

# Ming Menace

A "Battling" Mord Grogan Adventure by Robert Burt



THE dead of night in the heart of Suchow, a grim-walled, ancient city of *jungkwok*. The narrow, crooked streets were deserted. An oppressive sense of foreboding floated in the murky air. At intervals the sharp roll of a watchman's tom-tom reverberated through the wintry air, pricking at sensitive eardrums.

Three shadowy figures strode toward the great stone-paved square in front of the Ming Temple. A moment more, and the trio entered the square, their boot heels ringing out sharply.

The lean, powerful figure in the center would never have been taken for an Oriental, though his rugged features were tanned and wind-burned to an olive bronze. He was "Battling" Mord Grogan, Yank skipper of the famous Dragon Squadron of China. At his left marched his faithful chum, Ah Im, known officially as Captain Cheung Sun Im, premier *tong* ace of the scrappy Dragon crew. The last of the trio was Colonel Yau Sung Tao. Ah Tao was an old friend of Ah Im's, American-educated, and now an officer serving under General Lin Cheng, venerable *tuchun* of Suchow.

Colonel Yau strode straight ahead, up the massive stone steps of the temple entrance, and

the two Dragon hellions kept pace with him. They passed through musty corridors and open courtyards. Gold-leafed idols gleamed in the dim light, and incense floated about them.

They came eventually to the entrance to an inner chamber. Before its massive, ornamental door stood a young *tong* captain on guard. He saluted the trio respectfully.

"Open the door!" commanded Yau.

Dismay fluttered in the captain's dark eyes. "But, Honored One," he faltered, "General Cheng's orders are that he alone be admitted within the sacred precincts."

Yau's eyes gleamed balefully. "You are one of the officers in my regiment," he said sharply. "You will take orders from me first. If you value your head, open that door!"

The young captain hesitated no longer. "As you say, my *taipan*," he faltered.

Slowly he unbarred the heavy gate. Ponderously it swung open. A dark passage showed ahead, but, in the distance, a flickering light gleamed.

"You will stay here!" ordered Yau, motioning the young captain aside with a stern gesture.

The trio started down the passageway. The officer, uneasy and frightened, for he had heard weird stories of what was in that inner chamber, gazed after them. Grogan felt a queer prickling race up his spine. What were they about to see?

Unconsciously the pace of the three quickened as if they were all eager to get this suspense over. There was no necessity to exchange words. The same doubt lay heavily on all three minds.

And then they reached the end of the passageway. Another step and they were entering the Sacred Sanctuary.

As they passed the threshold, a gasp of amazement came from three throats. For there, in the center of the chamber on a raised dais and surrounded by four huge candles, was the most exquisite sight the three had ever gazed upon.

There could be no doubt. They were looking upon the famous White Jade Buddha—the

priceless image for which an ancient Emperor of China had once risked his head and his throne.

As the gasp of amazement issued from three throats, three figures fell upon bended knees. Low, thrice low, bowed three heads. There was nothing of idolatry in the act—nothing except worship of beauty, which is universal.

The statue was just as Marshal Wang, sponsor of the Dragon Squadron, had described. The body was of solid white jade, the robe of pure gold; the cowl and amice were trimmed with diamonds and rubies, some of enormous size, and all of the finest quality. In the forehead was a mammoth emerald, flawless, the largest in all the world.

A sigh issued from the lips of Ah Im. "Now I shall die happy!" he breathed simply.

Yau and Grogan nodded silently. Captain Cheung's words expressed their feelings completely, perfectly.

Suddenly, behind them, where they had left the young captain at the door of the inner chamber, was the sound of heavy steps, the clanking of swords. A harsh, strident voice rang out, then a sharp shot which gave birth to an agonized scream and ended in a rattling gurgle—and the dull thud of a body falling on stone.

The trio before the White Jade Buddha remained immobile, frozen.

"General Lin Cheng!" hissed Yau.

Rapid steps approached along the passageway. Ah Im pulled at the sleeves of his companions.

"When the tiger roars, it is discreet to stay in the background," he quoted.

Quickly the three withdrew into the protecting shadows bordering the wall.

AN old man, parchment-faced, but agile and swift in his movements, stamped into the chamber. He was dressed in Chinese robes. Cunning eyes, hidden under shaggy white brows, probed the shadows. Behind him came a man in the uniform of the Mikado. He was a major, and above a double row of ribbons on his left chest were the wings of the Imperial Japanese Air Force.

The old man was General Lin Cheng. And in his yellowed talons was a smoking revolver! The cunning old eyes found the trio. Wrinkled hand raised the gun.

"Come forth!" he snarled in *tong wa*. "I have sent Captain Mau to his ancestors for disobeying my orders, and am prepared to send others, also!"

Colonel Yau stalked forward, bowed humbly.

"It is I who am at fault, most honorable Father-and-Mother of the people. But we are honored by the presence of two famous *tong* eagles, General Grogan, the *fan kwei* ace who serves China, and one of his officers, Captain Cheung. They were on their way to Shanghai in their winged Dragons, but night overtook them and they landed outside the city walls. I felt confident you would want them to have the pleasure of gazing upon this, the most priceless image in the world."

The old war lord's shaggy brows bristled ominously. "Why did you not bring them to me then?" he demanded.

"You were not at your *yamen*, Most Honorable One," replied Yau, taking a chance.

