terrier bounded ahead, lapped at the face, blotched and streaked with a batter of blood and brains, horribly visible as Thomas switched on a ceiling light, gave out a cry. "Great heavens, what's this?" "It looks like murder, Thomas," Carter said. "Who was he?"

"It's Shields. This is his room. Why, this is a terrible thing! Yet I'm not too surprised--"

Carter wondered just *how* surprised he was. His agitation seemed real and regretful.

"Why not?" "The poor devil, to go out like that. A fine fellow, but he's been brooding of late. Scotch, you know, worked too hard and, lately, he's been drinking too much. Worrying--"

"What about?"

There was something to Carter antagonistic, not quite genuine, about this big, florid jowly chap, whose grief might be stressed purposely. He seemed assured enough, but Carter saw a ticking vein in his thick neck, another at his temple. He was dressed in wide-striped pajamas, his wrists and hands were hairy on their

backs, so were his toes in the bamboo sandals he wore.

"About nothing. In a hurry to make money. Not the sort to confide in one, y' know. I think you're quite wrong about the idea of murder, commissioner. It looks like suicide to me. That's his own gun in his hand."

Thomas stooped, as if to pick it up. "Don't touch it," Carter snapped. He felt that Thomas was deliberately sizing him up, rating him--not too highly. He did not like the eyes of Thomas, yellowish-gray, flecked with light-brown dots that seemed mobile. There was play in the orbs like the shift of light in pallid Mexican opals. Carter wanted to jolt him out of the complacency he felt was back of the grief Thomas had expressed.

"I suppose after he shot himself he switched off the light--I saw it go out *after* the shot--and locked the door?" Carter knew his tone was sarcastic.

It did not seem to faze Thomas. "He might have fallen against the switch, even turned the key in falling, perhaps with his elbow."

"He *might*. Where is the rest of your household, Thomas? Burton, Taylor, the Hallidays?"

He could see things shift and

change in the other's eyes as if the orbs were not merely a part of his anatomy but separate entities, alert as any part of his brain.

He was surprised at Carter's glib mention of the names, more surprised than he had been about the finding of the dead man, Carter fancied, not certain, but remembering Aylwin's description of Thomas.

"You shall see those who are here, of course. This will be a great shock to Miss Halliday. She is not strong. I wish we could keep it from her."

"Hardly," said Carter dryly, "if it's murder." "It could not be that. There is no one who would have any reason to kill Shields. We all liked and respected him. A bit dour at times, but--"

Thomas shrugged his shoulders, well in hand. The veins no longer ticked. Mabini came to the door. The Cairns lapped audibly.

"Take that damned dog away," said Thomas; "get it out of the house."

THE TERRIER growled, snapped as Matini grasped it, expertly, back of the neck, shutting off its wind with his free hand.

"Don't harm the dog," Carter said sharply. "Now, Mr. Thomas, what

about the rest?"

"There is nobody else, beside myself, Mabini, and poor Shields, except Miss Halliday. She has not been well. She is asleep. I gave her a sedative myself."

So that she wouldn't hear the shot, or the howling dog--though that could hardly have been figured out? Carter held those questions in his mind.

"There are inquiries from England about Burton, sent to the government." Carter watched Thomas and saw again the strange play of lighting in his curious orbs, where the pupils had contracted. They were more sensitive to light than a cat's, he thought.

"Is that why you came?"

It was Carter's turn not to answer directly.

"Burton has not been with us for a long time," Thomas went on. "He was not satisfied with our life here at the colony, wanted something more adventurous. He sailed with the skipper of the *Lehua*, a pearl trader named Larkin. And the *Lehua*, as you may know, was wrecked on a reef in the Santa Cruz group. It is feared that all hands were lost, perhaps massacred by the natives. They set fire to the hull, no doubt after they looted it. I have

been putting off writing to Burton's people, hoping they might have got away in a boat, be marooned somewhere."

You are lying as the clock ticks, Carter thought. Thomas was too glib to suit him. But thinking a man lied, and proving it, were two different matters. Carter felt his inexperience in this, his first big test. There was more to this than he had yet seen. And if Thomas was concealing, falsifying, he was a wily, resourceful opponent, astute at covering up.

"You should have reported to Port Vila," Carter said.

"I intended to, on my next visit."

"Taylor--what about Taylor?"

"He is away, prospecting. He is a mineralogist, interested in the metallic resources of the New Hebrides. They do not seem too promising, but Taylor was hopeful. He may be back any day."

"You mean he's gone into the bush, alone?"

"There were two native boys with him, and he was under the protection of Lasi, the tindalo. I don't think there was any danger, above the ordinary hazards."

Lasi, who had sent the drumgram?

He would have to see Lasi, Carter decided.

"And Halliday?" he checked.

"A native brought in a specimen, quite a good-looking one, and Halliday wanted to try his luck. We haven't been doing too well with our other enterprises. Labor is too hard to get, and get any work out of. But Halliday was not going far, to a definite spot. He should be back tomorrow, barring accidents." Thomas smiled deprecatingly, as if accidents were unlikely, minor factors.

To Carter there came again the same feel of contact with mystery, with murder, but now it was no longer presentiment.

One man dead, three missing. Thomas inscrutable, almost bland. Carter remembered Aylwin's ideas on Thomas--not too scrupulous, serving his own ends, in for deeper things than getting partners with comparatively small capital in on a project almost certain to fail, and getting rid of them because of that failure, because the money had gone and they were dissatisfied.

