

Blood On The Sun

A Three Mosquitoes Adventure by Ralph Oppenheim

CHAPTER I

Death at Wu-Chen

EARLY in the morning the exodus from Wu-Chen had begun. For hours the narrow, cobbled streets had been one-way moving streams of automobiles, rickshaws, ox-carts and milling masses on foot, as a terrified Chinese populace fled towards the Yangtze, screaming in their panic:

“Chiu Ming! Chiu Ming! Save a life! Save me!”

Now the brassy sun of afternoon shone down on shell-ripped streets where only the dead remained.

Wu-Chen, proud Chinese inland city, had become a desolate, ruined necropolis—desecrated by the spewing, ruthless Japanese shells which still continued to bombard buildings abandoned—empty.

But in one shell-ripped building that had been the newly constructed Wu-Chen Hotel, in a lonely broken-walled barroom which still boasted one of the world’s longest bars, three white men remained in the abandoned town, calmly drinking.

These men had taken down what bottles were unshattered by the concussions, and they were helping themselves generously, standing side by side at the long mahogany bar which could have accommodated a hundred patrons.

All three wore leather coats over mufti but puttee-legged trousers. Stuffed in their pockets were helmets and goggles.

A shell exploded deafeningly close outside. The three men calmly went on drinking. A deluge of plaster chunks, broken loose from the ceiling, showered down. Two unopened bottles on the bar shattered beneath the avalanche.

The shortest of the trio, Shorty Carn, a rotund little man with a chubby face and sleepy eyes, swore a round Yankee oath at this inconsiderate act of war.

“The only bona fide three-star stuff in the joint—and now it’s gone forever!” he moaned. “That settles it! I don’t care what you say, Travis—I’m for clearing out of this town!”

He had addressed his complaint to the tallest of the trio—a lean, lanky man with keen intelligent features and graying temples.

“Keep your shirt on, Shorty,” this man now crisped, in a voice that spoke only when he really had things to say. “We must wait until the last moment. If you and Kirby don’t want to stick it out with me—”

Whereupon Kirby, the impetuous, reckless leader of this Yank trio known as the “Three Mosquitoes,” gave an angry snort.

“Think we’re leaving you here alone to welcome the Jap army to this shelled city? Because that’s what we’ll be doing, if we stay much longer! If only you’d tell us what it’s all about.”

“I did tell you,” the lanky Travis crisped. “I got that phone call from old Quong Far just before the shells broke down the wires here. He said he’d learned we were up in these parts, and that we were in a position to do him a great favor.”

“Sure!” Shorty Carn moaned again. “He probably wants us to wipe up the Japs for him, or some other little thing like that!” He grinned then. “Not that it would be such a bad idea.”

“I reminded him that as Americans we’re strictly neutral,” Travis said tersely. “He said that had nothing to do with the favor, and that he was sending someone in a Douglas commercial to meet us here at this hotel and give us details.” His keen eyes looked through broken windows, to ripped-up ground outside, to clear blue sky above. “That plane will come in darned handy now to get us out of here.”

“If it ever arrives,” Kirby amended dryly as another shell spewed livid and black destruction across the ruined town. “Wonder who old Quong’s sending? Maybe that worthless son of his—what’s his name? Lin!”

Travis’ face tightened a little, “I wouldn’t call Lin worthless. You won’t find another Chinese painter who actually puts perspective in his work. Down at Shanghai they said Quong Lin’s battle pictures are more vivid than photographs.” The lanky, usually taciturn Mosquito stopped talking then, as if he had expressed more than he’d intended.

Kirby smiled. “You sure took a liking to that kid, didn’t you, Trav? But don’t forget how his old man felt about his going in for European culture, forgetting his ancestors and religion and all that. It wasn’t that

old Quong was against modernizing China, either. After all, he had us fly for him, to transport his soya beans.”

“Ah, those were the soft days!” Shorty Carn was puffing his inseparable briar pipe now, his sleepy eyes wistful. “Working for the biggest soya merchant in China! Basking in that garden of his Canton big house—where I could sleep in peace and quiet. How I could sleep!”

“Yeah, when you weren’t making eyes at that pretty Russian secretary of old Quong’s!” Kirby reminded him.

SHORTY blew out a most romantic smoke-puff.

“Ah, Nadya!” he sighed. “She was just a child then, but now she must be all grown up!” He hummed several bars of “Dark Eyes.”

Kirby shifted impatiently. Thinking back over the peaceful days at Quong Far’s made him aware of how things had changed in China. Somehow, it was always like that. Wherever the Three Mosquitoes came they found trouble sooner or later. Not that they couldn’t take care of trouble—

All about the globe the Three Mosquitoes had proved themselves the most unbeatable combination ever to fight through odds and live to laugh about it—whether in the air, in the lunging, insistent fashion that had won their nicknames, or on the ground, with ready fists and pistols.

But now that Mikado’s punitive expeditions had grown into a full-fledged though still undeclared war against a slowly uniting China, the Three Mosquitoes had to watch their step. It was hard to fight now without definitely joining one of the warring nations’ colors. This the Yank trio were pledged not to do. Back in Washington, D.C., their names were on the U.S. Army rosters as special reserve officers ever in readiness to don again the uniform of their country—and no other.

With these thoughts in his mind, Kirby turned anew to Travis.

“The Japs will be here any minute, Trav! The shelling is beginning to subside. Our passports are all in the Shanghai consulate. The Japs might start shooting before they ask any questions, and—”

He broke off. From the sky came a droning hum, growing swiftly louder, coming closer.

In one accord all Three Mosquitoes left the bar, dashed out into the sun, eyes jerking skyward. Sunlight glinted silver from a big, winged shape coming down a long hill of space towards the ruined town.

“It’s a Douglas all right!” Kirby cried, eager now, as his keen eyes identified the big cabin plane. “Coming just in the nick of time, too.”

“Say!” Shorty put in, while the wise Travis had merely grinned in tight satisfaction, “that doesn’t look like a commercial plane! Look at the stars on its wings!”

It was close enough, though still high overhead, for all to glimpse those insignias of the Chinese Air Force. A surprised exclamation tore from their three throats as they saw another plane!

A swift fleet scout plane, dropping like a plummet out of the blinding orb of the sun, was diving for the Chinese Douglas, spurts of red winking on its nose.

“A Jap Kawasaki!” Kirby yelled.

Yes, it was one of the deadly Japanese Kawasaki type scouts, and it was pouncing on that slower, larger Douglas with machine guns blazing, the blurred stutter of them drifting down to their ears like the uneasy muttering of a snoring giant.

ROOTED to the spot, squinting up at the sun, the Three Mosquitoes watched, breathless. They saw the Douglas pull up, rocking its wings to curve away from the Jap plane’s burst. Then the Kawasaki had dived past, was arcing up from below, and the Yank trio ducked as it roared with wide-open throttle over their very heads. They saw it clearly, saw the blood-red suns of Nippon on its wings, and another insignia: red stripes.

Even as the Jap scout zoomed, Kirby’s eyes slitted.

“That will be one of Baron Hakimi’s flyers, fellers!”

His two comrades had stiffened with him. The Three Mosquitoes had been picking up plenty about Baron Shoji Hakimi and his red-striped planes. Hakimi, head of the Jap Air Intelligence, was responsible for the ghastly bombing of helpless women and children in non-military towns. He was responsible for other work that the “so-sorry-please” Japanese Air Minister was constantly denying or apologizing for from Tokyo.