Grogan and Ah Im held their breath. But Yau's guess must have been a good one, for the *tuchun* did not dispute the implication.

"My orders were that the presence of this relic should be kept secret," said General Cheng. "How did these gentlemen know the Buddha was here if you did not tell them?"

The Yank stepped forward, bowed. "I can answer that, most famous general," he stated in perfect Chinese, "and in the explanation you will see your officer has not been unfaithful. We have just come from Marshal Wang in Peiping and he told us the image had just been sent here to you. We asked Colonel Yau whether he had seen it. When he saw we knew the relic was here, he offered to guide us to your *yamen*, so we could crave your permission to gaze upon its beauty." The American shrugged his shoulders expressively. "Your Graciousness was not there and we were under the necessity of flying on in the morning. If there has been fault committed, we are the guilty ones."

The *tuchun* gazed at the Yank, while his wrinkled eyes blinked shrewdly.

"You say you were on the way from Peiping to Shanghai," he stated. "Don't your flying machines wing their way across the heavens in a straight line? How came you to land at Suchow?"

Grogan was dismayed for a split second. Then in a lucid flash, he saw that old Cheng's question made it possible to put the war lord on the defensive. He looked the *tuchun* straight in the eye.

"Because, most loyal Mandarin, while we were pursuing our direct path for Shanghai, we came within sight of a vast air fleet of *jungkwok's*

enemies. Fearing their invasion portended ill for China, we turned and followed them. As faithful *tong* officers, that was our duty. If we had not done so, I am sure you would be the first to censure us.”

There was a strained pause. The air was tense. Lin Cheng still held the pistol in his yellowed talons. The Yank made up his mind to grab for his gun and start shooting at the slightest adverse move on the part of either Cheng or the Jap.

Grogan knew, as did Ah Im and Colonel Yau, that the old war lord was weighing the situation. Suddenly Cheng decided. Slowly he put away his gun. The Buddha, surrounded by its four flickering candles, was on the general's left. His wrinkled face was clearly outlined. The Jap major was behind him. Slowly, facing the trio before him, the general winked one eye. Then, clearly intoning the words, he said, “I invited Major Tobi and his comrades here. From this meeting great profit will accrue to China.”

Captain Cheung stepped forward so that he was even with Grogan and Yau. His black eyes flashed with anger.

“The White Jade Buddha,” said he, indicating the image with his right hand, “is *jungkwok's* salvation. Does the Great Lord think it safe for this *skibi* officer to gaze upon it?”

Major Tobi certainly understood Chinese well, for he stepped forward at once, small eyes glaring in his moon face.

“I resent that!” he grated in accented *tong wa*. “The captain's words are an insult to me and my country. I “demand satisfaction!”

Ah Im stared at the Jap as though he were a leper. “I don't know about you,” he replied evenly, “but your country can't be insulted. It will be my humble pleasure to accommodate you at daybreak. Which will you prefer—daggers, swords, or pistols?”

“None of those!” spat the *skibi*. “I challenge you to single combat in the sky. As soon as it is light enough to take off.”

Captain Cheung bowed. “As you wish,” he replied. “I merely desired to complete a disagreeable task as soon as possible.” He turned to Grogan. “Does such an arrangement meet with the *taipan's* approval?” he asked softly.

The Yank had been covertly studying General Cheng's face. At the challenge of the Jap and Ah Im's instant acceptance, a wolfish smile of satisfaction had lighted the wrinkled features.

Grogan was puzzled. Just what was going on in the shrewd old war lord's mind? Now, at Ah Im's words, he spoke to Cheng.

“I approve,” he replied, “provided the honorable Mandarin gives his permission.”

The *tuchun* placed his stamp of approval on the duel with these cryptic words: “The major has my sympathy. Captain Cheung's prowess is too well known for anyone to doubt the outcome.”

Grogan was completely puzzled.

COLONEL YAU found bunks for them in his quarters. Ah Im was ready to gamble his life on Yau's loyalty. Over cups of fragrant tea, therefore, the Dragon chief informed Yau of the confidential information they had received from Marshal Wang that the Nationalist treasury was depleted—that the priceless Buddha was to be mortgaged to a foreign commission of bankers, now on their way to Suchow to complete the deal, so that the war against the Japs could be waged to a successful conclusion.

Colonel Yau's dark eyes were vastly troubled. What were Major Tobi and his *skibi* hawks doing at Suchow? The question became more important than ever.

At daybreak Grogan and Ah Im took off from the millet field where they had landed on the opposite side of the city from that chosen by the Japs. They flew directly to the temporary tarmac occupied by the Nipponese air fleet. Yau had assured them he would arrange for gas and oil.

When the two landed, they found the *skibi* airmen busily engaged in refuelling and preparing their ships for flight. As soon as the Dragon hellions replenished their tanks, they taxied to the opposite side of the field. In talking the matter over, the two Dragons had decided that the Yank's plane must be off by itself, free to maneuver. He would be helpless if hemmed in on the ground. There didn't seem much chance for treachery, but there was no use taking chances.

Across the field came the roar of a suddenly started motor—the Kawanishi of Major Tobi!

Ah Im climbed in his pit, pulled on his starter button. Several seconds of raucous whine, and the Wasp turned over in irregular explosions. In a minute or two more the motor warmed up, falling into a steady drone of rhythmic power.

The red-disked Kawanishi rolled out, hesitated, and then, like a living thing, leaped into the air.