That was fantastic. There was no motive. Yet, out of Thomas' four partners, *three were missing*, one was dead. Carter believed him murdered. *Why not the rest? Why? Where? How? What for?*

CARTER thrust aside the crowding questions, came back to the present. He felt the antagonism of Thomas, as he had felt that of Mabini, the servant with whom Thomas was too chummy, according to Aylwin; but mingled with the air of Thomas he was sensible also of a mild but assured derision.

Carter told himself: "He's sized me up for a cub detective, or a stuffed shirt, said shirt stuffed with my own idea of importance and ability. Or else he simply guesses at my inexperience, considers me incompetent. Whatever it is, he's laughing at me, inside."

His reflections were not comforting. He did feel like a chap who has crammed for examinations and is a bit jittery about the outcome. "I'm not going to muck it, Doris," he said, almost aloud.

This was his opportunity, make or break. He was positive of it. He had to solve this mystery, and he could not handle it long alone.

He would have to call Port Vila and report the dead man. That would bring out the British police chief, it would bring the coroner, a French surgeon chosen for his ability, but supercilious and condescending toward Carter. It would slip out of his hands, solution, and all credit, give out the opportunity for him to

be quietly but firmly damned as a failure.

He could not call Port Vila before eight o'clock, and that would be early. It would take at least six hours for them to get under way and arrive.

Carter looked at his wrist watch. Ten after two. He had twelve hours to solve the mystery of the missing men--and the dead one.

*Bom -bom-boom-boom-boom--
BOOM-M-M-M!*

The heavy strokes came booming through the night, seeming to voice the mystery and the hidden horrors of the jungle. They were like great bells, sonorous and charged with doom. The released spirit of the bush. The notes deepened, they seemed to well up through the earth, to press down from the sky, to press in upon the soul with some cosmic force, dominating the pulses.

As suddenly as they had commenced, they stopped, vibrations dying, receding. And again Carter heard the Cairns howling dismally.

"What do you suppose they mean," he asked. Thomas seemed indifferent. "Nothing much, I imagine. They are the big devil-devil drums, but they don't have the significance they did once,

when they meant war or some cannibal feast. The natives are getting tamed a bit since they hanged a tindalo and shelled the bush, after the last raid on a plantation, over in Ambrym. Before your time, I fancy."

They meant something, Carter was assured. Not sending drums, but surely a summons of some kind. He could imagine apish men coming in along the bush trails. Thomas evidently did not fear an attack. Aylwin had spoken of the quieting of the natives.

"They still carry on among themselves," he said, "but they seem to have learned their lesson about interfering with the whites."

There were light steps in the passage. A girl was coming along it, tall and slender, in silk pajamas with a negligee over them. Mabini was behind her. Carter thought he had tried to stop her. Her eyes were as dark as her hair that waved to her shoulders. The irises were dilated so that the eyes seemed entirely black, like the eyes of a sleepwalker, Suddenly aroused, he thought.

"The drums," she cried. "What has happened? They woke me. What is wrong?"

Carter closed the door and stood in front of it so she could not see the

splintered panel, or the trickle of blood. Thomas stood between him and the girl.

"What is *he* doing here?" she asked, indicating Carter.

Surely, he thought, she must know that he had come in reply to the drumgram. But he did not mention it. Thomas might not, need not, know about it.

"Nothing," Thomas answered soothingly. "This gentleman is somebody who came to see me. Nothing is wrong. Go back to bed."

He put a protective, almost a possessive, arm about her and she drew away.

"This is Claire Halliday. She is not very well, foolishly nervous about her brother not having come back--"

"Not only Jack, but Burton, and Taylor. Something horrible has happened to them! Where is Shields? I... I--"

She swayed and went limp. Thomas picked her up in his arms like a child. "I'll take her back to bed, get her to sleep again. This is no climate for a white woman, or the surroundings. You'll excuse me."

He was suave, assured. Mabini followed them.

CARTER went back into the room. He found no blood on the bed, on the floor between it and where the naked body lay. The bed had been slept in. He tried the window screens, found them hooked, the lower casements open to the veranda.

He wondered if Shields had been roused, had turned on the light, opened the door to recognize his visitor, turned away to put on some clothing-- and had been shot from behind. But that did not account for the locked door.

He picked up the Webley by the end of its barrel, wrapped his handkerchief about it, laid it on the bed. The bullet had gone in behind the right ear--a possible but not likely position for a suicide. The hole of emergence was great. Little show of powder grains.

There was another thing Carter had learned from the book, "The Doctor Looks at Death," written by a New York medical examiner. That the death grip is instinctively vise-like. The Webley was loosely clasped in Shield's hand.

With such a low-velocity weapon the scant powder markings meant the gun had been fired from a distance of two feet or more, if what Carter had studied on ballistics was correct and he remembered rightly.

He found the bullet and placed it with the gun. It was misshapen, after plowing twice through bone, carrying splinters from the initial entry.

He took the key out of the lock. The metal was dull from tropic humidity. It looked as if the end had been nipped, perhaps by pliers to turn it from without.

There was a flat, metal trunk at the foot of the bed. The dead man's clothing was on a chair and Carter went through it, found a bunch of keys, tried one of them, then another, opened the trunk. It had a top tray, with a lid which he lifted. There was a small, flat book on top of some linens. Carter glanced inside, saw entries in neat script.

He slipped the diary into a pocket, closed tray and trunk, locked it. When Thomas returned, Carter was spreading a sheet over the body, though he was not through with it. But it seemed horribly indecent, pitiful.

"She is asleep again," said Thomas. "I gave her a bromide. A slightly neurotic type, I think, and the tropics raises hell with a woman's functioning, physical and nervous. She should never have come here. She is attractive and she has been--through no fault of hers, perhaps--a cause of friction among my partners. Did you find anything?"