Now one of his red-striped squadron was here, attacking that big Douglas which was proving to be a military and not a commercial job. Even now flame was spitting from its silver nose.

Its silver wings veered as despite its size the big cabin plane deftly avoided the bullet-streams of the climbing Kawasaki.

“That Chinaman can fight, who-ever he is!” Shorty cried, as both planes gyrated, twisted, banked for position in the sunny blue. “Give it to him, Chink!” he cheered.

Even the lanky Travis was showing uncontrollable excitement. The Three Mosquitoes stood on the devastated ground, shifting, dancing, yelling at the contesting planes as if their voices could possibly carry up there through the roar of motors and the stutter of guns.

There was no mistaking their sympathies. Indeed, all three wished they were up in that sky, fighting that Kawasaki of Baron Hakimi's outfit!

"Keep turning close turns, China!" Kirby yelled, his hands working imaginary controls. "And don't let your altimeter needle drop! Just sit tight and try to throw off that Jap's lead!"

It seemed as if Kirby's expert flying advice had carried up there, for the big Douglas was holding its altitude, doing deep banks, dodging the hornet-like Kawasaki. Furious now, the Jap scout lunged in, trying for a kill with a broadside burst. The Douglas banked again. The Jap, by his own momentum, was carried for an instant past the nose of the Douglas.

"Shoot, Chink! Shoot fast!" It was Shorty Carn who yelled the plea.

He didn't have to.

Smoky lines marked the course of tracer bullets from the nose of the Douglas as its gun blazed hungrily at the precise infinitesimal second the streaking Kawasaki was in front of it!

For an instant it seemed that nothing had happened. The Kawasaki streaked right on by across the sky. But just as the trio on the ground started to groan the Jap scout began to flop around like a graceful fish out of water. A livid gush of flame tongued from its motor—licked greedily down its tapering flanks, redder than its stripe.

The wind had already carried the flaming ship beyond the ruined walls of Wu-Chen. Now, dropping like a fiery torch and flinging out burning bits of wreckage, it disappeared out of sight.

"Got him!" Kirby said with grim satisfaction as if he had participated. "That's one Jap devil less to strafe women and kids!"

The big Douglas came slanting down now, nosing into the wind, coming straight and true for the shell-torn grounds here before them. The Mosquitoes got hastily out of the way as the big ship grew gigantic overhead.

Its wheels touched earth in the next instant, bounced, missed a shell-hole. Its silver wings saw-sawed perilously; then it rolled to a stop, Pratt-Whitney engine slowing to idling speed.

The heavy-togged pilot, sole occupant of the victorious plane, emerged from the enclosed cabin, jumped lightly down to the ground even as the

Mosquitoes hurried to the scene. The pilot whipped off a helmet, and the Yank trio gaped.

A mass of dark, luxuriant hair tumbled loose to shoulder length, and a grimy but white, feminine face with two dark liquid eyes, was revealed to them!

CHAPTER II

Ah Ying's Junk

A GIRL, a white girl, had piloted that Douglas, and shot down that Jap! It was Shorty Carn who gave a whoop of recognition: "Nadya! If it isn't our little *Otchie Tchorina!*" The girl, whom all three had known as old Quong Far's half-Russian secretary, gave a wan smile.

"Hello, Shorty." Her English had more the Chinese than Russian accent. Her voice was terse. "Please, dear friends, we must hurry. The Japanese are coming, and there may be trouble. Where can we talk?"

"The barroom is still here," Kirby said, dazed by the turn of events.

The Eurasian girl went back to the cabin of the idling plane and reached in. When she withdrew, she held in each hand a bulging, weighty sack. Kirby and Shorty relieved her of the burden, carried the sacks into the bar.

"Quong Far sent these. He begs you to use them for him," the girl was already explaining, breathlessly. She opened the sacks so they could look in and gape anew at the glitter of gold sovereigns. "It is all he could gather; he is no longer rich."

Travis was estimating the sovereigns. "I'd say there was about twenty thousand dollars worth here." He looked up. "Why did Quong Far send you on this risky trip with this money, Nadya?"

"It is the ransom for Lin," the girl replied. "Twenty-five thousand dollars." Travis' lanky frame stiffened at the mention of Quong Far's artist son. But the girl turned to Kirby now. "Kirby," she rolled the *r* prettily, her dark eyes a plea. "It is you on whom Quong Far depends. You are acquainted with the Chinese river pirate, Ah Ying?"

Kirby grinned reminiscently. "That fat old Chink? Sure, I know him! He's lots of fun when he decides to call you his friend, though he'd doublecross his own mother. Guess he's up the Yangtze, near Chunking, in that junk of his now. Why?"

"Don't you understand?" the girl cried impatiently, as if it were obvious. "Ah Ying kidnaped Lin! One of Lin's coolies brought the news to Quong, and he has sent the money to get his son back!"

"I like that!" Kirby snorted. "A war going on, and old Quong's got to worry about ransoming his highbrow artistic son from a river pirate! And he sends

you, a girl—” His eyes took in her feminine form, graceful even in bulky flying togs, and his voice went awed. “I still can’t understand how you bested that Kawasaki!”

“Why not? Did I not have a good machine gun?” Nadya returned, a little tremulously. “Quong had the Douglas armed along with his other transports, ready to turn them over to the Chinese army. And it is not uncommon now for women to fly and fight as men. Wasn’t Madame Chiang Kai-shek Air Minister?”

“When that Japanese sighted me and dived out of the sun, I—I had to defend myself.” She steadied her voice, went on bravely. “And I would do more for Quong Far! He has been as a father to me ever since I was left on his doorstep, a half-Russian orphan nobody wanted.” She seemed about to say more, checked herself.

“Sure! You’re great, Nadya!” Shorty Carn’s gaze was worshipful. “You ought to get a medal for shooting that Jap! Bet you remembered all I told you about flying and shooting. Of course, being the best marksman myself—”

BOOS from the other men interrupted him.

“Shut up, Shorty!” Kirby groaned. With sudden realization, he whirled again on the girl. “Look here, do you realize what will happen if we’re found by the Japs anywhere near a military-equipped plane that has just downed one of Hakimi’s flyers? We can’t use that plane! In fact, we’ve got to get as far away from it as we can!”

He broke off, and he and his comrades whirled towards the window, ears acute. What they actually heard at that moment was—silence! Silence save for the purring of the Douglas. The shells had ceased falling altogether.

But now, even as they listened, a new sound came. A clattering, clanking sound—tractors and heavy wheels.

“The Japs!” Kirby cried, and instinctively the hands of all three went to the holsters under their coats where each carried an army-type Colt .45.

Then Kirby gave a fresh exclamation, echoed by Shorty Carn. For as all turned back to face the girl, they found that she had vanished from the barroom!

THE next moment the airplane engine outside answered their unasked question with a roar. They glimpsed the wings of the Douglas slicing across the ground, taking the air. As they ran outside, the big transport shrank into the sky, disappearing over the ruined roof tops.

“Now look what you’ve done!” Shorty almost sobbed. “Hurt that poor girl’s feelings. She took the

plane away so we wouldn’t be found near it! And, and—”

He stopped, eyes following his comrades’ eyes over the grounds, past ruined cellars, down the road. A line of tanks and armored lorries was coming into the shelled town of Wu-Chen! Crammed with helmeted little men in mustard, and bristling with rifles, the first wave of the Jap advance was moving in.