Ah Im pulled down his goggles, saluted his chief, and poured the sap to his Wasp.

The two combatants were to meet at 5,000 feet directly over the field. They hurtled toward the upper reaches, and while they did so, Grogan took stock of the situation on the ground. Across the field, the Jap airmen had gathered in a group in front of their planes and were gazing skyward, evidently intent on watching the forthcoming battle. The Yank became aware that an immense throng was gathering around the field. Evidently word of the impending duel had been sent all over the city, for the countryside was teeming with hurrying people, all rushing to see this weird battle of winged gods in the sky. It is said that a Chinaman will not miss an execution or a torture if he can help it, and this certainly seemed to prove it.

Then, at the end of the field to Grogan's right, came a marching column of *tong* troops, and in their center was a massive, gold-ornamented sedan chair. The powerful *tuchun*—General Lin Cheng. And immediately behind the war lord came an exquisite *palanquin*, borne on the shoulders of sweating coolies.

The soldiers drew up in imposing array, the sedan chair and *palanquin* in the center. A neatly uniformed figure detached itself from the *tuchun*'s guard and hastened toward the Yank, who leaned against the wing of his Boeing fighter. Grogan recognized him at once as Colonel Yau.

As he came closer, the Yank saw that Yau was gray under his olive complexion. He made sure that no one was within earshot before he spoke.

"I have grave fears," he told the Dragon chief, without preamble. "The *palanquin* which accompanied General Cheng is supposed to contain his favorite wife, but I have found out that the *tuchun*'s personal bodyguard came by way of the Ming Temple. The general's young son, the joy of his life, is with him."

"What about this Jap armada?" demanded Grogan. "Have you discovered what Cheng purposes doing with it?"

"No, I haven't," returned Yau. "But I know the *skibi* ships have been refuelled and are ready to leave at a moment's notice. I had a second with the *tuchun* and I asked him. He looked at me strangely for a minute and then, with a cunning smile, he said, 'You will be greatly surprised.' I can't make up my mind what he intends to do, but I am greatly alarmed." "What of the foreign

commission due here today to complete negotiations for the Jade Buddha?" asked the Yank.

"They are expected at noon," replied Yau, "and Cheng has already announced he will receive them in his *yamen* as soon as they arrive."

"If he is here to receive them," grunted Grogan shortly.

"Exactly!" hissed the colonel. There was silence for a few moments, broken only by the strident whine of the battle birds in the sky above. They had reached the agreed altitude and were whipping in to the fray. They approached each other nose on, and silvery puffs of tracer flowered from the Jap's guns. Yau was apprehensive. "Aren't you alarmed for the safety of Cheung?" he asked.

The Dragon chief laughed. "Tobi's reputation is well known," he told Yau, "but I'll wager anything on Ah Im. If he wants to, he'll knock the *skibi* down in three minutes."

Although his gaze was toward the sky, Yau's mind didn't seem to be on the duel. "I wonder what's inside the *palanquin*," he murmured, softly.

The Yank had no time to reply. A glance at the sky showed that Captain Cheung evidently had no intention of playing with Major Tobi. He was going to polish off the *skibi* hawk without wasting any time.

Suddenly a sound reverberated across the field that caused Grogan to jump for his cockpit. A motor among the Jap planes had exploded into life.

As his inertia starter commenced to whine, Battling Mord called to Yau: "The Japs may be playing dirty—going up to help Tobi. You do two things. Make Cheng forbid any of the *skibis* to take off until the fight above is over, and see if you can't find out what is in the *palanquin*."

WITHOUT an instant's delay Yau started running. At the same moment Grogan engaged his clutch. There was a groaning whine and the motor caught. In two seconds it was turning over smoothly, rapidly.

The next second he was glad he had wasted no time. Separately, and together, other engines broke out into explosive life. Darting a glance across the field, Grogan saw that two flights of Kawanishis were being started. At once he made up his mind what to do.

It would be distinctly unwise to take the air first if he could avoid doing so. That would give the Japs an excuse for taking off. But conditions that had arisen favored the Yank. A slight breeze had come up and was blowing directly against the nose of the Boeing. The field was comparatively narrow and the *skibis* couldn't take off down wind without grave danger of many crack-ups. Grogan determined to stay on the ground just where he was until the Japs made a move. If they started to taxi into position to leave the ground, he would take off directly from the spot he was in.

A lightning glance upward showed Ah Im maneuvering into position on Tobi's tail. Unless the Jap eluded him, the end was at hand.

In that instant, across the field, a *skibi* flight leader raised his hand. The Kawanishis started rolling forward, straight ahead. Immediately, the American understood the Jap strategy. The Nipponese flight leader didn't believe Grogan would dare take off directly into the taxiing *skibi* ships.

The Dragon chief didn't hesitate a split second. The silver blades of his steel prop flashed fire in the first rays of the rising sun. Up came his tail. The Wasp blared. Straight for the advancing Jap flight leader drove the Boeing.

The Nipponese ship couldn't turn aside. On both sides were his fellows. It was either risk a head-on collision with this crazy American or put on the brakes at once. The Jap put on the brakes. Nervous, he put them on too hard. Down went his nose, his prop blades digging into the hard clay.

Grogan, zooming sharply upward, barely missed the Kawanishi's tail as it slapped skyward.