And what are we going to do about the body? We can't keep it long. My ice supply is limited. Decomposition is terribly rapid--you'd know that."

Carter surveyed him for a moment. The man had force, and resistance. He was capable, Carter believed, of murder, even of ridding himself of four partners, and being quite stoic about it as a pragmatic crisis that had to be met.

But why, why? What was there in it for him? Here was one--and one only--corpus delicti. It might be pinned upon him, but the task would not be easy--and it would be dangerous if Carter came close to the answers.

"I shall radio from my plane, later on," said Carter, and thought Thomas was a trifle startled at the mention of the radio. The next second he was imperturbable.

"That will be fine. There'll have to be an autopsy, of course."

"Of course," Carter repeated. He was conscious of a deep dislike of Thomas, something intuitive, allied to faculties that civilization has atrophied in most people. "I am not through with my own examination. I have a kit in my plane."

"Ah... fingerprints, I suppose."

"And other things." Carter spoke

dryly. "I'll come down to the plane with you. I'm quite at your disposal, commissioner."

"You are a damned hypocrite," thought Carter. He said aloud: "Let's go."

IV.

THOMAS offered to help, and Carter let him stay in the room, anxious to check his reactions. There would not be many, he thought.

Thomas was keenly interested as Carter laid out his kit.

"I have never seen a modern detective at work," Thomas said, and Carter was conscious, or thought he was, of a certain sardonic condescension. The other's poise was a bit too perfect.

Carter used a Pike Flash-o-lens, lighted so the rays were directed on the fingerprints. He did not expect to find much. He was as sure the dead man's prints were on the gun as that the bullet would fit it.

The light switch was negligible. Thomas had turned it, perhaps purposely. Carter himself had handled the key, a poor object to retain latent prints. The Pike magnified picture showed scratches on the end of it, but unless he could

tie them up with sharp-nosed pliers, identify who had used them--providing he found them--there was no proof.

Daylight was coming as he prepared for his final, crucial test. Thomas watched closely as Carter melted the paraffin wax over a Bunsen burner in a crucible, painted it over the space between the dead man's thumb and finger, well back. The right hand. Shields could not have shot himself with the left, from the position of the wound.

Carter peeled off the cooling wax and made a cup of it.

"The Guttman test," he said, watching Thomas. "When I pour Guttman's solution into the cup, the reagent will show any nitrous deposits drawn from the hand during the cooling process. They are often visible to the naked eye, always so under a lens--tiny blue crystals."

"You'll pardon me, commissioner, if I say you are much better equipped for this sort of thing than I expected. Do you mind if I smoke? I imagine the test is infallible?"

"It will show if Shields fired the gun," said Carter grimly. "The test has survived even the burial of a corpse."

"I see. The nitrous deposits--is that

what you called them?--persist, even after washing?"

His hand was steady as he bit the end off a cheroot, lighted it with a match. Carter wondered what he was driving at. He was up to something. Thomas was sure of the test turning out in favor of suicide.

The blue crystals showed up plainly. "Looks like suicide, doesn't it?" said Thomas. "But I doubt if your ingenious test is too conclusive, commissioner. You see, we all have pistols, even Miss Halliday--one her brother gave her--and we have target practice, almost every day. Mostly for amusement, but we might have to protect ourselves, and I know that Claire felt safer. She is quite a good shot. She, Shields, and I shot this morning, before breakfast."

He emitted a perfect smoke ring. The motes in his eyes were dancing. Carter felt like a fool. His newly acquired science had not helped him-- and Thomas had known it right along, drawn him out. Carter got to his feet from the chair he had used during the test, clinging to the facts he knew.

"That shot killed instantly, paralyzed the nerve centers. It was fired from two feet away. There is the light, the locked door and the fastened screens. This is *murder*, Thomas."

"Interesting, if you can catch the chap, and make a mixed jury of frogs and Britishers see it your way. Look here. How about some coffee, a bit of breakfast? You must need it. Mabini is a fine chef."

"It's a good idea," said Carter. He was tingling at the other's attitude, complacent and commiserating, but infinitely condescending.

THE MEAL, ripe papaya with lime juice, broiled silver mullet, marmalade, toast, and coffee, served by Mabini, was excellent.

Mabini was nervous, Carter fancied, but he acted like a professional butler, which Carter was sure he was not.

Thomas laced his coffee with brandy. Carter refused it.

"Tell me about Lasi," he said.

"Lasi? A witch doctor. Attached himself to me for what he could cadge. They're fakers, these chaps. He'd do anything for a can of sardines. He's been useful. I never could have got any natives to work for me at all without him."

"Do you think he thumped those drums?" Thomas took another cup of coffee, more brandy, stirred it in with the sugar. He seemed to need a bracer.

"They are always thumping drums," he answered.

"Burton take all his things when he went away with the pearl trader?"

"Eh? Oh, quite. I'll show you his room. Nothing to send back to his folks, if that's what you mean. I must write them."

The brandy, or the heat, was making Thomas sweat. Mabini hovered about, and Carter was sure he missed nothing. Carter held on.

"I'll have to quiz Lasi, as best I can, and have a talk with Miss Halliday."

"Surely, surely." Thomas took a silk handkerchief from the pocket of his pajamas, wiped his forehead. "You'll find her a help with Lasi. She has a lot of time on her hands, and she's picked up native. Lasi is a greedy beggar. Mabini has to watch the larder, I assure you. Lasi got a bellyache, and Claire fixed him up with bicarbonate. Damned if I don't think *he* thinks she is some sort of a witch herself."