“The money!” Kirby yelled.

“Got it,” came Travis’ quiet voice, and the lanky Mosquito stood holding the two sacks by their necks.

“Okay!” Kirby gave the familiar, reckless words of the Mosquitoes then: “Let’s go!”

They went.

In the very shadow of the incoming Japanese, they ran through the death-littered streets of Wu-Chen, ducking past ruins, keeping under cover as best they could. As the Japanese came in one end of the village, the Three Mosquitoes—discretion being the better part of their valor right now—fled out the other. Little Shorty was panting to keep his short legs in pace with his comrades. Kirby now was carrying one of the money bags.

They didn’t stop running until, crossing a multi-colored field of poppies, they reached the muddy banks of the yellowish Yangtze. This morning the river had been thick with craft. Now, with these craft having taken the refugees downstream, only a few sampans floated near at hand, their owners too bewildered to know where to head.

They weren’t too bewildered to listen to the clinking of a few gold coins, though. Kirby quickly struck a bargain.

In one of the larger boats, which had a small ragged sail as well as the usual oars, the Three Mosquitoes were soon being carried against the tide, upriver. Both Kirby and Travis who knew different dialects of Chinese, had taken time to warn the other sampanmen to flee, but had been unsuccessful.

Their own sampan rounded a bend—one of the many sharp S-turns in the river—and the other boats, as well as the ruined town of Wu-Chen disappeared from view. A sound came to their ears, the blurred clatter of machine guns.

“Well,” Kirby sighed philosophically, “I told those fishermen to pull out! The Japs don’t like to take prisoners.”

Travis’ face was tight. He was looking back intently to see if the Japs might have noted the escape of the one sampan. There was, as yet, no pursuit. But if those sampanmen had been taken alive they might have talked and there would be a hot chase.

The Three Mosquitoes settled as comfortably as they could in the warped boat, while their sampan-

rower, a ragged old fisherman, performed the back-breaking kind of labor it takes to buck the Yangtze—something only a Chinese river man could do.

“Of course,” Kirby growled, “we should have headed down-stream, for our passports. But I suppose we owe it to old Quong to try—”

“We owe it to Nadya!” Shorty sighed. “Gosh, I never dreamed she’d grow up to be such a swell girl! And imagine her downing a Jap!”

“I am imagining it,” Kirby said. “It makes her as safe as dynamite to us!”

THE first gray of twilight began to mist the Yangtze. The sampan-man toiled away, oars lapping, sails too ragged to help much. Adroitly he avoided rocks which, on the ebb tide, were fortunately above water. When covered, they created some of the most dangerous rapids in any navigable water in the world.

The shores slipped slowly by, great poppy fields alternating with herding fields for water-buffalo. And northwest, palls of smoke showed where a war far bigger than most of the world imagined was going on between two yellow races.

The hamlet of Chunking at last loomed in the distance, apathetic with its rotted wharves and piers and the usual cluster of sampans. Kirby stood up now in the slight-rocking boat.

Out in midstream, beyond Chunking, the outlines of a huge, three-masted junk had come into view. Sails were unfurling even as they sighted the vessel.

“Looks like we came just about in time,” Kirby observed. “That’s Ah Ying’s junk all right.”

“We’ve got to get that kid from him,” Travis crisped. “Hope he’s unharmed.”

“He will be if Ah Ying has hope of getting money out of it,” Kirby stated.

His face screwed up thoughtfully then, shrewdly. Of a sudden he commanded the fisherman to take the boat in to the Chunking wharf. Both his comrades looked at him in mute question but, accepting as always his leadership, they silently followed him ashore.

They went down past rotted wharves, down a greasy bank with a few sparse trees. Here, hidden from any view, Kirby paused, took from beneath his sheepskin coat his bag of gold. Travis produced the other.

“You see, boys,” Kirby grinned, “I happen to know Ah Ying well, and our own good Book says something about ‘He who leads us into temptation—’”

He paused. “How about this tree? Take a good look at it so we’ll know it.”

Below the trunk, the Mosquito leader buried the bag which almost burst with the contents it now held.

He had transferred all but some hundred dollars in sovereigns to that bag, putting the rest, with some grass stuffing back into the second bag, which he hooked to his belt under his sheepskin jacket.

THEY didn’t return to the sampan that had brought them from Wu-Chen, but took a different one from the wharves here.

This one had no sails, and was inconspicuous as its scrawny Chinese owner who rowed it out across the stream.

Kirby again assumed command. “Fellers, you squat down low. You, Shorty, keep your gun ready. That marksmanship of yours might be needed.” Shorty’s boast about that had not been an idle one—he was a crack shot, in the air or on ground.

“I don’t think there’ll be trouble, but we’ll be ready.”

He rattled off Cantonese to the oarsman as the other two Mosquitoes crouched in the stern shadows. The sampan slid close to the looming junk, with its half-unfurled sails.

Kirby stood conspicuously, outlined against the waning sunlight, in the front of the disreputable little craft.

His hand was on his holster. His eyes saw quick, furtive movement on the junk now.

Glinting eyes peered from behind deck-structures, the snouts of guns protruded, the glitter of knives flashed.

He sang out quickly: “*Hou N’u Hou Ah!* Hello, Ah Ying—it is Kirby, your friend!”

There was no answering hail. But now, snake-like, a Jacob’s ladder was flung over the junk’s rail.

“Keep out of sight, guys!” He didn’t have to warn the sampanman, who was quivering with fright, knowing the river pirates.

With Shorty and Travis almost down flat on the bottom of the sampan, Kirby grabbed the Jacob’s ladder, swung off the fishing boat.

He climbed aboard the junk. Men came out of concealment, some of them in mushroom hats. They were enough to make even the hardest person have his doubts—a motley crew, most of them naked to the waist, mongrel types, most of them Malayan, as the wicked kris knives in their belts showed.

One giant with a face like a slant-eyed gargoyle, grinned with betel-stained teeth at Kirby.

“Honorable taipan come,” he said.

He led the way across greasy decks, through a hatch, and into a cabin surprisingly hung with silks that would have brought a fortune on Fifth Avenue. But this was China.

CHAPTER III
Missing Men

THE Sybarite who sat amid this luxury in a filthy junk was an obese Chinese whose face looked like a shiny yellow moon. He sat on a backless plush chair, squatting like some evil but amiable Buddha. He grinned at Kirby and promptly spoke the strange pidgin English some river Chinese had mastered :

“Goodee you come, Hon’able Koibly! You always bling Ah Ying lots of joss!” He sighed. “Things bad with Ah Ying! Yaps make pilate business no goodee!”

“Then you do know there’s a war going on!” Kirby said. He was thinking it was no wonder the Chinese forces found it hard—with fat-bellied bandits like this showing not an iota of patriotism. Aloud, however, he lapsed into friendly pidgin English himself: “Tellee, Ah Ying! You gottee Quong Lin—son of Quong Far, yes?”

The amiable yellow moon didn’t change, but the little black eyes narrowed. Kirby was aware of the big Malay behind him, of others, too, slipping into the cabin. The Mosquito spoke quickly, ready to shout his lungs out for two men waiting on the sampan.

“Quong sendee big ransom with me for Lin,” he explained.

The narrowed black eyes promptly glinted, nor did the amiable grin hide the avarice quick to come on Ah Ying’s face.