During the climb to 5,000 feet, Ah Im had been wildly exultant. No one would have guessed his inner feelings from a glance at his imperturbable features, peering blandly through windshield or photographing the sky about him.

Always before it had been the Yank who had occupied the limelight, fought the duels. But this time Ah Im had the chance he had always dreamed of—to perform for his chief while Grogan watched from the grandstand. Tobi had chosen to challenge him—Captain Cheung. Let the gods be praised!

And then the two ships were at it. They started in by rushing at each other head on. The Jap's guns started chattering from a foolhardy distance. Ah Im held his course straight for the Kawanishi nose. How much courage did this Tobi have? The

*tong* ace didn't have long to find out. The Jap kicked up in a wild zoom, and as he did so, Captain Cheung's lean fingers eased back gently on the stick. Then the pressure increased and the Boeing speared up and over like a living thing.

The Kawanishi climbed faster, dived faster, than the Dragon ship. Ah Im knew that, but the fact didn't worry him. Momentarily he permitted the Nipponese hawk to sit on his tail. Again the Kawanishi's twin guns clattered wickedly. Funnel-shaped tracer rings bored into the chill ether.

Major Tobi's sharp little eyes gleamed triumphantly. This was going to be easier than he had anticipated. Perhaps that insurance he had arranged for wouldn't be necessary. But what was the matter? Why weren't his steel-jacketed messengers blasting the flesh of the insolent *tong* eagle sitting so calmly in the saffron-winged plane before him?

But Tobi didn't know that the impassive Cheung, while appearing to be going straight ahead, was in reality skidding sideways. The Jap's bullets hurtled harmlessly past the wing tip of the Chinese plane and seeing this, not understanding it, the heart of the *skibi* birdman was filled with foreboding.

Another instant, and Ah Im had pulled a stall turn that left Major Tobi blinking. Then the two ships were in that old dizzy, tail-chasing *virage*, and the Dragon buzzard was relentlessly curving his way into position to give his foe the *coup de grace*.

Desperately the *skibi* hawk clutched his stick and tried to *virage* tighter. But it was no use. His plane wasn't constructed that way. If he had known it, he could have done much better throttled down. At full motor the centrifugal force was intense. Panic-stricken, he looked down. Where were his comrades?

But when his ferret eyes, agonized with the fear of death, found the field below, he knew that Ho-tai, god of Good Luck, had deserted him.

Captain Cheung, immobile, waiting inexorably for the space to narrow—waiting for the moment when the Kawanishi before him would edge into the field of his telescopic sights, as he knew it could not help doing, saw that glance of Tobi's over the side, he interpreted it correctly.

In that instant the olive ace, also, whipped a glance below. What he saw caused a deep, consuming rage to blaze in his soul. His loved

chief, Battling Grogan, was zooming, diving, tearing back and forth across the field below, fighting desperately to prevent *skibi* planes from taking off. Already three smoldering wrecks attested to the Yank's skill. Savagely Ah Im looked up to trip his guns and finish the rascally Tobi.

But the Jap hawk was no longer in his sights!

TOBI, praying mightily to Kami, had looked back to see how near he was to livid death. He saw his foe's head over the cockpit coaming, taking in the strife below. In that split-second, sensing that fate had given him a reprieve, the Nipponese vulture dived. Motor wide out, bellowing stridently, he dropped. Captain Cheung, a second too late, darted after him.

Undeterred by the nosing over of their flight leader, the rest of the Jap ships kept taxiing forward, turned, and gave their ships the gun.

Grogan was about three hundred feet in the air. He *viraged* madly and stormed down along the line of Nipponese ships as they moved forward on the ground. His Brownings rattled forth a hymn of savage death. The Jap pilots, confused, taking their eyes off their fellows to watch this aerial madman, lost their sense of direction.

Two pairs of planes, each curving the wrong way, locked wings and piled up in two heaps of splintered junk. One *skibi* hawk, the first one Grogan trained his sights on, died as his wheels left the ground.

While the death rattle sounded in his throat, his right hand clutched the stick in a futile, desperate pull. The Kawanishi stood squarely on its tail, its spinning prop arc pointed full at the heavens. For a second it hung there; then it dropped to its doom, and a puff of black smoke erupted skyward.

In the course of that one fierce, raking dive, which was like the thousands of times the Yank had strafed trenches, he got two more. One of the two made the air. But his life blood flowed forth from his lacerated body in crimson streams. His Kawanishi staggered drunkenly through the tingling air while the rich sun rays etched it in sharp relief. Then, nose whipping down frenziedly, the plane made a half-turn of a spin and crashed. Greedily the fire demon lapped at its victim, but for once it had been frustrated—the flames licked at unfeeling flesh.

Seven ships, that made—seven *skibi* planes incapacitated in one dive!

The remaining pilots didn't attempt to leave the ground. They left their ships in the middle of the field, props turning over, and huddled into a group. What should they do?

The Dragon chief answered the question for them. *Viraging* back from that blasting strafe, he saw the group form. Straight for them he came, Wasp whining like a million souls in torment. Those Nipponese pilots couldn't take it, and they lit out for the edge of the field for cover.

A perfect furor, a mad bedlam followed. Whistles shrilled, trumpets blared. A *skibi* captain, evidently second in command to Tobi, spouted orders. Mechanics and pilots sprang to start other motors. Cheng's troops rallied round him and the *palanquin*.

