

The Bat Brood

A Battling Grogan Adventure by Robert Burt

Battling Grogan and his men knew there was something strange, menacing about the crest of Ming Kung Chan hill. Nothing visible was there, yet every man on that Dragon flight heard whispered warnings of impending doom from the cliff below. And when Grogan received word that no night patrols should go out from his squadron, he knew that somewhere on that sinister cliff lurked a weapon that could strike at the Dragons only in the inky darkness of night.

BLACKNESS enshrouded Hunjao, nest of the valiant Dragon Squadron of China. A clammy, penetrating mist swirled and eddied across the tarmac's bleak surface. The dead leaves on the shadowed trees, sighing dismally, the frozen ground, echoing hollowly to the dull, clanking steps of the guard, the very inky void of the night air itself—all whispered sinister warnings of impending doom.

Battling Grogan, taipan of the Dragon brood, paced restlessly back and forth along the line. In the direction of Chapei, star-shells and artillery fire winked through the dark mist like the eyes of some mammoth but distant demon.

The Yank ace pulled his furred collar closer about his ears.

Suddenly a hollow, resonant note boomed out through the night air. It was the sergeant of the guard, tolling forth the midnight hour upon his copper tom-tom.

Gazing toward the carnage-racked city, Grogan cursed silently to himself. What had he been thinking of, to allow Ah Sin, brave and experienced eagle though he was, to take Captain Cheung's place as flight commander of the night patrol? He should have gone himself.

Momentarily the American, forgetting he had already been out on three missions that day, considered ordering out his Boeing and trying to locate the absent patrol, but he restrained the order on his lips. The flight would be back in less than an hour.

Then Grogan's thoughts returned to Cheung. Poor old Ah Im, tossing feverishly on his bunk, a victim of the malaria which swept back upon him periodically. The Yank's heart contracted with pity for his tong chum. It wasn't the fever which burned the Oriental ace most. It was the fact that he was not allowed to fly. Battling Mord and Doc Kuo, the squadron medico, had been forced to restrain Cheung physically from leaping up and joining his hellions of the 3rd Flight.

A figure shot out of the enveloping shadows.

"General Grogan!" saluted the man, a Dragon greaseball on guard duty. "Your honored presence is desired in the tent of Captain Cheung as soon as possible."

Entering his chum's quarters, the American's keen gray eyes made out an Asiatic standing by Cheung's cot. Instantly, even before a word had been spoken, Grogan knew the man was a half-breed. He wore the nondescript civilian garments affected by many of the mixed population in the coast cities.

"General Grogan—Chung Keung," introduced Ah Im, with his accustomed brevity.

The two men bowed.

"Have known Chung Keung many year," continued the sick man, his dark eyes shining with an unnatural brilliance. "Him most trusted spy of Nanking. Bring most important message for honored *taipan*."

Chung Keung's restless eyes photographed the interior of the tent in one sweeping motion of his head. Noiselessly, with the slinking liteness of some jungle beast, he glided to the tent's entrance. Momentarily he disappeared into the drifting night mist. He was gone only a few seconds, but both Dragon buzzards knew that the G-2 agent had circled the tent.

"I must take most infinite care," purred Chung Keung in English, and softly, when he had returned. "After many months I have succeeded in becoming a spy in the service of the Mikado. Therefore my usefulness to the tong cause is

beyond computation. I am taking a most grave risk in coming here. Beyond doubt there is at least one, perhaps many, *skibi* agents in the Dragon Squadron. Were I to be seen here, it would mean my certain death and a fatal blow to *jungkwok*."

He stepped closer to the Dragon chief, and his eyes burned with dramatic intensity.

"General Grogan, you must not send out any of your eagles this night. They will never come back! You must not send them out at night until you hear from me."

The Yank's heart sank. There could be no mistaking the deadly earnestness of the man before him,

"You are too late," he muttered. "The regular night patrol left over an hour ago. It will be back shortly."

Chung Keung made a characteristic Chinese gesture of fatalism. "They will never come back," he replied quietly. "Unless," he added, after a moment of silence, "the gods are very, very kind."

"Just what do you mean?" demanded the American.

Chung Keung shrugged his shoulders. "You will no doubt think me insane," he returned, "when I tell you I have no definite information to give you. But Captain Cheung here will tell you I am not given to grotesque fears. Most certainly I would not have embarked on this desperate mission to warn you if I had not been convinced a terrible disaster threatened you and your men."

"But what kind of a disaster?" muttered Grogan.

"I am not sure," returned the spy, "All I can tell you is that the Japs are preparing to release some infernal weapon against the Dragon Squadron tonight. Already I have jeopardized my position by my curiosity. I am convinced that there are only one or two men in Jap headquarters that really know what is going on. They are taking no chances of having any information leak out."

"But why are they releasing this weapon at night?" asked the Yank. "Isn't it any good in the daytime?"

The G-2 agent shrugged his shoulders. "That I do not know," he answered. "But I hope to find out. There is only one clue to go on. I overheard the words Ming Kung Chan."