“Goodee! You showee money?”

“You showee Lin first!”

Ah Ying shrugged, gave an order. One of the crew went out. Kirby waited anxiously, telling himself this was too easy, and shortly finding it out. When the man returned he carried only belongings—wallet, coat, a hat. Initials in Chinese and English satisfied Kirby that the stuff was indeed young Quong Lin’s.

“You no savvy!” he told Ah Ying then. “I say, bring Lin—himself.”

“You showee money!” grinned Ah Ying. “Hon’able Koibly trust Ah Ying, no?”

Kirby’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe Honorable Ah Ying is being honorable skunk. Maybe he has not Lin?”

“I showee clothes.”

“Showee Lin!”

“Showee money!”

This wasn’t getting anywhere, Kirby reflected. So he pulled forth the bag from his belt. He reached in and brought out a handful of sovereigns. The stuffed bag promised many more.

“Velly goodee,” said Ah Ying, raising his hand. “Velly, velly goodee!”

THE funny part was that Kirby, who had been ready to yell, didn’t think of yelling now when the move came. Instead, as Ah Ying’s arm raised—as the Malay and others slid towards the Mosquito—he gave a reckless but gritted curse and yanked out his Colt, thumbing back the safety.

The giant Malay had his kris arcing through space. The knife-blade glittered as it plunged towards Kirby. He fired straight into the Malay’s naked belly. The bullet made an awful mess as the roar of the .45 split the confines of the cabin.

The Malay dropped like a heavy log. That gave Kirby time to duck. By that time he was also yelling. Another gun went off in the hands of one of the pirates. The Mosquito ducked and wood and silk ripped as the slug whined past him.

Pivoting, the Mosquito tried, to cover Ah Ying with his Colt to terminate the sudden surprising attack. But Ah Ying had ducked behind his men, was shrilling orders. They were orders for Kirby’s immediate death.

The Mosquito’s gun blazed again as a scrawny, rotten-toothed pirate leaped towards him, again a knife upraised. He shot that one dead, mortally wounded another, all the time backing to the wall so he wouldn’t get a knife between the shoulder-blades. He had dropped the stuffed bag with its scant money, and they hadn’t yet seen it on the floor.

The room was full of yellow devils now with bared teeth, slant eyes, murderous faces. A thrown knife actually pinned Kirby’s coat-sleeve to the wall as he raised his Colt again, knowing he could not stem them all.

Then another Colt blazed thunderously from the doorway. Without looking, Kirby knew at once it was Travis. Travis always shot that way, in rapid succession, not with the slower but more precise marksmanship of Shorty Carn. But marksmanship wasn’t needed at this range.

The crew members screamed. Travis killed one of them, pegged another in the leg. It was a mad scramble then, with Kirby yelling the Mosquito war-whoop: “Let’s go!” And wondering why Shorty wasn’t in the fray, too!

Two Mosquitoes seemed to be enough for the pirates. They were breaking—leaping out of the square windows into the river, leaving their dead and wounded behind. Then, in the smoke-filled cabin, Kirby saw Ah Ying again, trying to aim at the back of the lanky Travis.

Kirby cursed and whipped up his Colt to cover the double-crossing obese pirate chief. He fired one of his two remaining cartridges. Ah Ying sighed and sat down heavily, holding his fat paunch with blood spilling out over his fingers.

“Hon’able Koibly—too bad—” said the amiable villain.

Then, with the speed of light, his gun whipped up. Kirby fired once more, even faster, and Ah Ying’s shot went wide. Ah Ying slumped convulsively and toppled sideward to lay very still. Kirby faced a grim Travis.

“Too bad. He wasn’t such a bad skunk until he pulled this attempted murder on me! I’d rather be killing Japs, but that wouldn’t be legal.”

TRAVIS didn’t reply, but was looking around.

“Get ‘em all—except the ones overside?” went on Kirby.

“Yes, they all came in here to make sure of you, Kirby, Funny—why did they have to kill you when they could just take the money?”

“Or rather the decoy money,” Kirby amended. Then, anxiously: “Where the hell’s Shorty?”

“I guess he must still be in the sampan where I left him. A wonder he didn’t hear the shots. I was already on deck here when they started; I had a hunch I’d better come on up to see how you were making out. What I want to know now is where is Lin!”

“We’ll find out!” Kirby gritted. “They couldn’t have gotten him off.”

“He’s not on this ship!” Travis said decisively, eyes shrewd. “I took a sneak all around when I slipped on board. There aren’t many other cabins.”

“But they had his clothes. He was on this ship!” Kirby swore, grim eyes surveying the cabin.

Only one of the wounded pirates in the cabin lived, the one Travis had winged in the leg. He wasn’t badly wounded, but he was huddled, frightened, on the floor. Kirby went over to him, leaned down.

“Where is Quong Lin?” he intoned ominously in Cantonese.

A prune-like mongrel face looked up at him with impassive hate.

“Fool taipan, we did not have Quong Lin!”

“Then where did you get his clothes?”

Travis, meanwhile, was scouring the cabin, gun gripped, eyes alert for any possible return of the escaped crew. But, like most “bold” bandits, they had been too cowardly to come back. The lanky Mosquito paused now over the fat corpse of Ah Ying and stooped down, his wise face screwed up with interest.

Kirby was still repeating his question to the wounded mongrel.

“Answer me!” He shook the mongrel’s shoulder roughly. “Where did you get his clothes, if you did not have Quong Lin?”

“Joke on taipan,” the man grinned as he repeated his former words. “We did not have Quong Lin.”

Kirby was mad enough to shake the very teeth out of the wounded man, though he knew this wouldn’t help. At that moment an exclamation from Travis drew his attention across the cabin.

Travis was holding a bit of rice paper in his hand, stained with blood, a little crumpled.

“Found this on your friend Ah Ying. What does it ‘savvy’ to you, Kirby?”

Kirby took the paper. Black-penned ideographs met his eyes. At once he saw they were not Chinese characters. His momentary puzzlement gave way to sudden shocked amazement.

“Japanese!” he cried. “That’s funny! What’s a Japanese paper doing on Ah Ying, a Chinese river pirate?”

“I can’t read Japanese any better than you can,” Travis said dryly. “But notice there’s a small seal in the right-hand corner.” He pointed out an engraved red rising sun, some tiny characters beneath. “Unless I’m wrong that’s the seal of the Jap military!” The lanky Mosquito’s shrewd eyes were slits now. “I think I’m beginning to see—”

As he spoke he drew Kirby back toward the leg-wounded mongrel, still grinning on the floor. Then, astonishingly, the wise Travis began to talk to Kirby conversationally—in Chinese.

“Did you ever see a Chinese execution, Kirby? It is very quick, the way they chop off the heads. One time, in Hankow, I saw five executed. The heads rolled off, so! Th’ executioner lifted them by the hair and held them up, then he put them in a pile—like stones.”

A laugh from the mongrel, a rather shaky laugh, broke in:

“Taipan fool! They do not execute the river pirates of Ah Ying.”

Travis seemed not to have heard him but, while Kirby still stood a little bewildered, the lanky Mosquito went on. “Chinese are very angry at the taipan Japanese. Especially though they are angry at Chinese who frustrate the new spirit and refuse to be loyal. The executioner is busy night and day with foul traitors who help the enemy.”