Thomas took another drink, straight. He was garrulous, but Carter began to think he had found a weak link in his armor. He was sure that Thomas did not know about the drumgram, or Mabini. He was not so sure about the girl.

Still he did not underestimate Mabini or Thomas--either of them. They had some sort of secret between them--and they respected Carter more than they had. He caught a glint in Mabini's eyes that gave him a warning. He was in danger from these two--as he believed Shields had been. Shields was dead. This was a lonely place. Once he got in communication with Port Vila, it would not be so risky. But there was no use trying to get through for three hours.

The girl was in danger, too. Carter thought of Doris. She was a sport. She would enjoy this sort of thing--though it was not the sort of thing he meant ever to let her share.

He gave her a thought, liked to think it a telepathic message that would reach her. Such thoughts sometimes had. They were well attuned. "I've got something, sweetheart," Carter projected. "You are not to worry. I'm going to crack this nut," he promised.

"Too early to radio," he said aloud. "Mind if I stroll around?"

"Of course not; the place is yours, commissioner." Thomas shrugged.

As he went out, Carter saw Thomas helping himself furtively to the brandy. He was not too sure of himself, Carter figured. It was,

perhaps, the radio.

THE SUN came up with a rush and the day was suddenly radiant as Carter walked between variegated crotons, hibiscus, and flowering shrubs, smoking a cigarette, looking for Mabini's cabana. He saw no natives until he suddenly came upon an old one, hunched down at the foot of a pandahus, chewing lime and betel nut, spitting scarlet plops he promptly erased with his naked foot.

He wore a scant loincloth, his eyes were like those of a turtle in his wrinkled face, his skin was like the bark of a cork tree, and he was diligently scratching his head with a sliver of bone, as he watched Carter.

This should be Lasi, Carter thought. He could wait. Then he saw Mabini's cabin. It was as neat within as a creche in a nursing hospital for babies.

Carter went through it like a land crab cleaning a coconut. He found two things, one under the mattress of the cot, the other--a pair of them--on top a rafter. He left them undisturbed, but he had got his first real clue. He felt like a man who essays to open a safe and hears the tumblers begin to click.

One thing was certain. Mabini, for all his name of a national hero, was

not a Filipino. There had been something about his accent that had puzzled Carter. It was plain enough now, and he began, dimly, like looking at an eclipse through smoked glass, to glimpse something else.

It had taken him perhaps twenty minutes. He started down to his amphibian. Privately, he called it "The Spirit of Doris," though the identification lettering and figures on it were far more prosaic.

The tide was ebbing, but the plane was nicely set. It was not long to the flow of the flood.

He had still several hours to go--alone. When the tide came in, the plane would ride safely. He would start his engines and call Port Vila. He was still a long way from the heart of the mystery, but he had at last a definite lead.

He checked over his sending apparatus. Someone--who knew what he was about-- had been tinkering with it! The transmitter was out of connection! The vacuum tube of the coherer was broken!

Mabini!

They did not mean to let him communicate with Port Vila. And it would be easy enough, if they disposed of him--as they might have disposed of the missing men--to tow

the plane to sea, sink it, or wreck it on the reef. The answer would be a missing police commissioner, who had never arrived at the Thomas plantation.

Carter felt as if a clammy finger traced his vertebrae, rallied to it. Outside of his own peril, which he believed imminent enough, there was the girl, Claire Halliday. She had shrunk from Thomas, was afraid of him.

He went slowly back to the bungalow. As he reached the lower terrace, he saw a movement in the crotons. It might have been the breeze, but there was none. The land wind had died, that from the sea not yet started.

Phutt!

It sounded like a cork, easily drawn. He felt a slight rap on his sleeve. It was getting warm and he had started to wipe the sweat from his brow.

That was all that had saved him. A sliver of hardwood clung to the stiffened linen of his cuff, a tuft of kapok cotton at its end. *A dart from a sumpitan, a blow gun!*

HE YANKED his Luger loose, and fired, twice, where the crotons moved as slightly as if a snake glided through them. He felt he had

missed, plucked away the dart with its gummy tip--wurari sap, deadly and swift--raced through the stiff leaves, sweat dripping off him. It had been a close call.

And the condescending coroner, Dr. Vernier, would suggest that Carter had been ill-advised in contacting natives. No blame would attach to Thomas.

He found where the man had crouched, where his own bullets had split the waxen leaves--and that was all.

Thomas was calling from the lanai.

"I shot at a snake in the bushes," Carter answered, as he carefully put the dart of death away. "Missed it."

"Those bush boas come into the garden; harmless, though they don't look it," said Thomas. "By Jove, commissioner, those shots gave me a turn."

"I wouldn't wonder. I'll be right up. My radio's out of order. Must have jarred it when I landed."

Mabini met him. Mabini was breathing a little fast; there was a lot of sweat under his arms.

"Mees Halliday awake now," he said.

"She can see you, commissioner," said Thomas. "I'll take you to her. I've been trying to persuade her to eat something."

Carter was astonished in the change in Claire Halliday. It seemed that relief had come to her in her sleep--more, he fancied, than drugged slumber would have brought.

"She is much better," said Thomas. "Lost her fancies, but she must be careful."

Mabini picked up the breakfast tray and went out with it.

"Better, much better," repeated Thomas. "That's *fine*, Claire."

Carter wondered if he meant it. The girl's eyes were bright and sparkling. She must have taken some vigorous tonic, medical or mental, to snap her out of a narcotic, he thought.