"Ming Kung Chan?" repeated Grogan, "Chan means mountain. Where is Ming Kung Chan?"

Ah Im, who had been listening intently, stirred in his cot. "Him steep hill near mouth Whangpoo," he muttered.

The Yank looked at Chung Keung questioningly.

"Captain Cheung is correct," the G-2 man affirmed. "Already I have tried to gain access to this hill, and it is guarded by lines of soldiers that stand almost shoulder to shoulder, I have found out that only one Jap officer has access to the mountain. He is a Lieutenant Michi. I have tried to find out who this Michi is, but nobody seems to have heard of him before."

The G-2 agent brought forth a watch, looked at it, shook hands with the sick man, saluted the Dragon chief.

"I must go," he said. "I am supposed to be far from here. But I am going to return to the *skibi* lines. You have my assurance I will leave nothing uncovered in an attempt to discover what this menace is that you face. In the meantime, please exercise the greatest care."

In a second the clammy night mist had swallowed Chung Keung.

GROGAN stared grimly down at Ah Im. He was about to say something when a faraway but insistent sound beat in upon his eardrums. Captain Cheung heard it even before his chief. He gazed up at his master. In the eyes of both men was an agonized, mute interrogation.

Silently the two Dragon buzzards regarded each other. Rapidly the sound changed into a high-pitched drone, and just as rapidly the high-pitched drone changed into the screaming staccato of a furious power dive.

The eyes of the two listening men fell away from each other. The agony of suspense was over—the certainty of catastrophe remained.

"One ship out of six," muttered the Yank.

At the same moment another question jumped into the minds of the airmen. The Oriental essayed an answer.

"Perhaps dive to escape skibis," he hazarded.

Grogan shook his head. "You're wrong, for once," he answered dejectedly. "If I'm any judge at all, that's the dive of a fear-crazed pilot." He turned and rushed from the tent.

As the figure of his chief disappeared into the shadows outside, Ah Im leaped to his feet, jumped into a fur-lined flying suit and pursued him.

The Yank had barely emerged from his chum's tent when the ghostly outline of a Boeing, diving at terrific speed, its exhaust stacks spurting blue flame, roared over his head. Suddenly the pilot cut his gun. The resultant silence was deafening, and broken only by the hissing screech of flying wires and the moaning thrumming of taut linen. By the time Grogan reached the line, the ship was coming in for a landing—and lancing down with far too much speed.

The Dragon chief saw that a crash was inevitable. He turned and barked out strident orders. Then he started running for the spot where he knew the ship was going to pile up. On his heels raced Ah Im, and surrounding the two was a horde of Dragon eagles and greaseballs.

The incoming pilot forced his wheels down on the frozen ground. Then they bounced off. Down he forced them again. There was no attempt to open throttle and circle the field for another trial. Every man of that racing pack knew they were witnessing the action of a flyer rendered temporarily insane by fear. He was going to get on the ground, and wasn't going to waste a second in doing so.

Down came the wheel trucks of the Boeing once more. This time the pilot had momentarily lost control. One wing was down. The tip dug into the ground. There was a rending crash, and the saffron-winged plane ended up on its back.

“Damn it—don't take fire!” screamed Grogan.

Another minute, and the pack of Dragons converged on the wrecked ship. Desperately they tore in to pull out their comrade. The Yank's prayer was heard—the fire-demon reared not its flaming head. In another minute the pilot was freed. Tenderly loving hands laid him down on the ground. In the distance gleamed the headlights of the squadron ambulance.

Grogan knelt by the wounded man. Gently he wiped crimson froth from the pilot's face.

“It's Ah Sin!” cried the *taipan*.

The body of the injured eagle shook violently. Frenziedly he tried to leap to his feet, and wildly gazed up at those over him. Insane lights glinted and glittered in his eyes. Suddenly he covered his eyes with his hands. Blood-curdling shrieks and

screams, outcries that froze the very heartstreams of his listeners, came from his shattered lips.

FOUR men sat round a small, circular table in Battling Grogan's tent. Tense silence reigned. In the center of the table a candle sputtered and flickered in the freezing draft of night air that blew through the open tent entrance. The shadows of the four men danced grotesquely on the tent walls.

The hour of one tolled out suddenly from the tom-tom of the guard.

The Dragon chief looked at his three flight commanders in turn. An expression of grim resignation had settled on his rugged features.

“The devils!” growled Monty St. John, the lanky British leader of A Flight. “The rest of the patrol haven't a chance. Their gas would have given out by this time. We've sat here almost an hour, and not a sound of an airplane motor have we heard. It just isn't human. Five good pilots wiped out as you would crush a mosquito, and another turned into a raving idiot. I tell you it's enough to drive you batty!”

Hank Goyen, dapper Frog chief of B Flight and a scrapping hellhound, shifted his gaze to the tent's opening. His sharp black eyes peered out into the swirling night mist. Slowly, solemnly, he crossed himself.

“*C'est la guerre!*” he muttered.

Ah Im nodded his head quietly. The tong ace's philosophy agreed perfectly with the Frenchman's expression of fatalism.