The mongrel sat bolt upright with a surprising howl. “No! No—I did not do it. I—”

“Of course,” said the cool Travis, the man who spoke only when he had something to say—even in Chinese, “if one has only worked for a traitorous chief and makes full confession, a white man might turn his back and forget.”

The mongrel talked very fast.

“Ah Ying—he took Quong Lin, that is true. He took him for big Jap man who promised many Japanese yen. He delivered to the big Jap man. He was to sail down river tonight to get the yen.”

Kirby, once more taking command, grabbed the man's shoulder again.

"Who was this big Jap man?" He knew the adjective "big" referred to position rather than size.

"Do not know. He was a soldier."

"Where was junk to sail tonight?"

"To Tienchow. That is where Ah Ying was promised yen—"

Travis broke in swiftly. "Tienchow is where Baron Hakimi has his present headquarters, Kirby! Things are beginning to make sense I"

"Sense?" Kirby turned to him, bewildered. "I don't see any sense to them. What the hell would Hakimi want to have Quong Lin kidnaped for? Quong Lin's no soldier or flyer; he's just a worthless artist."

"I'm thinking of Hakimi! A flyer, but also their clever intelligence man. Come on, let's get back to Shorty, who must have fallen into one of his periodical snoozes. We've got things to do!"

They left the unarmed and grateful mongrel in the cabin. It was not their business to capture the pirate junk. Travis stuffed the Japanese rice paper into a pocket as Kirby picked up the "decoy" gold. They hurried above to the deck.

The twilight mist was dark now, obscuring the sails of the junk, which had a desolate air. But even in the gloom they could see that the sampan and Shorty were gone!

FORTUNATELY, there was a dilapidated but river-worthy dinghy tied to the junk. They piled in, Kirby taking the oars and rowing hastily to the wharves of Chunking.

There they located the very sampan that had taken them out to the junk. The scrawny sampanman's story was simple.

After Travis had gone aboard the junk on his own hunch Shorty had waited a few minutes, then suddenly given the order to be taken ashore. He had told the sampanman to wait, but he had not returned as yet.

The two Mosquitoes looked at one another, worried, in the gathering gloom.

"That's crazy as hell, Shorty going back to land like that without apparent reason!" Kirby said. "He must have gone before the shooting started, for he wouldn't have left that. But why?"

Travis was silent as he led the way back to the tree where they had cached the gold sovereigns of Quong Far. The money was still buried there. The lanky Mosquito spoke tensely.

"Maybe Shorty saw one of the fleeing pirates and learned the truth himself. He was darned anxious to rescue Quong Lin—thought it would please that girl Nadya."

He broke off, shaking his head as if this explanation didn't satisfy him.

Kirby was badly worried. "You don't think Shorty'd be crazy enough to go after the kid, even if he did learn that Hakimi has him? As if it would do any good, getting involved with the Japs! Why, by this time Quong Lin must be a corpse."

"I don't think so," Travis himself spoke now in a shaky voice, and Kirby remembered his affection for Lin even though it was now overshadowed by anxiety over Shorty. "I think Hakimi will have kept Quong Lin alive, though I'm afraid—"

He broke off, took out a memo pad he carried, scribbled on it in the last waning twilight. It was a note for Shorty, in case he were around and came back, naturally, to the gold cache. It told Shorty to take care of the gold, that Kirby and Travis were going to Hakimi's headquarters!

"That might mean tangling with the Japs," Kirby said, but his eyes were gleaming in a familiar fighting way.

"We cant take any chances about Shorty, and I want to rescue Quong Lin!" Travis replied. "I have a lot of hunches, and they all spell dirty work! Tienchow isn't so far. What do you say?"

There was only one answer to that, and it was the familiar reckless one:

"Let's go!" said Kirby.

CHAPTER IV Jap Torture

DEEP night. A wan moon and stars struggling through the night mist typical of Southern China. And in the furtive light, the walled town of Tienchow, Headquarters of the 2nd Japanese Corps. Only a few parts of this town were in ruins, for the Japanese had preserved it from their shells to take it over.

They had converted it into a virtual military fortress. Its ancient walls bristled with modern machine gun nests, at which helmeted Japanese squatted alertly. At its gates paced little mustard-clad sentries with bayonet-tipped rifles.

Just where the road from the Tienchow gates led out into night gloom, two dusty, but adventurous Yanks drew to a furtive halt to survey the scene. Their journey had not been long in distance or time. But it had been hectic.

In Chunking they'd managed to find an old Buick, which some of the gold from Kirby's "decoy bag" had bought. In the Buick they had headed northwest, into the zone of war.

The Buick had held up nobly as long as it could over shell-ripped roads and bad bridges, and they had

avoided meeting either of the contesting armies. When finally the car had expired, its motor wheezing out and refusing another chug, they'd abandoned it. They had come the rest of the way, a few miles, on foot, until they now stood under the walls of the city.

"We've got to get into Tienchow," Travis whispered. "Don't know how we'll go about things after that, but we'll have to take pot-luck."

"That wall looks pretty damned big, and well guarded," Kirby observed, eyes recklessly agleam in the dark. "But I've got plenty of clips for my Colt."

"None of that, unless it's to protect our hides!" Travis cautioned. "We're not dealing with river pirates now. We're dealing with nationals of a recognized foreign nation!"

"Look," Travis drew out the Japanese paper with its military seal, found on the dead Ah Ying. "We know Ah Ying was due to visit Hakimi tonight. That gives me a strong hunch this paper is a military pass. But would Hakimi make it out to Ah Ying by name? I doubt it, because it wouldn't look so nice for a Jap big shot to have traffic with a known Chinese river pirate. I'm betting my head that this pass is a general pass which merely says admit the bearer. We'll take a longer shot and try to make it admit two."

Kirby shook his head, but he was right in step with Travis as the lanky man started determinedly for that Japanese bristling gate.

"I don't like this diplomacy stuff," the Mosquito leader mourned. "If I wasn't so worried about Shorty—"

"*Todimuru!*" came the peremptory call.

The high-pitched challenge rang out in the night. As suddenly as rousing terriers, the Japanese sentries whirled, bayonet-tipped rifles coming down, flashlights going on. Both Mosquitoes were covered while hostile slant-eyes surveyed them in the blinding beams.

Travis did no speaking. He merely showed the pass, his stoic face revealing nothing. Kirby struggled to show no more expression.

To their joyous triumph, that pass proved an open sesame. The hedge of rifles lifted; a Japanese non-com gestured jerkily for the two Yanks to proceed. No questions had been asked.

THROUGH the gate, between columns of Nipponese soldiers, unmolested, walked the two Mosquitoes. They were in the town of Tienchow, on a cobbled street, full of parked, empty lorries.

"*Todimuru!*" Again came the command to halt.

For no sooner had they stepped through the gate than a fresh group of sentries was stopping them. This time, as lights were turned on them, a haughty soldier

with an officer's red bands confronted them, a long-barreled pistol in hand.

He read the pass, looked at the two white men.

"English?" He gave the *sh* a hiss as he spoke that language. "No, you look American. This is strange indeed. I cannot understand the baron giving a pass to two Americans."

Kirby's hand was already going down toward his hidden Colt, but Travis spoke quickly. "We have a diplomatic matter to discuss with the baron, purely unofficial."

The Jap officer giggled. That was exactly what he did, but it wasn't amusing in the least. His hissing "s-s-s-s" laugh, almost effeminate, didn't match his murderous eyes.