"She should be careful, commissioner," Thomas went on solicitously, and there was an unctuous quality to his voice Carter did not like. It tied up with the possessive way in which he had picked her up in the passage. "You'd like to talk with her--but not too long, if you'll permit me to make a suggestion."

He was old enough to be the girl's

father. His attitude to Carter was that of a headmaster to a not-over-bright pupil. But Carter swallowed his bile. He had the whip hand, and he meant to use it, even the more so, since he knew Thomas would be hard to handle.

"How about a little chat outside?" Carter suggested. "The fresh air will do you good." He saw an instant response in the girl's eyes. She *wanted* to talk with him. Things were quickening, he knew.

"That would be fine," she said. "I'd love it." Thomas did not like the idea. Carter caught a side glimpse of his profile in a mirror, his full face drawn into a strained mask of malignancy, lips back, teeth snarling like a wolf. Then the face changed.

"Fine, just *fine*, but *not* too long, commissioner."

The voice was suave, but there was menace in it. Carter got the idea that the nerve of Thomas was jarred, that he was like a threatened cobra, coiling, ready to strike. Carter could almost sense--told himself he *did* sense, with old atavistic qualities--the unpleasant odor of an evil effluvium. The opal eyes of Thomas shifted above his fixed, mechanical smile.

Carter left while the girl dressed,

Thomas with him.

"How soon do you expect to call Port Vila?" Thomas asked.

His eyes flickered as Carter looked at him, wondering about the broken coherer, what Thomas knew of that, and the sumpitan dart.

"I might fly back," Carter said. "It would be almost as quick, and I could make a fuller report."

CLAIRE HALLIDAY did not keep him waiting long. He went with her down to the open beach. They sat on a pontoon of the plane, where they could not be overheard.

"Who *are* you?" she asked.

She gave a sigh of relief when he told her. "I'm so glad you came. I've been so afraid of... of everything, especially for Jack. That worry is over now."

Carter started to ask her what she meant by the last remark, but she went on.

"What happened to Shields? Please tell me?"

"Didn't Thomas?"

"He just said there had been an accident, and that I was not to worry. I knew he was lying. Is

Shields dead?"

Carter nodded. Her eyes widened, and her lips compressed.

"Then Thomas killed him. Just as he killed Burton and Taylor, and would have killed Jack. I know it, I can prove it about Burton and Taylor, with Jack's evidence."

"Actual witness?" "Pretty close to it, native boys, of course." "They are not worth much in a case, against a white man for murder. It was because you were afraid that you had Lasi send the drum message that brought me from Vila?"

She looked at him blankly. "I don't know what you mean. I never thought of such a thing. Lasi *might* have done it, if I had asked. I don't know. The idea of drum sending to the police never entered my head. We seemed so cut off here. Thomas would never take us to Vate."

"You're friendly with Lasi?"

"He's really rather an old dear. I gave him some medicine once or twice and he is grateful, and now he's paid it all back."

Carter supposed she meant that the drumgram had shown Lasi's gratitude. He could see how such a simple thing as a girl easing an old man's stomach-ache, make him belch up the gas that crept around

his feebly ticking old heart, might have tamed even a cannibal wizard, as Androcles tamed the lion.

"I want you to tell me what you've been afraid of. First, I'll tell you what Thomas told me."

She gasped, her eyes blazing. "He is a liar. I don't know if Burton went away on that ship. I doubt it. He talked about it to Jack, and said the man--Larkins, his name was--wanted a thousand dollars. Burton didn't have it. He was broke, like all of us. The money that has been put into the colony is almost gone, Thomas told us that."

"Anybody kick about the lack of profit?"

"No. Shields worried, but he didn't say much. It had always been a gamble."

There was no motive there for Thomas killing these men, or causing them to be killed. There was something deeper, Carter reckoned.

The girl went on:

"When Burton didn't show up for breakfast that morning, after the barkentine had gone, I thought he'd gone hunting. He was always hoping to find something bigger than pig. The natives told him yarns about mysterious beasts;

stuffing him, of course, for the presents he'd give them. They'll do anything for a broken dollar watch, or a spring or wheel from it. Mabini has a lot of them jumping all the time for things he hands them out from the pantry. Lasi doesn't like that at all."

"These boys that went out with Taylor, and your brother, did Lasi pick them out?"

"No, Mabini."

Carter saw Lasi losing control over the natives, as Mabini gained it.

"And there was no friction between Burton and Taylor, on your account?"

"Certainly not. We were all good pals. Burton showed me the picture of his fiancée in England, raved about her. It was the same way with Taylor. But Thomas"--she flushed through her golden tan--"he never actually made love to me, but he was always touching, looking. He *wanted* me, the beast. A girl, even a nice girl, can tell that sort of thing. He meant to take me. That was why I was afraid to have Jack go. Shields kept to himself."

"That brings it pretty well up to date. Now, tell me what you mean about Jack, your brother. Is he back?"

"Yes. Lasi told me this morning. He came up on the lanai outside my room when I first woke up, before Thomas came. I know some Melanesian, and I have taught Lasi some English. He doesn't savvy so much beach pidgin as some of the boys-belong-along-beach. He's really a bush native. I don't know why he came to the bungalow, unless it was just curiosity."

"Or he might have known funny things were going on in the bush, about Burton and Taylor, and wanted to have an alibi, not to get hanged, like the witch doctor on Ambrym. He might have sent that drum message to get on the right side of the law."