A figure stepped suddenly out from the blackness of the night. It was Doc Kuo. As the sawbones entered the tent, Grogan gazed at him with burning intensity. What was the verdict?

The squadron medico saluted his *taipan*. His features were a perfect mask of immobility.

“Ah Sin,” he reported, “is absolutely insane. Whether this condition will be permanent I cannot say at present. He has suffered a terrific shock—one of such stunning force that I shudder to think—in fact, it is difficult for me to conceive of what diabolical monstrosity could have caused it.”

There could be no mistaking the utter sincerity with which the surgeon's words were spoken. For a few palpitating seconds complete silence existed. The four Dragon hellions could only gaze

at Kuo while a nervous stricture clawed at their throats.

Racing steps, muffled by the clammy night ozone, beat in upon the consciousness of the five men in the tent. Another figure erupted out of the night, darted into the tent. The newcomer came to a rapid halt. He saluted the Squadron C.O. with his right hand, while he kept his left hidden behind him. His lips trembled, and his face was a greenish olive.

"Well," growled Grogan to the squadron engineering officer, when the man had tried to speak with no success, "what's the matter with you? Are you going nuts, too?"

"*Taipan!*" blurted Lieutenant T'san, finally, when he had gained a measure of control. "I was making a preliminary examination of Ah Sin's wrecked Boeing, and look what I found caught in one of the flying wires!"

Quickly he brought out his left hand from behind his back. The eyes of the five men before him protruded from their heads.

In T'san's hand was a mammoth black feather!

Again there was an interval of utter silence. The eyes of the five men were held by the object in T'san's shaking hand as though by some evil lodestar. After some moments, the engineering officer placed the feather upon the little table. Then he backed away from it in the manner of one who avoids a pestilence.

Battling Grogan was the first to regain his voice.

"Come, come!" he scoffed. "What in the world do you take us for? How could such a thing get on an airplane?"

T'san shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot explain the matter, most honored taipan," he replied. "But most assuredly I took it from Ah Sin's ship. It was caught in the elevator control wire back on the tail of the plane. Also, there is something else. The linen has been slashed in many places over the ship, just as though someone had taken a small knife and made innumerable slits, or a gigantic bird had tried to secure a footing on the plane with its talons. The slashes in the fabric could not possibly have been made when Ah Sin wrecked the ship when landing."

"On what portions of plane are slits?" demanded Captain Cheung.

"On the upper wing," returned T'san, "and on the fuselage just back of the pilot's pit. Also on the upper part of the horizontal stabilizers. Then the leading edge of the vertical stabilizer has been crushed in such a manner as would not have been possible when the ship nosed over."

The Dragon chief picked up the feather gingerly. It was approximately two feet long and four inches wide. One side had been torn as though held by some metal object. The base still had shreds of flesh hanging to it, leading to the assumption it had been pulled out violently.

"This all leads to only one conclusion," Grogan forced himself to say, "and that is that Ah Sin was attacked in the air by some gigantic, monstrous bird. For my part, I think the whole thing is too fantastic to be credible. However, we've got to face facts. What do the rest of you think?"

Ah Im's ebony eyes looked up and into those of his commander.

"Forget not—Chung Keung," he intoned softly.

The Yank gave a sudden start. For the time being, he had totally forgotten the spy's warning. Slowly he nodded his head. Then he told the others.

When he had finished, Monty St. John looked at his chum Goyen and gave a low whistle. Doc Kuo retained his usual imperturbability.

The medico was the first to speak. "This makes it easier," he stated, "to understand Ah Sin's condition. It must have been something ghastly and weird beyond the ken of ordinary man to unseat his reason so completely. I'm beginning to think he must have been attacked by some monstrous creature of the upper reaches—some vile, lethal bird that pounced upon him out of the night sky. Such an experience would be enough to drive any man insane."

"*Nom d'un nom!*" exclaimed Hank Goyen. "It is that we now have the explanation of the slits and cuts that *T'san* has reported?"

Grogan gave vent to a derisive snort. "Granted such a thing was possible. Do you mean to tell me this mysterious creature destroyed the five other planes? And if such a creature existed, why haven't we run across it before?"

"Maybe the *skibis* can answer that one," replied St. John.

The Dragon chief gazed at his senior flight commander as if the Limey had lost his mind.

“So you think the Japs fly up into the sky and whisper into the ears of these birds, telling them to attack *tong* planes—to leave *skibi* ships alone?” he asked sarcastically.

The Britisher shrugged his shoulders, but his features reddened. The whole idea sounded utterly ridiculous.

“What is it that we shall do?” demanded Goyen.

“I don’t know yet,” replied Grogan. “Let’s sleep over the thing—if possible. Then we’ll make a decision in the morning. Perhaps we will be able to find some trace of the five missing planes.”

The conference broke up. All except Kuo sought their bunks, to get what sleep they could. The medico returned to his patient. He had some slight hope that with rest Ah Sin’s reason might return and he could relate what had happened.