Grogan scattered the huddle of Jap pilots in the middle of the field without firing a shot. Then he continued on across the field and arced up to a near stall. There, at a little over a thousand feet, he hung, slowly curving round in a stall turn, while he looked the situation over.

Major Tobi sat huddled in the cockpit of his Kawanishi, taut nerves like flesh seared with acid, the spectre of death riding on his tail. His wide-open motor thundered in staccato protest. Hard-pressed linen vibrated shrilly. Flying wires screamed like angry fiends. The *skibi* hawk knew, without looking back, that *jungkwok's* premier eagle was just behind, his hungry machine guns eager for a Jap meal.

Suddenly, directly in Tobi's path, an airplane zoomed. The Nipponese pilot hadn't time even to tell whether it was friend or foe. Desperately he wrenched controls, but all he succeeded in doing was to prevent a head-on collision.

Grogan, in his stall-turn, with his head over his pit cowl and his eyes on the excitement prevailing on the field below, was barely conscious of a fleeting shadow that speared at him from above.

Then came a rending crash!

Momentarily stupefied, the Yank darted a quick glance back at his tail. It was gone! Without an instant's hesitation the Dragon chief leaped from his crippled Boeing. He knew he hadn't any too much altitude to spare.

The Boeing had whipped over and was plunging earthward dangerously close to him. Using the finest chute-jumping technique, the

American had dived head foremost so that his seat-pack was exposed directly to the sky. Thus the pilot-chute would be able to drag out the main chute without any interference.

Hand on his rip-cord, Grogan watched the Boeing. It was still too close, but his wonderful sense of time, speed, and distance told him he couldn't wait any longer.

Out from his left chest jerked his right hand. There was a moment's heart-rending, life-and-death hesitation. *Snap!* With a sharp explosion the silken folds filled with air.

Looking down, Grogan saw he had a bare fifty feet to spare. As he relaxed and drew up his legs for the approaching impact upon the hard ground, he became aware of a hurtling figure not far on his left. Just as this object was about to strike the earth, a second sharp explosion took place, and a white flower blossomed. Wildly clawing legs kicked furiously for an instant not two feet above the ground.

More miraculously Tobi, also, had been saved.

Ah Im, lancing down from above, had seen everything. When his *taipan's* chute finally opened, it seemed that the weight of centuries had been lifted from his soul. He roared down low over the Dragon chief. Looking up, Grogan waved that he was all right. The olive ace, breathing curses on the cowardly Jap who had sought to trick him and who had very nearly killed his beloved chief, slipped rapidly down for a landing.

The Yank's first thought was of Yau. Quite evidently he hadn't been successful in preventing the attempted treachery on the part of the Mikado's hawks. But what about Cheng's *palanquin*?

Immediately he became aware that troops were surrounding him. In their hands they held leveled muskets, and they were dressed in the nondescript and tattered uniforms of *tong* soldiers.

A rotund officer pushed his way forward importantly. He, also, was garbed in the uniform of *jungkivok*.

"I am Colonel Yen," he stated haughtily. "You are under arrest!"

The Yank gazed at him in amazement. "By whose orders?" he demanded.

"The orders of the *tuchun* of Suchow, General Cheng!"

HERE was treachery far more reaching and serious than that attempted by the Jap airmen.

Grogan's mind worked with lightning rapidity. He must warn Ah Im before the olive ace landed.

His eyes flashed skyward. But even as they did so, the hollow crunch of wheels and tailskid nearby warned him he was too late. Captain Cheung braked his ship to a grinding stop and leaped from his pit. Desperately Grogan shouted a warning. Ah Im ran squarely into a squad of soldiers who had responded instantly to Colonel Yen's shouted orders.

The Yank knew when it was policy to submit, to bide his time. He still couldn't convince himself that they were in serious danger. In two minutes the Dragon hellions were disarmed and manacled.

"I demand to be taken before General Cheng," growled the American.

The fat, bloated features of Colonel Yen wreathed themselves in a disagreeable smile. "Your wish shall be granted immediately, *fan kwei*."

At hearing himself addressed as a foreign devil in such contemptuous terms. Grogan knew they had nothing in the way of sympathy or help to expect from Yen.

Fifteen minutes later they were brought before General Cheng in a peasant's hovel near the field. Another manacled figure was brought in to join them. When the Yank saw it was Colonel Yau, his heart sank lower, and his face grew grim.

The guard of soldiers left the three in the hut and went outside, closing the door behind them. Back of Cheng and to one side was Colonel Yen.

"I demand the reason for this outrage!" stormed Grogan, without waiting for the *tuchun* to speak. "Why are we, loyal officers of *jungkwok*, under arrest? I promise you that Nanking will hear of this."

The long, yellow fingers of the aged war lord, which resembled the clawing talons of some fierce bird of prey, stroked the straggling white hairs on his chin meditatively. An evil smile flitted across his parchment-like features.

"That is what I fear," he replied, low but quite distinctly.

The Yank's heart sank still lower. He read something ominous, deadly, in the Mandarin's words. Nevertheless, he pulled himself together.

"Of what crime are we charged?" he demanded.

"Of being disloyal to the future Emperor of China," replied Cheng.

Battling Grogan had a definite premonition that he and Ah Im, and Yau, too, were at the end of their rope, but not the slightest semblance of trembling showed in his voice.

“Just what do you mean by that?” he asked steadily.

Lin Cheng knew that this foreign devil felt himself done for and he admired his courage.