"Oh! I believe you're right. You are clever. Lasi *did* send boys out to look for Jack, when he knew how I felt about it. Boys he could trust, not the ones Mabini has been petting. I don't think he expected to bring Jack back alive, but he did, or rather, the boys did. Jack slipped on brittle lava in a crater called the House of the Devils--Debbildebbils! That was where he had gone to follow up his lead about the specimen--"

"Jack know anything about minerals?" "Oh, yes. He graduated from Boston Tech as a geophysicist. This seemed a good opening. Thomas wrote of great possibilities, and Jack got enthused. We haven't

done much with anything else. I mean crops. And Shields was a metallurgist, always working in the laboratory. Mabini works there, too, not in the daytime, or when Shields was there, but at night, with Thomas, I don't think Thomas knows so much about minerals. I'm rambling all over the place. There's so much to tell."

"Get it all out of your system, the way it comes to you," said Carter. "It begins to fit into a sort of pattern, not a pretty one. I thought Mabini was cook and steward?"

"He acts as such, but he isn't what he seems. I'm sure of that. There's a mystery about him. Sometimes, I think he's more of a partner with Thomas than any of the rest of us. His cooking is a blind."

"I wouldn't wonder," said Carter, He was thinking about what he had found in the cabana. Again he seemed to hear a tumbler falling in the combination of the safe he was trying to open. "Go on about your brother. You haven't seen him yet?"

"No. Lasi said he was afraid to bring him to the house. He fixed up Jack's ankle, after the boys brought him in. He's keeping him in a safe place, on the tabu sing-sing ground, where they have their dances, or used to. No whites know where that is. There are many bush paths leading to it, most of them trapped."

Carter nodded. He had heard of those secret places, used not only for dances but for cannibal feasts. "I think he had better stay there, you too," he said grimly. "After I've had a talk with him. And then, I think I'll be ready for a talk with Thomas, and Mabini. First we'll have a look at the diary I found in Shields' trunk."

The small, neat writing was easy to read. The last entry took up two pages, and it was under the date of the night when Shields died.

I am going to have it out with Thomas tonight. There are three men missing now. I don't believe Burton went away with Larkin. There was no need for Taylor or Halliday to go prospecting. The specimen brought in by one of the boys Mabini is corrupting, so that they only obey him, was no better than others. We have enough silicate in sight to develop, to start getting dividends on our money. That's all gone, Thomas admits, but he doesn't worry about it. Why not? That's one of the things I'm going to ask him.

Silicate? Carter did not think there could be much money in silicate. It was common enough, surely, hardly worth shipping. Some sort of salt, or soda. It was a silicate deposit that made petrification out of trees, formed stalactites. They made water glass of it. Found, he imagined, in volcanic regions a good

deal, but neither rare nor precious. Hardly a motive for Thomas getting rid of his partners. If it had been gold, or diamonds-- there were none in the New Hebrides. He read on:

Mabini is a good chemist. I don't believe he's a Portuguese. There is something wrong, and Thomas will have to come clean. He has no more use for us, now the money we put in has gone. Talks about having to chuck it all up. But he's got something up his sleeve, with Mabini. I'm going to shake it out tonight.

The girl looked at Carter, with horror dawning in her eyes.

Once again he nodded. She was highly intelligent, and she had pluck.

"It looks as if he had his talk with Thomas," he said. "And he did not shake down that 'something' from Thomas' sleeve. Later, Thomas went to his door--or it might have been Mabini-- and one of them killed him. But I can't yet see *why*. Unless Shields *did* know something he didn't set down in his diary. Let's go see your brother. I think I saw Lasi just now."

"I can find him."

Carter put the diary away in his pocket.

V.

THE TABU place was not so very far away, but it was securely hidden in the bush, where the narrow paths, the dirt packed hard as cement by generations of naked, calloused, savage feet, formed a maze no white man could have penetrated.

It was Carter's first actual experience with the bush. He saw trees, big and small, fighting to reach the sun, two hundred feet high or more, wattled with thorny undergrowth, laced by lianas; solid resistance against ax or machete.

Lasi led them. No other natives. The wizard's withered limbs were hung with rings of pearl and ivory, curved boar tusks. He wore a pendant of nacre that hung from his ropy neck, and he had painted his wrinkled face with vertical stripes of black and yellow. He wore a long cape of grass that rustled as he walked, while the anklets and armlets clicked.

The sing-sing ground was a silent and sinister place. It seemed to reek of sacrificial blood, of man-meat feasts, of weird ceremonials. Lasi went with dignity.

No sun broke through to the tabu place. Neither would moon or stars. There were the ashes of bygone fires

before a group of hideous images carved from hollow logs, standing on end. Faces with nacre eyes and lolling tongues, the logs split down their centers. They must be, Carter figured, the drums he had heard.

A great banyan sprawled, cavernous, with its root pillars, and great horizontal boughs from which pended strings of skulls, clicking gently, like Lasi's ornaments, as they swayed in the barely perceptible breeze.

There was a great carved bowl, set on flat stones, that Carter took to be the sending drum. Helped by the girl, he asked Lasi about the message, also about the pounding drum logs.

His guess had been right. "Too much trouble along this place," Lasi said. "I no likee all same. Send for bossi man. You come. Then I lookee for Halliday. I beat devil-devil drum for plenty man to come, they find boys who take along Halliday to Devil House. Then I make them talkee-talkee."

Part of this was in Melanesian, when Lasi hesitated for a word. Carter found, with satisfaction, that he could follow it.

Jack Halliday was in a small, circular grass hut with a conical roof. It was, Lasi explained, "all same his place"--his sanctum

sanctorum. It did not smell sweet, but it was cool. It was half filled with the paraphernalia of his mumbo-jumbo magic, dried beasts and reptiles, skulls, human and animal, a mummified baby, twisted roots.