SHORTLY after daybreak a seven-ship Dragon formation roared away from Hunjao Drome. In the pits of the quivering Boeings sat the pick of the Dragon pack. St. John, much to his disgust, was left behind to take command during the absence of the Yank. Ah Im was ordered to stay in bed.

However, the formation hadn’t been gone ten minutes before Grogan’s keen eyes spotted a plane climbing toward his crew from behind. In a few seconds he knew the plane to be one of his own. In a few more seconds the newcomer had slipped into place at the rear of the formation. The American grinned. There was no use trying to keep Cheung on the ground—fever or no fever!

On thundered the saffron-winged covey. Above lowered a sullen, gray sky.

Long before sleep had visited him the night before, Grogan had decided on his course. Whether Ah Sin recovered sufficiently to give a coherent story or not, the Yank was determined to leave no stone unturned in a search for some trace of the five missing planes and pilots.

But there had been no change in Ah Sin—at least for the better. He was in a worse state, if such a thing was possible. Doc Kuo had ultimately been forced to administer opiates to the deranged airman. Eventually Ah Sin had lapsed

into a drugged, unnatural sleep, in which he twitched and tossed spasmodically.

Grogan had no idea where to look first. The patrol of the night before had had no instructions other than that for a general offensive. There had been a sudden spurt of night bombing on the part of Jap Air, and General T’sung had begged the assistance of the Dragon Squadron in putting a stop to it.

But, bearing in mind Chung Keung and Ming Rung Chan, the Dragon chief pursued a general course for the mouth of the Whangpoo. There was usually a horde of *skibi* ships in the air at this early hour, but for some strange reason the skies were deserted. Not a single red-disked plane of the Mikado was to be seen. Finally the American caught a rapid wing-rocking from the last Boeing on the right of the V—Hank Goyen’s ship. The Frenchman’s arm was thrust out of the pit and he was pointing below.

In a few seconds Grogan had discovered the object of the Frog’s interest. Three Jap two-seaters were directing artillery fire over the western outskirts of Chapei.

Instantly, signaling his hardy pack to the attack, Battling Mord nosed down in a space-devouring dive. Eight Wasps blared forth in a staccato chant of doom. Whistling slipstreams lashed back past grim, stern-eyed faces. The muzzles of steel-blue Brownings danced eerily on their mounts, and short bursts of red-hot steel slugs spat viciously outward into space as the Dragon eagles made sure their guns were functioning.

One of the Jap observers had the eyes of a lynx. He spotted the attacking formation almost at once. Frantically he drew his pilot’s attention to the onrushing danger. Without further ado the *skibi* hawk turned and hightailed it for safety. The other two planes, seeing their comrade’s move, followed suit without ever looking to see the cause.

The three red-disked ships would have been far better off had they stayed and fought. The Dragon formation, with their chief in the van and their missing fellows in mind, pounced upon their foes with all the ruthless savagery of jungle beasts.

The Mikado’s hawks knew they were doomed. The pilots and observers of the rear planes, seeing the ugly snouts of the Boeings on their tails,

leaped desperately from their pits, pulling rip-chords as they jumped. They only had a couple of hundred feet.

But one pilot wasn't lucky. His chute bellowed out too soon and was caught in the tail. Down he was carried, to end up in a roaring vortex of crimson as the ship's gas tanks exploded.

THE observer of the first plane—he who had first discovered the diving Dragon hellions—decided the altitude was too low to take a chance on his chute. Consequently his chance of life evaporated completely. Captain Cheung, the lust of battle shining brilliantly in his fever-burned eye, lanced forward with a rush, twin Brownings flaming.

The Jap gunner cowered down in his pit. Ah Im's lithe fingers depressed his triggers in two short bursts. Together, seemingly dancing to the same ironic tune of death, pilot and observer pitched and squirmed in unison. The Mitsubishi quivered violently and nosed earthwards, to disappear in a seething cloud of red and black! On streaked the Dragon pack. Gradually regaining altitude, Grogan presently found himself approaching Ming Kung Chan. Carefully he searched the place. At first there seemed nothing unusual.

Ming Kung was a conical hill perhaps five or six hundred feet in height and about a mile in diameter at the base. At points the sides were precipitously steep. Top, sides, and base were covered with a dense growth of stunted, scraggly trees. But it was in the dead of winter, and things were visible to keen eyes that would not have been seen at any other season of the year.

The Yank swooped down low, started circling the base of the mound. Suddenly his eyes made out the prostrate form of a greenish uniform. A *skibi* soldier was lying motionless on the ground, half-hidden under a bush. Then the Dragon chief made out another similar form nearby, then another. Chung Keung was right—a close line of guards encircled the hill!

What in the name of heaven and earth was it the Japs were guarding so jealously? What monstrous secret did Ming Kung Chan contain?

Grogan kept his Boeing in a steep bank. His trusty hellions, wing tips nudged into each other's ribs, roared along on his tail. Gradually the

American climbed so that he could maintain his circle, yet keep his gaze fixed on the summit.