“The gods have willed that I am to occupy the Dragon throne. This will be accomplished through the aid of the Mikado of Japan. I am his friend.”

“You mean his servant!” hissed the Yank.

The *tuchun*'s eyes gleamed with anger at the interruption, but he ignored it.

“Perhaps you and Captain Cheung would like to become Officers of mine? But no, don't answer. I wouldn't believe you. You would only agree to make your escape later. I am leaving in a few minutes on an extended air trip, during which I shall place the treasure I have accumulated in safe keeping. But Colonel Yen, who will command here in my absence, has his instructions in regard to you. As a reward for interfering in my affairs, you will be invited to a banquet. You will be allowed, even persuaded, to gorge yourselves.”

Grogan was puzzled. What did this old rascal mean? But if the words of the old war lord perplexed the American, Captain Cheung and Colonel Yau understood their meaning perfectly. Yau trembled slightly and Ah Im's face, despite the brown of wind and sun, became gray.

“However,” continued Cheng, “I have changed my mind in regard to this Captain Cheung.” He turned to Yen. “The *tong* airman will go with me.”

An hour later Grogan and Yau were ushered into a bare room in the *yamen* of the *tuchun*. As they entered, the sound of a vast armada taking the air beat upon their ears. The Jap fleet was off, and in the center of the still powerful formation was the Mitsubishi bomber that contained General Lin Cheng and his prisoner, Captain Cheung.

Colonel Yau hadn't had the heart to tell the Dragon chief what was in store for him. The realization would come soon enough, reasoned the Oriental. Therefore he had professed ignorance as to their fate.

They were seated at a lone wooden table. At once a soldier entered, bearing a large platter of dry, uncooked rice, two porcelain spoons, and two large bowls of water. Then the manacles on their

hands were loosened. But the walls were lined with grinning soldiers, armed to the teeth.

When Grogan saw the rice and water borne in, the full significance of Cheng's words burst upon him. He and Yau were to be subjected to the rice torture, the most diabolical suffering cunning Asiatic minds had ever invented!

COLONEL YEN took his place before them. In his hand was a sword with a dagger point. “Eat!” he commanded.

Yau cursed him quietly, fluently, with all the terrible oaths known to the Sons of Han.

Yen grinned and jabbed him three times with the sword. Small streams of blood trickled from the wounds.

“Eat!” he commanded.

In a low tone the Yank counseled his friend to obey.

“It will be far more merciful to die by the sword,” replied Yau.

“But it won't take so long,” answered the American. “Eat. I have a plan.”

Slowly—as slowly as Yen would allow them—Grogan and Yau ate dry rice and washed it down with water. Between mouthfuls the Yank talked to Yen.

“I suppose you know that you have seen the last of your master. General Cheng,” he advised. “He has taken his treasures, which he has wrung from the people, and the priceless Jade Buddha, and he will enjoy life in some other part of the world. And what will become of you, who are not strong enough to stand alone? Most assuredly you will lose your head. If you are wise, you will release us. If you do, we will see that such a fate does not overtake you—that you are not sent thus ruthlessly to join your ancestors.”

These words had some effect upon Yen, but he resisted them.

“My master is returning with thousands of winged gods from Shanghai,” he boasted. “Winged gods that will carry a hundred skibi soldiers each, and are protected by the small winged gods that fight. They will help Cheng conquer all *jungkwok*. Then I am to be the first-ranking Mandarin in all the land and will have unlimited power.”

“You have been smoking too much opium!” cried Yau, scornfully.

Ceaselessly Grogan kept up his talk. He began to get under Yen's skin, but not enough. Soon the

two prisoners were full. Even Yen could see they could not stuff themselves with more. He gave a signal. Their hands were manacled again behind their backs. Then they were marched out of the city, between lines of curious and taunting masses, out to the very field they had quitted not so long before.

The news of the torture had spread, and word that one of the prisoners was a foreign devil. Huge crowds were straggling out to watch the spectacle.

On the way out, Grogan couldn't help wondering why these people were so fascinated by suffering when they saw so much of it around them constantly.

"I feel myself very near my ancestors," remarked Yau, quietly.

"Take heart," answered the Yank, feigning an optimism he didn't feel. "It is not time yet to burn the red papers."

Yau had nodded agreement with Grogan's words. Then his dark eyes looked ahead—into the far distances. Glancing at him covertly, the Yank saw he was already suffering badly. The air was cool—they were not being marched fast—yet the sweat ran down the Oriental's cheeks and neck in little rivulets. Yau was small, slender, typically of the scholar class. He wasn't rugged, like Ah Im.

"My good friend Yau," said Grogan softly, "perhaps I counseled you badly when you refused Yen's command to eat. I beg of you not to hold it against me if the gods do not hear our prayers."

"Cast such thoughts from your mind," pleaded Yau. "As soon as you spoke, I recognized the wisdom of your words. As you foreigners say, 'While there is life, there is hope.' But I must warn you that the last hours of our life will be more horrible than any torture you can imagine. However, if the gods have willed that my ancestral tablet is to be carved, I am content. For one thing I am devoutly thankful; they can bruise our bodies but not our spirits."

"You have seen men die this way," answered the Yank. "How long does it take?"

"It differs with different men," replied Yau. "I am afraid for you. You are strong—your suffering will be prolonged. But rest assured of this—after my spirit is released, it will remain close to you, comforting you in your last agonies."