Halliday lay on a mattress of plaited pandanus, food and water beside him. His foot was bandaged and in splints. Lasi had pomaded him with a pungent but soothing, and healing, ointment, massaged him. As a wizard. Lasi was at least a fine surgeon.

The girl knelt by her brother's side, but she was practical. She introduced Carter, told of the death of Shields.

Halliday's eyes were free from fever, his pulse even.

"I'll say this for Lasi," he said, "he knows his stuff. I'm all right, only I can't walk. Have to wangle a crutch. I was in rotten shape when they found me. Damned nigh starved, into the bargain. That swine Thomas--"

"Mind cutting it short, old chap," said Carter. "We haven't got much loose time. Thomas and Mabini may have made up their minds to get out. I think I've got the wind up on both of them. And Mabini knows too much about planes. I'd like to get back. They've got the launch, too."

"Right! Thomas, or Mabini, had a native boy bring me a fine sample of nickel."

"Nickel? Not silicate?"

"Both. The nickel we find here is the same as in New Caledonia, and that's not far away. It's classified as hydrated silicate of nickel and magnesia. And it's worth almost its weight of gold when there's a war on, or on the horizon, like there is now in Europe, over in China."

THE LAST tumbler in the combination fell. Carter had only to open the safe that had held secret the murder motives. "Go ahead," he said.

"I've been figuring it out, all except where Mabini comes in. We've been chasing nickel. Thomas wanted it kept mum. I didn't tell sis, because we'd put all our jack into this and it looked like we might win out--or we might not.

"Thomas handed me the specimen, and I know, damn well, he did the same thing with Burton and Taylor. Two boys went with me to show me the lead. They showed me, all right. Mabini's pets. We went to what the natives call 'Devil's House'--and it's well named. It sure looks like an anteroom in hell, but it's where you'd expect to find silicate.

"The boys took me down over the sulphur grit, that's black on top and turns up dirty yellow as you walk. Then we came to lava, flinty a-a that cuts your shoes to ribbons, ropy pahoehoe looking like pulled candy for giants. Then cliffs and terraces, you can look down to the dead craters at the bottom, into 'em, with vapors crawling out of rifts and over pools with silica formations and sulphur crystals on the rims. Hot springs. Lava formations in queer shapes. Nothing grows there or lives there.

"About a third of the way down, they balked. They claimed that the last time they had been there, to find the specimen, Lasi had made a tiki charm to keep off the debbil-debbils, just as my own mana was supposed to be able to protect me. Lasi made the tiki because he wanted them to fetch him some sulphur crystals, but he wouldn't make them another one for just a white man's business. It sounded reasonable enough, and I fell for it.

"They showed me the way to go on. The place was sort of gassy; if I'd had my wits about me, I'd have remembered that mephitic vapors gather at the bottom of extinct craters and exhausted geysers. I learned that at Tech. But I was hot after nickel and, so far, the gas wasn't too bad.

"Then--" Halliday paused and his

eyes seemed again to see the ghastly sight he was about to describe. "There were two figures on the crater floor, some distance apart. The clothing and the pith helmets told me who they were. Burton and Taylor!

"I suppose we'll never know the details of how they got there. It's my idea the native boys were primed by Mabini. They got Burton the same way they got me, and Taylor, too. But Burton went on down to where they pointed out he'd find what he was after. The gas strangled him. It might have been exactly the same with Taylor, or he might have seen Burton, started down to investigate, just as I did. The gases choked him, and they almost got me.

"I was climbing down when a chunk of brittle lava broke and I turned my foot. That saved me, that and grabbing a rock that was solid, as I was sliding over the edge, with the gas clawing at my throat and lungs. I managed to crawl up higher, and then I must have passed out. The next thing I really remember is Lasi's boys finding me. They packed me up to where they could make a litter, brought me in, washed up. But I've got my gun. I'd like to get a crack at that devil, Thomas, and his brother fiend, Mabini. Maybe they didn't actually murder Burton and Taylor with their own hands, but they tried to, plotted to send them--and me--into that death trap.

But they can't get away with that, can they, commissioner?"

"I don't think so. It's not the only or most serious charge against them."

"I still can't see what they expected to get out of killing us off. We weren't kicking about the money we'd put up, though Shields might have grouched a bit. What was the motive for murdering us? What would they have done with Claire, here? When I think of that--"

"Don't think of it, Halliday. It's at an end now. But I can tell you the motive. As you said just now, nickel, the way the world is, with nations at war, or ripe for war, nickel is worth a tremendous fortune. Thomas got wind of nickel in the New Hebrides, possibly in London, from some skipper or supercargo who'd been out here. He planned to advertise for capital, got hold of Shields to begin with.

"He met Mabini in Manila. Mabini was a spy, a Japanese spy. His name is probably Ito or Tamaka. I found chopsticks on the top of a rafter in his cabin, a Japanese novel under his mattress, with smutty pictures in it. That's the sort of bird he is. You can figure out how much Japan would be willing to pay for knowledge of a nickel deposit, proved to be extensive. Mabini came along to investigate. He is a chemist.

"Japan is out to conquer everything west of the international date line, and the first place she'd be out for is one where there is nickel. She has her program of conquest all laid out. She can afford to wait. In the meantime, she'll pay a fortune to any traitor like Thomas, who'll sell out his own country.

"From what Shields wrote in his diary, the deposit is proved up, the deal ready to be closed. Thomas would keep it all. It would be enough to make it well worth while to murder all of you. And Mabini helped him plot it."

"The black-hearted swine," cried Halliday, trying to get up.

"You stay here," Carter told him. "See that he does," he said to the girl. "I'll handle this."

VI.