Eye the place as he did, he couldn't discover anything to arouse suspicion. Then suddenly he spied something. On one side of the hill, near the crest, a massive rock jutted forth. In the face of this formation was a horizontal crevice. This crevice formed a ledge, and the Yank became convinced that the figure of a man was lying on the ledge, half back in the shadows of the crevice. At length this conviction became a certainty.

On the next lap, when he approached the same spot, he slipped in towards the ledge. There was a slight movement. It was a man lying close to the grayish rock, his clothes blending with the color of the stone.

The formation of the jutting rock was such that Grogan knew he couldn't train his guns on the man without immediately crashing against the face of the cliff. And suddenly he was aware that the man realized the same fact.

On the next lap, the man raised up on one elbow and waved an arm towards the leading Boeing. Then he made a gesture—a gesture that means fight in any *khan* on the China coast!

Keeping the same circle, Grogan drew out his service automatic. In a few seconds he was back again. This time he slipped in as close as he dared. Suddenly, when opposite the man, whose malignant features he could now see well, he drew his gun and fired two rapid shots. He knew he had not made a hit—to have made one under the conditions would have been miraculous—but he did have the satisfaction of seeing the man squirm rapidly back out of sight.

Taking one last look at the crest of Ming Kung Chan, a look which left the Dragon chief more puzzled than ever, he led his buzzards back to Hunjao. All the way back to the tarmac he searched the ground eagerly. Not a trace of the five missing Boeings did he find. But this didn't surprise him. If any of the ships had fallen behind the *tong* lines, the matter would have been reported at once. The fact that no such report had been made indicated the planes had been brought down inside Jap territory. There it would have been a simple matter to destroy all trace of them.

AGAIN Battling Grogan and his flight commanders were gathered in solemn conclave.

This time they had all examined the remains of Ah Sin's plane. And having seen with their own eyes, they were more solemn than ever. Many and many a plane had they seen nosed over, but never one whose fabric had been scratched and slit as though a sharp-clawed leopard had been playing hide-and-go-seek over it!

"Well!" growled the Yank. "It looks as though we're no farther along than we were before we took off. Did anyone see any sign of our missing planes?"

Goyen and Ah Im, who had been on the patrol, shook their heads. Then the Frenchman looked at the commander with a baffled expression in his dark eyes.

"*Nom d'un chien!*" he cried. "Why do the Japs guard that hill so closely? And what is it that is so strange about the crest of that mound?"

"I had the same feeling!" exclaimed Grogan. "There's something not quite natural about that hilltop. And I wonder what that Jap is doing up there on that rock. Did either of you see him?"

Goyen nodded and Ah Im grinned.

"Him leave quick when taipan shoot!"

Doc Kuo entered, and reported no change in Ah Sin. The Dragon chief rose, leaned over the small table in the center of the tent. He looked at his officers slowly, one by one. Deep lines were etched in his face, and a dynamic purpose burned in his eyes.

"Men," he stated quietly, clearly. "We are face to face with the gravest crisis the Dragon Squadron has ever confronted. Since you have seen Ah Sin, the fear of the unknown is upon every man in this organization. There are men who will tell you they are afraid of neither man nor devil. They are all liars! You and I are human—just like our men. Yet we are their leaders. There is no disgrace in being afraid. But there is disgrace in allowing fear to conquer us. We've got to go out and battle to the end—and I am quite frank in telling you that very probably it is the end.

"Tonight, at midnight, a Dragon formation will take off from this field. I will lead it. In addition to myself, there will be two of you three flight commanders and the three sub-flight leaders. You three will draw lots to see which one of you stays. The reason I am doing so is because one must be left to carry on if none of the rest of us returns."

Grogan took three matches. One he broke off short. Then he turned his back to his men, fixed the slivers of wood so that three equal lengths protruded from his palm, offered them to the three.

Hank Goyen drew the short match. He hurled the splinter to the ground and burst forth in a torrent of curses.

Once more the fatal hour of midnight boomed forth across the Dragon tarmac. And as the sonorous tones rolled from the taut skin of the tom-tom, the Yank ace lifted a shadowy arm high in the night air. A torrent of thunder cascaded from the hot exhausts of six Boeing fighters.

The sky was dark. A misting drizzle had begun to fall—a filmy wetness that would have been snow if the temperature had been a few degrees lower.

Grogan knew no more than he had in the morning. Ah Sin was in the same deplorable condition. He had calmed somewhat. The furious storm of his madness seemed to have passed, but the same wild glare was in his eyes, the same restless twitching in his limbs. Kuo was frankly skeptical of any change for the better. No word of any kind had come from Chung Keung, and although several Dragon patrols had been out during the day, no trace of the missing Boeings had been seen. The American's last words had been brief. "We will destroy—or be destroyed!" he had said.

BATTLING MORD, as *taipan* of the Dragon crew, flew point. Behind him, in a compact, tight formation, came his most trusted eagles. Monty St. John, senior flight commander, brought up the right rear. Ah M'aan, next to Ah Im in point of service, guarded the left rear. Captain Cheung, premier *tong* ace of the hardy pack, flew the lookout position just above the center of the open end of the V.