"Already the rice within me has swollen greatly and I feel as though I had stuffed myself at a huge banquet. But the rice will swell to five times its original size. With me, probably two

more hours will suffice for my stomach to burst. And that is just the beginning of the worst suffering. Men have been known to linger on for more than a day. Perhaps Yen will take pity on us at nightfall and end our miseries with a shot. But there is no hope of life after the stomach breaks."

Then they arrived at the field. Holes had already been dug, and the two prisoners were placed in them, their hands still manacled. Dirt was shovelled back in until they were both buried to the neck. Only their heads showed above the ground.

The soldiers formed a ring about them, and behind the troops pressed the populace, fighting each other for positions of vantage, each one determined to see the death agonies of the two unfortunates. Now Grogan began to feel a firm swelling within him. It was like a gigantic tumor which slowly grew larger, pressing against his internal organs, stretching the membrane of his stomach taut as a bowstring. The sweat began to break out on the Yank's face, just as it had broken out on Yau's. The Dragon chief was not afraid to die—but brave men can suffer as well as cowards.

Yau was only a few feet away. He turned his head toward Grogan. The intense suffering in his dark eyes made the Yank wince.

"My only regret," muttered the Oriental, "is that we have to start the Eternal Journey in such a manner. If only I could have died leading my men against our hereditary enemies, the hated *skibis*! And you in combat far up amongst your twinkling stars. Then our memories would be eternally blessed."

Battling Mord agreed. But love of life was strong within him yet. He called to Colonel Yen. In this man, it seemed to Grogan, lay their only chance. As he called, he was thinking of Yau's words on the march out. There was no hope of life after a certain time.

AH IM, his hands still manacled, found himself seated on the floorboards of an airplane in flight. The bombing compartment of a Mitsubishi had been rebuilt into a cabin for General Cheng. The *tuchun* squatted upon the floorboards also. He was rapt in the silent adoration of an image before him—a statue beautiful beyond words to describe—the priceless White Jade Buddha.

Cheng's young son, alarmed by the constant throbbing of the plane and frightened by all the

strange things he had witnessed, that morning, whimpered.

The war lord finally turned to his prisoner. "I will tell you why I have brought you with me," he began, a gleam of triumph in his aged eyes. "You are the son of Cheung Wan Man, who once replaced me in the affections of the Emperor. I lost my high position, became of a puny magistrate in a town little bigger than a village. This is the day of my vengeance against the House of Cheung."

He pointed to a latch in the floor. "That is a trapdoor. I have instructed Major Tobi to fly high over your field at Hunjao. The door will be opened, and you will be dropped out. It will please me to return you thus to your friends."

But Captain Cheung's wits had not been idle. He smiled at the *tuchun*. "I am very grateful to you for such a kindness," he said.

Cheng was genuinely surprised. "Kindness?" he repeated. "I admire your indifference to death, but your meaning escapes me."

"Because," explained Ah Im boldly, "my poor bones will be picked up by my friends. That is as it should be, whereas your mutilated body will be thrown by your enemies to the dogs—and that very shortly after my poor remains have had the proper rites performed over them."

The *tuchun* was visibly perturbed. "Tell me more, oh son of the scoundrelly Cheungs, and perhaps I shall make your death easier."

"Whatever the relations were between you and my honored father," replied Ah Im, his tones the very essence of sincerity, "your reputation for wisdom is known throughout the length and breadth of the Middle Kingdom. You certainly know the Japs better than to suppose they will permit you to keep the priceless Jade Buddha. I spent five years of my youth in Japan, and it is common talk in the streets throughout Nippon that the Mikado has sworn to have the famous Buddha in his palace at Tokyo. As soon as you are in their hands, in their power, in their country, off will come your head, and the Mikado will have the image. If you do not believe me, just put yourself in the Mikado's place. What would you do?"

Ah Im was wise as a serpent. He had hit at the weakest point in the war lord's armor. For Cheng judged all men by himself. He was moved far more than he wished his prisoner to see. In fact, he was suddenly terrified by the picture young Cheung had painted before his eyes—a picture

which he knew could be and probably was the very truth itself. So, reverting to the very words of his prisoner, he asked, "What would you do if you were in my shoes?"

"Just this," replied Ah Im, courageously. "Why be the puppet of the Mikado, even if he were willing—which he is not? Why not be the Emperor of all China in fact? You have the White Jade Buddha, the most priceless treasure in all the world. Back in Suchow, a foreign commission is arriving, willing to open the money bags of Europe to its possessor. Take their money. With it you can conquer all China yourself."

"What about returning to Suchow?"

"It will be simple," scoffed the olive ace, who had good reasons for wanting to make it seem easy. "I can fly this plane. We have only to make the crew our prisoners."

"Major Tobi is flying this winged god," said the *tuchun*. "The regular pilot is assisting him."

"Good," replied Ah Im. "Take off my manacles. Then go forward and ask the assistant pilot to come back here."

The critical moment had arrived. Would the Mandarin go through with it? The olive ace held his breath and prayed mightily. The old war lord stood rapt in thought. His cunning eyes probed the face of the man before him.

"You will always be my servant? You will always be faithful to me?" demanded Cheng, asking that which he had often sworn to others but never given.

"You will always be my *taipan*," lied Ah Im.