"The unofficial business of Americans," he said, "is, as a rule, espionage. I am forced to detain you until I have checked this pass with the baron."

He clicked his heels together, barked an order to the sentries, and strode off through the gloom. The sentries put their rifles on their shoulders, gestured the two Yanks to follow, and started a brisk march past the line of trucks, evidently to some detention building.

Both Mosquitoes, especially the lanky Travis, towered well above the heads of the little Japs. The two exchanged a look in the gloom. Their thoughts coincided in that tacit glance. When Baron Hakimi saw the pass, learned that two Americans were using it, there was going to be hell to pay. The two Mosquitoes could even be held as spies attempting false entry.

When, as they marched, their eyes had already reached an understanding, it was Travis who suddenly crisped: "Let's go!"

"Okay!" Kirby yelled recklessly.

The tactical beauty of their move was that it was at once coordinated and yet diverse, so that the effect on their guards was confused surprise. The sentries saw both men leap sidewise, but at different times.

Travis got through the Japs in his way by the simple expedient of using his two long arms like opening scissors, pushing two heads and shouldered rifles apart, and sliding his thin body through.

Kirby was slightly more direct. He picked one Jap, and he tried a straight jab to the jaw. It worked, bringing a hissing sigh and buckling knees.

Then both Mosquitoes scrambled, as if their eyes had almost agreed to do so, under the rows of lorries. Japs, with flashlights and guns, scrambled after them. A whistle blew in alarm.

The Mosquitoes were together by this time, wriggling like human crabs under the trucks, rolling from beneath one to another. They emerged in a gap between the many trucks and keeping their heads low,

ran down this gap, rounded a ruined building and came out onto a twisted street with plenty of dark doorways.

The town became a bedlam of noise, caused by their escape, but most of the uproar came from the direction of the town's gates. The Japs assumed naturally that the Americans, since they had fled, would try to get out. They did not think that the Americans would be crazy enough deliberately to penetrate deeper into the town with the alarm now out for them.

However, that was precisely what the Americans did. In the midst of that Jap bee-hive, knowing they had done enough to be shot on sight now, the two Mosquitoes slipped like shadows to the very midst of the town.

The keen eyes of Travis had seen something there, a smoothed expanse of grounds with one sprawling stucco-type building on it. There were winged shapes on the ground—several slender Japanese scout planes. An engine was roaring.

The building itself, on the street side, was guarded by fully a score of sentries. In front of it stood several limousines, rising sun pennants visible on their fenders in the light streaming from the open door.

"Headquarters, or I'm plain nuts!" Travis whispered, as he and Kirby slunk down the darker part of the street.

"If you ask me, I'm saying we better make a break for two of those planes. They look like Kawasakis," Kirby said. "If we don't get the hell out of here—"

HE broke off, stiffening with his comrade. Somewhere from within the stucco building there came a sound to raise the hair on a man's scalp.

It wasn't a scream. Too deep for that, and with a strange almost un-human thickness to it. But there was agony in the sound, unutterable agony. It died as suddenly as it rose.

The Mosquitoes, still in the shadows of the street, instinctively moved closer together. They remembered that Shorty was still missing. That alone would have been enough to spur them.

The side of the building fronting the aviation field was at the moment unguarded. There were big windows with bamboo-slat shutters like Venetian blinds. Kirby promptly went to work.

His penknife cut them with a fair amount of ease. There was a big chamber on the other side, empty and dark. The two Mosquitoes climbed into the room, concealing as best they could the damage to the bamboo blinds.

Slipping forward, they emerged into a corridor which ran, Chinese fashion, deviously through the

house. Light slanted from one end, and a sound of sibilant voices drifted from there.

The two Mosquitoes who had deliberately entered this enemy stronghold, tiptoed along the dim corridor. They came to the partially ajar door. Kirby, hand on his Colt, peered through the crack.

The room was large, bright-lit by hanging electric bulbs, around which flies buzzed. There was a round table. A gathering of the mustard-clad Japanese, all with officer's red bands, sat at the table, eyes turned in one direction.

LEANING forward was a Japanese whose face was so feline it seemed noticeably to lack a spray of cat's whiskers. The Jap's head was a shaved bullet, German fashion. On his mustard tunic were a tiny pair of wings.

He was talking in rapid Nipponese. Kirby who knew only a smattering of the language, couldn't follow the rapid flow. He gave his position up to Travis, whispering into Travis' ear.

"It's Baron Hakimi, and some Jap brass hats. See if you can savvy if he's saying anything about Shorty, or Quong Lin."

Travis listened, looked. Kirby stood impatiently, hand still on his Colt. The sibilant voice of Baron Hakimi continued to an apparently fascinated gathering.

Travis whispered to Kirby.

"He's talking about propaganda. He says he is going to fly over Tokyo on his leave and drop leaflets, thousands of leaflets. He says all Japan will really be up in arms and the rest of the world, including what's left of the League of Nations, will agree with them—"

"What about Shorty or—"

"Not a mention." Travis straightened. In the dim light of the hall his face was grim now, shrewd with thought. "We've got to move. Something tells me we better hurry!"

Kirby, thinking of that thick scream they had heard before, gave quick assent. They moved away from the headquarters room, went on down the hall, investigating doors, finding dark chambers, jumping as they inadvertently made some slight noise in their stealthy search.

They came to another room then, with an arched doorway that had a curtain in lieu of door. Dim light filtered from within. Kirby lifted the curtain tentatively, and his breath sucked in.

A Japanese sentry in pill-box cap stood within the room, rifle at rest. At his feet, a huddled figure lay on the floor, neck on a Japanese wood pillow. The figure, vaguely the form of a man, did not move. Ropes bound him.

Kirby did not hesitate. Once more assuming the initiative, he pushed through the curtain. The Japanese sentry heard the curtain swish. He whirled, started to lift his rifle.

This time Kirby's arm shot forward like a piston, his fist an iron ball at its end. The Japanese took the blow flush on the jaw, and it made an awful *c-r-runch!* He went down very fast, rifle clattering noisily before him.

He sprawled out cold, the second Jap tonight who'd had no chance to use his gun or display some of that highly touted Japanese jiu-jitsu.

Travis had slipped into the room and was already bending over the bound man on the floor. Kirby hurried over. Travis was freeing the bound figure. He spoke in a choked voice.

"Quong Lin!"

In the dim light of the single bulb Kirby recognized the son of the soya merchant. Recognized him though his young Oriental face was hideously emaciated, his eyes looking up in agony.

Quong Lin began to make sounds, horrible sounds, which were no language and yet seemed expressive of agonized recognition. Kirby knew it was he who had screamed then—that thick, incoherent scream.

Travis was undoing the bonds, as he spoke in a voice of horror.

"They've cut his tongue out—probably some time ago. They must have been torturing him again when he screamed."

Kirby turned away, fighting down a wave of nausea which Travis seemed too grief-stricken to feel.

CHAPTER V

In the Lion's Mouth

KIRBY turned back, wondering why Travis began questioning a man, who couldn't possibly talk. Then he saw Travis holding down his memo pad. A pencil in Quong Lin's hand was writing jerkily. Travis stood up at length, looking at the writing. He turned to Kirby, his stoic face hard.

"The window there is barred, but the bars are bamboo. If you can cut them, take Quong Lin out. I think you'll be on the aviation field. There must be some planes revving, on the alert. You get near them and wait. I'll be there to help you—"

"Wait a minute!" Kirby's eyes were grim, "Where are you going in the meantime?"