Just before taking off, the Yank received a desperate radio message from General T'sung, begging for relief against a huge formation of *skibi* attack planes that were raining death and destruction on his secondary line of defenses. It was for the center of Chapei, therefore, that the patrol headed.

On through the sinister night the Boeings speared. Grogan kept at a scant altitude of five

hundred feet, but even then the slanting tile roofs of the houses below were invisible most of the time. This was not true as the Dragon pack neared Chapei. At one point a mammoth fire had broken out, and the curling tips of angry flames licked at the trucks of the saffron-winged ships as they thundered on.

But when the Chinese formation reached the place indicated by T'sung, not a single Jap ship could be found. Back and forth Grogan led his eagles, with no sign of a red-disked plane to dispute the sovereignty of the sable-shrouded sky.

Finally the Dragon chief veered away from the flaming ruins of the native city and headed for the mouth of the Whangpoo. There was no use begging the issue. On the crest of Ming Kung Chan—there lay the gruesome secret of the night.

The drizzle had lessened, and Grogan chose to take on some more altitude. Perhaps only the Prince of Hades knew what lay in wait along the skyways of the night, but the Yank preferred to have a little spare ozone, a little space to maneuver in—a chance at least to see what diabolical being it was that waited to usher him and his hellions across the Western Horizon.

Suddenly, peering ahead, Grogan saw a light in the distance. At once he knew that light was on the summit of Ming Kung Chan.

In that instant a premonitory chill raced down the American's spine. He became aware of a violent rocking of the wing next him. And then, off to the right, Grogan saw the strangest sight he had ever witnessed.

At first he thought the atmosphere had cleared and he was gazing at some new constellation in the heavens he had never seen before, some arrangement of stars and planets peculiar to the Asiatic firmament. But he knew at once that could not be. The arrangement was too regular.

A gigantic V was rushing at tremendous speed across the night sky to intercept the formation of Boeings. At the point of the V were two lights, close together, like two powerful searchlights. Only they didn't glow with the steady brilliance of electricity—they burned with a fitful, unnatural glare, now ebbing, now increasing in intensity, and they changed in color from greenish purple to jaundiced yellow.

Had the lights been farther apart, Grogan would have believed them to be the navigating

lights of an airplane. But they were too close together for that. They looked more like the eyes of a cat in the darkness of the night, only far greater in size. And on each side of the center pair of lights, stretching back along the sides of the huge V, were scores of pairs of lights, stretching on into the distance.

Suddenly Battling Mord knew those were not artificial lights, brought into being by batteries of generators. They were the eyes of animals—winged, gigantic creatures—creatures that were rushing at the Dragon crew with incredible speed!

The next instant the feathery horde was upon them. For a moment it seemed a collision was inevitable. Both formations, flying creatures and flying men, were on the same level. The Yank held his course, didn't deviate a foot. He realized there wasn't the slightest use.

For a split-second Grogan stared straight through his propeller arc into the loathsome, greenish-blue eyes of the huge bird in the lead. Then, with an amazing swiftness, the creature arched upward and passed directly above the American. The birds behind followed their leader.

But as the leader speared above and passed by, a sudden light flashed out from somewhere behind the Dragon chief. Later he was to know this light came from Ah Im's ship. The Oriental ace had suddenly flashed on his landing lights. And in this light Grogan caught a fleeting glance that, used as he was to terrifying sights, nearly froze the blood in his veins.

He saw a mammoth creature with huge wings, black and somber. The body of the creature was as large as a St. Bernard dog, if not larger. From the belly there protruded the legs of the beast, and these ended in curved talons, larger than the Yank had ever seen on a bird of the air. A scrawny neck, devoid of feathers or hair, ended in a grotesque head, from which extended a sharp, curved beak.

This much Grogan saw, and then the creature had passed. But above the roar of his Wasp the American heard a mighty whirring and flapping. And with this whirring and flapping there came the weirdest sounds Grogan had ever heard. The sounds were halfway between a squall and a howl, and they had a penetrating quality that rubbed every nerve raw in the Yank's frame.

FOR the first time in his flying career, Grogan was at an utter impasse. What tactics could he and his men use against this feathered brood? Should they try to fight these creatures as if they were planes? But even as the question propounded itself in the American's mind, he knew the thing was impossible. These beasts of the air had a heritage of the ages. From time immemorial their ancestors had patrolled the upper reaches!

Not only that—they were quite evidently totally unafraid of the Dragon ships. And as the Yank recalled the formation of Ah Sin the night before, a definite feeling of doom took possession of his mind. All good pilots, tried and true, those eagles had been.

Suddenly the solution of the problem was taken out of the American's hand. Looking back, Grogan saw that the vast formation of winged creatures had wheeled and were pouncing to the attack. He would not have known this had it not been for the strangely luminous eyes of the beasts. But there they were, stretched out behind and above the Dragon ships and gaining rapidly.