CARTER faced Thomas and the mock Mabini across the table in Thomas' own room. There were official-looking papers on the table and Thomas was checking over a stack of currency, when Carter came in without knocking.

"You're under arrest, the pair of you," he said. "Murder and conspiring to aid and abet the enemy. I've read Shields' diary; and young Halliday has come back,

alive. Seen the bodies of Burton and Taylor. Later, we'll recover them. In the meantime I've got one pair of handcuffs; you can share them. Your wrist first, Yoshima, or whatever your name is. You shouldn't leave dirty books and chopsticks about in your cabin. I suppose you two were going to have another shot at bumping me off--since the dart failed--and then make your getaway. It doesn't matter now what your plan was about Miss Halliday, Thomas; you haven't the decency of a centipede. Come on, Fujiyama."

There was no jesting in his stern, gray eyes as he suggested names for the Japanese, whose features seemed to shrink and harden into a Shinto mask of baffled malice. The florid face of Thomas had gone patchy, the veins throbbed in his brow and neck.

Carter could handle the handcuffs he had brought up from his plane in one hand, his other rested on the butt of his Luger. He moved slowly around the table to where the Japanese held out both wrists in a sudden movement that brought a knife from cuff to palm with the speed of a striking snake. He flipped it in an expert's movement and the keen blade sank deep into Carter's right shoulder. It grated against the bone, shocked his nerves to loss of contact as he vainly tried to yank out his Luger.

Blood spurted, cascading over his white tunic. Carter whipped his will to resemble coordination, striving to lift the Luger with numbed and nerveless fingers, as Thomas let out a bellow of sudden triumph and snatched a gun from the drawer that was half open beneath his hand.

Carter hoisted his pistol, rested the heel of his palm on the table top, the best he could do for the moment, plucked at the trigger. The Luger spat flame that blended with the fiery belch of Thomas' weapon.

This time lead scored on him. The heavy charge back of the .45 slug spun Carter half about as it struck his side; but he saw a bright patch of scarlet appear, like a crimson blossom, on the white shirt of Thomas, spreading. Thomas raised his gun again--and now the Japanese had one, brought from a hip pocket.

There came the crash of glass, a spiteful crack, and the little brown son of Nippon yelped in anger. His arm fell, and his gun. He bolted for the door as the crack came again. Claire Halliday was on the lanai, Lasi behind her. She had fired through the pane and winged the Japanese.

He dodged around Carter, held on, bent double as Carter struck at him with the left hand that held the

handcuffs, hit him a glancing blow that did not disable him.

He had Thomas yet to reckon with. The girl's gun was an old-fashioned but efficient derringer her brother had given her as a handy weapon for a girl's protection when they came out to the islands. Both barrels were empty.

Thomas had his lips drawn back in a snarl. He figured Carter as practically helpless, with blood all over him, knowing he must be badly hurt.

"I'll get you, you Yankee swine," Thomas snarled. His finger faltered, died on the trigger as Carter shot him between the eyes and he toppled over the table. The currency notes of the Judas deal were blotted with the red ink from the traitor-murderer's veins.

Carter plucked out the knife from his shoulder. There was anguish in his side like that of a spent runner, but the coherence of will and nerves had returned. He went after the Japanese who had left a crimson-spotted trail.

The little brown man was running along the pier, one arm swinging limp, shattered at the elbow by Claire Halliday's pellets. He clung, one-handed, to a fall, monkeylike in his agility, dropped into the dinghy, released it, spun at an outboard

motor that caught and, with the Japanese steering, sped for the cruiser launch as Claire Halliday came up, panting.

"He'll get away," she gasped.

"He will not," said Carter, feeling groggy from loss of blood. "Over to the plane--"

"You can't fly it." "Don't have to. Get me that jigger, off those hooks."

He set his teeth as he snapped the skeleton stock to the Luger, sighting deliberately, despite the anguish in his side and throbbing shoulder.

The Japanese was halfway to the cruiser launch when Carter's bullet hit him in the small of his back, smashing his spine. The dingy went careering in circles as the agent of Nippon jerked and flapped on the thwarts, suddenly still.

"Let Lasi get him," cried the girl. "He'll send out a canoe. The natives will all obey him again. And you're badly wounded."

"All right, lady," Carter said, with a grin that cost him something. "I'll be good. You and Lasi can patch me up, after I've had a good swig of Lasi's brandy. I can stand it."

"WE'LL get Jack down to the

plane," said Carter. "I can fly you both in, with nothing worse than a busted rib and a slash in my shoulder. That ointment of Lasi's is big medicine. Then we'll send back for the cleanup, for those two skunks, and for Shields and Burton and Taylor, poor chaps. And the two boys Mabini used, if Lasi rounds them up.

"You and your brother'll file on that nickel claim. It belongs to you. Ought to make you rich and Great Britain grateful."

"It also belongs to the others--their families; not Thomas, but Burton, Shields and Taylor."

"Fair enough." Carter felt embarrassed at what he saw in the girl's eyes as she looked at him. They were dark, and beautiful, and something close to passion stirred in them--but they were not the eyes of Doris.

"When you get back to America," he said, "I want you to look up Doris Ogden."

The light faded in the girl's eyes. "She is your fiancée?"

"Yes. A wonderful girl. You'll like her."

"I'm sure she is, and a lucky one. I... I shall be glad to know her, tell her about you."

Carter turned to Lasi, to change the subject. "How about *you*, Lasi? You ought to catch a medal and a pension for what you've done, sending that drum message and all."

"No likee medalli. No savvy pensioni. All same you send me one casi sardini, mebbe two casi."

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