"I've got to attend to something. Just leave it to me."

Again Kirby had to yield to the older, wise Mosquito who seemed to know what he was about. Travis slipped out of the room, his hand on his Colt.

Kirby was alone with the unconscious guard and the scarcely conscious Quong Lin.

Had Travis learned something about Shorty? No time to tarry, conjecturing though. Japs might be coming in here any minute.

Kirby went to the window, lifted a curtain, saw the aviation field under the wan moon. Three planes were on the alert out there. The sentries were over by a hangar.

He got out his penknife, sawed at the tough bamboo bars which, though pliable, would not snap at his pull. He cut two bars, and that proved to be enough.

He dashed back. As gently as he could, he lifted the groaning figure of Quong Lin. The young Chinese was a dead weight, but Kirby's shoulders were broad. He lifted Quong Lin over one of them.

The barred window was just a foot above ground level. Carefully, Kirby stepped through with his burden. He staggered a little, but made no sound as he carried Quong Lin along the building to trees opposite the planes. These were Kawasaki KDK 5's, resplendent with red-stripes. Only one Jap mechanic was near at hand.

Kirby eased Quong Lin gently to the ground.

"Take it easy, feller," he whispered.

He peered out through the trees, waiting. He didn't want to try to get to those planes, with that mechanic guarding them, until Travis showed and they could make the break together. He was still worried, too, about Shorty.

Minutes passed. Then, with the suddenness of a storm, hell itself broke loose!

Whistles blasted, boots pounded, bright lights appeared from all sides of the field. Horrified, Kirby saw swarms of Japs—sentries and others—pouring from around the building. Had they found the cut bars, the prison room empty save for its knocked-out guard?

His thought broke off, even as shots rang out. And then he saw a lanky figure, disheveled now, and minus flying coat, running on his long legs before the Japs, carrying something oblong and bulky under his arm.

Travis! They were after him, shooting at him! In another moment, when they got closer—

Kirby leaped back to Quong Lin, gathered up the Chinese. The Mosquito leader's eyes were desperate. Travis was cut off from the planes. Kirby must get to one of those planes, get off the ground—the only way he could hope to help his lanky comrade.

Kirby deliberately lurched out to the field with his human burden. No sooner had he started for the Kawasakis than he, too, was spotted. A fresh howl of alarm arose from the soldiers pursuing Travis.

Quong Lin at the same time made sounds of protest, struggling in Kirby's grip to get out of it. But Kirby ran on toward the planes, holding Quong Lin with growing effort. He saw he couldn't make it in time. One of the Jap groups was closing in on him, and the rifles began to send bullets whining over his head.

Quong Lin tugged loose then with a lurch of his body. The Chinese mouthed a tongueless word of cheer as, despite Kirby's effort to stop him, he slid to the ground. Even then Kirby stopped to pick him up again, cursing the delay.

He straightened instantly as he saw that Quong Lin was dead! Not from bullets; none had come that close, but from what he had already been through. Knowing he was as good as dead he'd struggled to slip out of Kirby's grasp and remove the burden of his body to aid Kirby's escape.

Since there was nothing to do for him now, Kirby grunted a hard oath and catapulted forward. In one mad spurt he reached the first of the warming Kawasakis. The Jap mechanic who had been looking confusedly from one chase to the other, leaped forward. But he was too slow.

KIRBY was in the cockpit with the experience of vaulting into many such pits behind him. He had no trouble finding the throttle lever and other controls. The Kawasaki was very familiar to his touch, though he had never flown one. He had flown American Curtiss Hawks, however, and if ever one plane resembled another—but then the Japanese were famous for their imitative skill.

With a full-throated roar, the Kawasaki leaped forward, jumping wheel-chocks. Kirby was down in the seat, snatching out the helmet and goggles still in his leather coat. He got them on somehow, even as he sent the fleet scout thundering into the wind, and silently praying that he would be in time.

Shots pinged after him; he heard them hail against the plane. But Japs were scattering like frightened rabbits before the whirring propeller of the speed-gathering Kawasaki.

Then Kirby was in the air. He was in the air, a neutral Yank in a Jap plane whose seat was a trifle uncomfortably low because it had been constructed for shorter-legged Japs.

He banked the climbing Kawasaki, which flew with bird-like ease and grace, and swung it down over the field, eyes peering down through his goggles at the moonlit expanse. It had consumed no more than a minute—that mad take-off of his.

At once he picked out the running figure of Travis, dodging like a shadowy, lean fox amid smaller hounds. They hadn't got him yet, thank God!

KIRBY dived. He dived, his fingers ready on the electric push-buttons that he knew could send two streams of lead through a synchronized propeller from guns hidden in the engine cowl. But he didn't push the trips. He remembered in time that he must try to win through without killing any Japs. He must try to stay "neutral."

He took his fingers reluctantly from the gun-trips, and just swooped low instead, in a death-defying pull-out dive almost at ground level. One and all, the Japs scattered in a widening circle as their own red-sun-marked scout like a dark menacing shadow roared right on top of them. They hurled prone.

But Travis stayed on his feet, because he knew one of the world's greatest pilots was handling that Kawasaki. Travis stayed erect, running faster now, still clutching that oblong package under his arm.

Kirby, like a great gull, continued to harry the Japs with swooping dives—zooming to bank and dive again and again. He kept them at bay without firing a shot, though he was getting their lead now.

He heard bullets hacking through his fuselage. Still he continued to swoop down at them in lunging Mosquito fashion.

And then Travis was in another Kawasaki. The Jap mechanic and others had been unable to prevent him with Kirby hedgehopping all over the place like a stricken hawk.

Travis got into the air, his lank, disheveled figure protruding in the wan moonlight from the Kawasaki's pit. Even as Travis climbed, Kirby became aware of a new menace.

Figures down there, in flying togs, were rushing toward other planes, including the one remaining alert plane.

Cursing, Kirby dived again—and this time he used the Kawasaki's guns! He pressed the trigger buttons, and felt rather than heard the guns vibrate, as flame spewed in two streams from the Kawasaki's nose.

But the Mosquito wasn't yet shooting at human beings! He was aiming instead, at the empty planes before they could be manned. Over those empty planes Kirby swooped, pouring lead into each, ripping wings, ruining engines, puncturing gas tanks. He thought he'd got them all, having conked the revving one on alert first. But even as Travis now winged up into the night sky beside him, Kirby pulled up his own ship to find an enemy rising to give combat.

Out of trees which had screened it came a single Kawasaki that rocketed into the air like a streak. Wan moonlight showed its all-red color, save for white circles to offset the "sun" insignias.

“Baron Hakimi’s own ship!” Kirby gritted, remembering tales about that red plane.

He saw Travis waving, using the signals the Three Mosquitoes used in lieu of speech when in the air. “Put on speed! Don’t get in any engagement!”

But Travis was flying sluggishly even though he was urging that speed. Across the space, despite the gloom, Kirby saw the lanky man using only his left arm for both stick and throttle. His right was limp. His disheveled shirt was torn, and Kirby thought he could even see a dark stain there. Travis had been hit in that ground-chase!

He was having trouble piloting the Kawasaki. And as Kirby tarried, refusing to leave this second comrade of a trio already minus the third, Baron Hakimi struck!