The Boeings were cruising at a good 150 miles per hour. The Yank knew then these beasts were faster than the Boeings, and there wasn't the slightest doubt, also, that they could outmaneuver the man-made planes.

The Dragon formation had been flying a tight patrol. At the first sight of the weird and mysterious horde, the *tong* pilots had drawn even closer together. Now, as the loathsome creatures gained upon their prey, the Chinese flight burst apart as if a monstrous bomb had torn them asunder.

At once Grogan knew what had happened. The nerves of the *tong* sub-flight leaders had given away. The Yank didn't blame them much. The spectacle they had witnessed was enough to shatter the iron control of the bravest.

A fleeting glance showed two planes diving recklessly for the earth. Grogan knew the pilots of those planes were victims of the same wild panic that had sent Ah Sin and his companions to their doom.

Momentarily the Yank felt the same paralysis creeping in upon him. Desperately, furiously, he fought against this surge with every ounce of his iron will. Even to yield the slightest would be fatal, he knew. And, in that instant, the saving

necessity for action became paramount. The Dragon chief didn't have to look around to know that deadly danger was upon him. At the command of an instinct which had been whetted and sharpened by countless dangers, Grogan thrust his stick forward and jammed the throttle open to the last notch.

As he did so, his Boeing quivered violently. At once he knew the tail had hit something. The American did not need to glance backward to know what the tail surfaces of his plane had encountered. At the very instant he thrust the stick forward, two sharp claws, suspended from a black feathered body, had been clutching at his shoulders. The quick dive of the plane had thrown the tail up and forward, and the leading edge of the vertical stabilizer had struck the winged creature an almost stunning blow.

As the Yank hurtled toward the ground, motor bellowing, he knew he had been saved but for a moment. Glancing back along the wind lashed surface of his fuselage, he saw a huge black shape following him. A grim determination made Grogan keep his plane in the space-annihilating dive. Could this winged creature, this beast of the air, stand the wing-crushing force of plunging headlong toward the earth at over 300 miles per hour?

Carefully the American watched his air-speed indicator and altimeter. When the Boeing had reached its terminal velocity, he brought his ship out of the dive as rapidly as he dared. His wings groaned, and crimson spots danced before his eyes. A nauseating weakness enveloped him as the blood was forced violently out of his head. It took a supreme effort to maintain control of his faculties.

As soon as he was physically able, he whipped a glance backward in search of his foe. And in that instant Grogan knew that in one respect mankind had outdone nature. For the winged creature which had attempted to follow him was fluttering madly about, and even above the moan of the Yank's engine he heard the same weird sounds of a few moments before. Grogan sensed what had happened. The beast of the air had been overbold. His wings of flesh and bone were not equal to wings made of steel and wood. One, perhaps both, of its wings had been broken in attempting to come out of that terrific dive.

BUT what, about his companions? Where was the brave St. John, the faithful Cheung? Suddenly, off to his left, Grogan glimpsed a sight which caused the very marrow in his bones to thaw. A Boeing, which seemed to hover brokenly in the air, was surrounded by a whole flock of sinister black forms. Monstrous, shadowy wings flapped up and down in savage beats.

And while the Dragon chief gazed, a gigantic form pounced out of the blackness of the sky above, directly upon the fuselage of the stricken ship. His lips pouring forth a stream of curses, the Yank speared to the aid of his unfortunate pilot. In another instant he was nearing the grotesque, fluttering mass.

His trigger finger itched, but he forced his hand to be still. To fire would likely prove fatal to one of his own pilots.

But in the next second the hideous mass ahead seemed to disintegrate. Falling toward the earth was what had once been an airplane. Now it was merely a skeleton of wood and steel.

The wrecked ship, gyrating slowly in a final spin, fell directly in front of the oncoming Grogan. For a fleeting second the Yank switched on his landing lights. To his amazement and horror the cockpit of the other plane was empty!

And then, far above him, Grogan caught the whir and beat of mighty wings. Looking up he saw a furious battle being waged in the night sky. Many times before, the Yank had seen the same thing—a seagull seeking desperately to make off with the small fish he has just captured. But he is surrounded by a screeching, fighting mass of his fellows. And this was what Grogan saw above him.

A tremendous fear, succeeded by a boiling rage, took possession of the Yank's soul. Directly for the center of the gruesome mass he drove. For a split-second the struggling group ahead fell apart. Grogan saw, suspended in two monstrous talons, underneath an enormous spread of feathered wing, the body of a man. And striking at this human being, while weird and unnatural cries rumbled from their throats, were the curved beaks of these beasts.

The Dragon chief knew that his pilot was past all human aid, but at least his agony could be brought to a swift end.

Grogan's Brownings chattered. Their muzzles danced on the mounts. Greenish-blue flames played in the silvery arc of the propeller. Straight for the man ahead Grogan aimed, and his tracers lanced true to their mark. The man's quivering ceased, and the Yank rotated the nose of his ship in a slow circle. As he did so, his guns never ceased their vicious chant.

The sky was suddenly filled with furious flapping, and the raucous screams of wounded animals.