The old *tuchun* gave his prisoner one more long, searching glance. Then he came forward, unlocked and removed the captive's shackles.

"You stay where you are," he directed, then disappeared into the tunnel leading to the pilots' cockpit. In a moment he returned, and in his wake came the assistant pilot.

Cheng stopped and pointed at Ah Im.

"Look at the prisoner," he directed.

THE *skibi* airman passed by the *tuchun* and came to a halt, gazing down at the captive. His mouth opened as if he were about to speak. In that instant Captain Cheung glimpsed the lightning movement of a scrawny arm behind the Jap. A steel blade flashed in the dim light, and there was a hissing thud. Instead of words there came a gurgling scream from the *skibi*'s mouth. Then he

pitched forward on his face, and General Cheng was calmly wiping a dagger on his sleeve.

Without a word Cheng passed into the tunnel leading to the machine gunner's pit. Directly there came back the dull cough of a pistol, the sound muffled by the engine roar. In a minute the *tuchun* returned.

"That matter is attended to," he reported. "Now what about Major Tobi?"

But Ah Im had made up his mind to put a stop to this cold-blooded murdering.

"Tobi shall wear my manacles," he announced. "He is my personal prisoner. I have a score to settle with him. Here is the plan. I will wear the helmet and goggles of this dead pilot. As I slip into the co-pilot's seat, you cover Tobi with your gun. Then I will take over the controls, at the same time relieving him of his pistol. You force him back here and have your son put on the shackles while you keep him covered. Then you don the helmet and goggles of the dead gunner and take his place."

"And then?" asked Cheng.

"We will leave the formation and fly back to Suchow. If they try to prevent us, you know what to do." A sudden chill coursed down Ah Im's spine. "By the way, *taipan*, what punishment did you order for the *fan kwei* dog with me?"

Cheng's evil features smiled. "I thought your soul detested him. He and the traitor Yau are feasting on a banquet of rice!"

White-hot fury raged in Ah Im's brain, but his iron will forced him to mask his feelings.

"Let's go," he muttered.

Silently, warily, the two crept up to the pilot's pit. Ah Im slipped into the co-pilot's seat. As he did so, Tobi turned to speak. Recognizing the olive ace at once, his eyes widened in alarm. In that second Cheng pushed his pistol into the *skibi's* back. Ah Im grabbed the controls as Tobi's hands came up. The Dragon buzzard's left hand reached over and pulled the Jap's gun from its holster. Another moment and Tobi was crawling back into the cabin, Cheng behind him with drawn gun.

At once Ah Im changed his plans. He couldn't take a chance on a running fight all the way to Suchow. They might not get away. Guile had served so far, and it would serve farther. He was conscious of only one thing—he must get back to Suchow without delay.

He saw that his ship was flying point of the bombers. The gods were to be thanked that the formation was loose—too loose for faces to be recognized behind winter goggles. Slowly he waggled his wings, and started a gradual bank to the left. He could see heads jump in surprise, but the whole formation turned with him.

In a few minutes the flight of bombers, his ship still at point, headed directly for Suchow.

BATTLING GROGAN gazed at the faces of the soldiers near him with unseeing eyes.

Suddenly a faint sound, an insistent, compelling resonance, hammered at the Yank's fast weakening senses. But even before Grogan heard the low drone, it was heard by Colonel Yen.

"The *tuchun* is returning to watch your last agonies," he jeered.

Ah Im flew down to the field outside Suchow with his prop blades turning over every rev they could.

He braked his Mitsubishi to a screaming stop not ten yards from the tortured captives. In one wild leap he was on the ground. Grogan saw him through a film. Ah Im glared at the soldiers.

"Dig those men out at once!" he ordered.

Colonel Yen was stupefied for a second. This man had been as good as gathered to his ancestors. Where had he sprung from? Yen immediately recovered from his amazement and loudly countermanded the order. Ah Im's hand moved like a ray of light. His gun barked once and Yen wilted, a bullet through the brain.

General Cheng climbed out of the bomber and strolled over to the scene. When he saw the Yank and Yau, he laughed. All the *skibi* ships landed, taxied into line and killed their motors. With difficulty Ah Im controlled himself.

"An emperor will need many airplanes," he said.

Cheng turned to one of his officers. The officer shouted an order. One by one, as the Jap pilots strolled up to see what was going on, they were arrested.

Fifteen minutes passed. Grogan lay on the ground, shuddering from the effects of medicine which had been administered to him. A doctor, hurriedly recruited from the crowd, shook his head after examining Yau.

But Yau knew—long before the medico examined him. He lay on the ground near the Yank and gathered his waning strength for one

last act. His lips moved and he whispered, "General Cheng."

The *tuchun* was standing near, watching the scene with a callous leer on his aged features. Impelled by some strange motive, he bent over the dying man. With a last, almost superhuman effort, Yau's hand darted up, grasped the war lord's pistol. Cheng fell upon Yau to protect himself. Like two wrestlers the figures were locked.

The gun coughed twice, then once. An expression of grotesque amazement appeared on the *tuchun's* face. Yau collapsed, but a smile of ineffable bliss was mute proof that he started the Eternal Journey in complete content.

Grogan's amazing constitution carried him through.

That afternoon, at three o'clock, the Dragon chief and Ah Im turned over the White Jade Buddha to the European commission. The deal, approved by a telegram from Nanking, had been made. There would be plenty of money to carry on the war against the hated Nipponese.