CHAPTER VI Quong Lin’s Secret

BARON HAKIMI struck with all the deadliness of a bursting rocket, his Kawasaki spewing lead at both Yank - manned Kawasakis! As the Jap hurtled through the sky, Kirby could glimpse his helmeted head.

Baron Hakimi wasn’t holding his guns back. You had a right to shoot at any thieves who stole your property—that was accepted custom—even if your thieves were neutral foreigners. That was duck soup to Hakimi, bomber of women and children, torturer who had cut out the tongue of a young Chinese.

Lead spewed first at one Mosquito, then the other. Travis was getting the worst of it, wounded and unable to put his plane through defense evolutions. Kirby was dodging and twisting up there in the night sky, his eyes slits of hate and murder. Yet he knew if he shot Hakimi the Japs would make everything of it. As reserve U. S. officers the Mosquitoes would be violating their country’s neutrality.

Cursing, Kirby lunged his stolen plane towards the baron, trying to drive him off by sheer bluff from Travis. When that didn’t work, Kirby fired bursts over the Jap’s wings, not daring to fire too close to a man he would have been delighted to kill.

That didn’t work, either.

Travis’ plane was bullet-drunk as well as manned by a wounded pilot. Kirby’s own plane was taking lead as Hakimi had a merry time of it, sensing his diplomatic advantage.

“So help me,” Kirby gritted then, “I’ll have to send him to hell even if—”

He broke off, for at that instant a silver meteor seemed to drop out of the dark heights above him. A huge-winged meteor, trailing sparks from exhausts. A great silver Douglas PC, which came down hell-bent, Chinese stars on it.

It happened in an amazing instant. The Douglas swooped upon the tail of Baron Hakimi’s Kawasaki. A single, spear-like stream of machine-gun fire streaked from the Douglas’ nose.

The propeller of Baron Hakimi’s Kawasaki flew out in all directions, shattered to bits by the burst which had not touched its Nipponese pilot.

“Shorty!” Kirby yelled then, for who else could have flown like that and made that shot?

Baron Hakimi’s propellerless Kawasaki fluttered down—gliding perforce to earth—its pilot going through mad, futile gyrations.

By that time Kirby and Travis, who seemed to have gained new strength by the rescue, were waving signals at the Douglas. Lights appeared in the Douglas cabin. Shorty’s grinning face showed through glass. Another face, that of the Eurasian girl, Nadya, was beside his, her eyes straining hopefully at them. Kirby wagged an “all clear” signal.

Then, automatically, the three planes, despite their difference in size, got into the famous formation of the flying Mosquitoes. Kirby at point, Shorty Carn with his Douglas to the right, Travis to the left.

As a battery of anti-aircrafts began to cut loose from below, and searchlights swept the sky, the Three Mosquitoes hurtled away from there across the China skies.

MORNING sunlight streamed upon the portico of the Quong “Big House” in peaceful Canton, where a benign and sad-eyed old Chinese in mandarin robe and cap gave Chinese greetings to the three men who had arrived with Nadya.

Old Quong Far greeted them by shaking his own hands, bowing. They followed suit. Then Travis, his arm in a sling, stepped forward, the package under his good arm.

He had not yet explained that package to his comrades, although everything else was now clear. Shorty had told his story when the three landed on a plain at the nearest Chinese position to Tienchow, so that the Chinese army could find the Douglas and the two Japanese ships, and take them over.

Shorty’s romantic nature had been responsible for his disappearance, and later his reappearance. While on that sampan in the Yangtze alongside the pirate junk, Shorty had spotted a plane landing beyond the shore line in a poppy field. It was the Douglas.

Nadya, after her angry take-off from Wu-Chen, had started flying back for Canton. Then she had changed her mind and flown to Chunking, with some idea of participating in the negotiations with Ah Ying.

Shorty had promptly gone to investigate. He had found the Douglas had blown a gasket—and stayed to

repair it, thinking to use the ship to transport his comrades and Lin, whom he thought to be in the pirate's hands at the time.

By the time he had made peace with Nadya and repaired the ship and gone back, Kirby and Travis had already had their fracas on the junk, returned to land, missed Shorty, left the note, and set out for Tienchow. Shorty, going to the gold cache, had found the note. Nadya insisting on being in on it, he had flown the Douglas to Tienchow. He'd had some trouble locating the Hakimi field. When he finally did so, he'd seen two Kawasakis trying to make a getaway from a third with red wings. His keen mind had figured things out.

Now Travis was talking to Quong Far. He broke the news gently that Quong Lin had died. Then he unwrapped the oblong package on a table. As Nadya came forward with the rest he halted her.

"No, Nadya, this is not for you."

The girl, who was sobbing strangely now, retreated, without protest. Travis revealed pictures. They were water-colors, in the realistic style of Quong Lin—with his signature on them.

Old Quong Far was impassive until he saw those pictures.

"No—" his voice quavered sharply. "My son painted only the true—and these cannot be true!"

They were not pleasant to look at, those paintings. They showed Chinese soldiers who seemed to be carried away by their fighting zeal, to the extent that they were committing outrageous tortures upon Japanese soldiers they'd captured.

"They are not true!" the wise Travis crisped. "This was just a devilish stratagem of Baron Hakimi's to make Japan and the rest of the world sympathetic to the Nipponese military. He knew that the Orient world would believe paintings, if they proved to be the genuine work of Quong Lin. And these are genuine.

"Hakimi tortured Quong Lin until he made him do the work—which, as Kirby and I overheard him say, he intended to drop in reproduced leaflets. An ironic business, committing an atrocity on a Chinese to make him paint false atrocity pictures. I had a hunch that kidnapping had to do with Lin's art work from the start. But Lin, in his predicament, managed to do something else."

He pulled out another picture. This looked more like a map than a picture. It was a map of Japanese Tienchow positions, locations of various corps, personnel, and so on.

"Lin took advantage of all he'd seen, hoping to escape, and knowing he could talk with his paints. He smuggled this picture into the rest, unnoticed. When I questioned him, he wrote down the location of the pictures, another room of the house. Getting the batch

brought the Jap alarm hot after us. But I think this last picture will help your country, Quong Far. Your son had western ways, but he died a Chinese patriot in every sense."

Quong Far nodded, eyes misty. "I shall set fire-crackers off tonight. I have lost a son—but," he sighed, "I still have a daughter."

Travis and Kirby exchanged a puzzled look.

And the Russian girl, Nadya, rushed into Quong Far's arms. She was crying openly, her face wet with tears, her large dark eyes tragic. Old Quong Far held her, stroked her hair, muttering words softly.

Kirby spoke in understanding.

"So she was married to young Lin. No wonder she risked her life!"

SHORTY CARN'S chubby face nodded gloomily.

"Sure," he said. "Nadya told me that when I fixed her plane. If we hadn't thought you guys had Lin in one of your planes last night, I bet she would have jumped out."

As Quong Far guided the heartbroken girl into the house, still comforting her, Shorty walked off alone.

"Say!" Kirby suddenly remarked to Travis. "Do you know we forgot all about that gold! Shorty didn't take it from the tree! It's still there—and old Quong didn't mention it, as if he takes it for granted we want it for our services."

Travis nodded. "We must go back and get it. Every sovereign, except what we used for expenses, we must turn over to Quong, Where the hell did Shorty go?"

They found out as they went into the sunny garden. And some of their dejection left them, an involuntary smile coming over their faces.

Under a mulberry tree, Shorty Carn, godfather to romance, lay peacefully asleep—snoring.