Suddenly, straight in front of his whirling propeller, darted one of these winged monsters of the night. Before Grogan could even move a control, his steel propeller blades were eating into a feathery body. A gruesome head struck at him. Flaming eyes, burning with a last frenzy of life, glared at him. A prop blade broke off, and the motor became a shrieking, pounding mass of destruction.

Without wasting an instant, Grogan leaped. As he did so, he collided sharply with a feathery form. He counted five—then pulled his rip cord. No sooner had he done so than he realized he had made a fatal mistake. His chute opened almost immediately, but as it snapped full of air, a sharp-taloned creature pounced upon it.

Glancing at the white expanse of silk above him, Grogan saw a vicious rip start near the apex of the chute and widen rapidly. Nearby, another rent suddenly opened. The beast was tearing at the upper surface with its claws.

The Yank gave himself up for lost. Faintly, far below him in the ebony void of the night, he made out the shadowy ground. The distance was a good thousand feet.

A staccato roar burst into Grogan's eardrums. Two flashing spears of light flashed through the air above him. An inhuman screech rent the ozone. A heavy object half-slipped, half-fell along the bellying parachute and plunged past him. The next instant the silvery sheen of a propeller arc appeared. The wing tips of a plane flashed by and the American caught a fleeing glance of a familiar silhouette—a Dragon ship! The plane curved back and the pilot waved. It was Ah Im. And in the next instant Grogan heard a roar and another plane flashed by.

An overpowering sense of relief filled Grogan's heart. At least these two had been spared.

But, looking down, he saw that the ground was rapidly coming up at him. The tears in the fabric were increasing in size, and the chute was dropping faster every moment. The Yank was thankful he had only a few hundred feet to go.

Before he was on the ground, however, another of the winged creatures swooped down on him. The beast struck at him with a slashing thrust of its massive beak. He felt the rush of air past him as the creature made its lunge. But for the second time a twin stream of crimson tracers shot past, and his attacker plunged rapidly out of sight, gigantic wings thrashing in a death agony.

In another minute Grogan hit the ground with a thud. For a moment he lay stupefied, the breath knocked completely out of him. As he lay there, struggling desperately to rise, the blinding glare of a powerful light caught and held him for a moment. The next instant he was on his feet. Again the same light or a similar one found him. He started to run, then recalled Ah Im and St. John. It must be their landing lights.

Rapidly he freed himself from his dragging chute and took stock of his position. Again there came a roar as the plane dived down almost over his head. Two powerful lights flashed out. Immediately the Yank saw what was happening. Ah Im or St. John was flying low over a nearby field, closely examining it.

Grogan rushed over and made out a long, narrow stretch of meadow between two lines of trees. He started to race across this stretch with the idea of finding out whether it was safe for his pilots to come in. But he was too late. Already the hollow crunch of a landing gear was audible. A plane, two fingers of light probing the ground in front, rolled up to him, and as the lights went out, a dark figure leaped from the ship and came running to him.

"*Taipan! Taipan!*" cried a voice which the Yank immediately recognized as that of Ah Im.

Grogan wrung his chum's hand in silence. For the moment words failed him. Above circled the watchful St. John.

"We must hurry!" whispered Ah Im. "Jap ship on way."

The Yank knew when not to ask questions. He lay flat on the lower wing next to the fuselage, with his hands cupped over, the leading edge. The next minute they were in the air, hurtling for the tarmac at Hunjao. Behind and above flew St. John.

BOTH bad and good news awaited them. Ah M'aaan had already landed. He was the only one of the three *tong* sub-flight leaders to return. The other two, the ones who had broken formation, had not been heard from.

But a new spirit seemed to have taken possession of the Dragon camp.

Almost immediately Grogan found out the cause. Ah M'aaan, one of their own kind, had met this terrible menace and lived to return to them!

At once the Dragon chief called a conference in his tent. In addition to his three flight commanders, he asked Ah M'aaan. When they had gathered there, Grogan rose to his feet. But before he could open his mouth, rapid steps were heard outside. The tent flap opened and a small figure glided in. It was Chung Keung, the spy. Immediately he saluted.

"With your kind permission. General Grogan, I shall give my message and go. I fear very much that the *skibis* have discovered my true identity, but I shall return to my post to serve my country as long as I can.

"By pretending to have a message from the Jap high command, I was able to make my way through the lines at the foot of Ming Kung Chan. I gained admittance to Lieutenant Michi, and pretended to know all about his activities. The result was that he told me everything. He not only told me but he showed me a sight which made me sick—a sight of huge, winged creatures like bats. They are not bats, but of the same family, only infinitely larger. The beasts come from a small island named Bodos in the Marianne Group, which were taken by Japan from the Germans after the war.

"This Michi has succeeded in some unnatural way in getting these creatures under his control. He has only been able to do so through the leader of the pack. The beasts only come out at night, and they have been trained to subsist on human flesh. They will attack anything and everything in the air. When they are released, no Jap ships are

allowed out. They always return at daybreak to their abode, a huge hut on the top of Ming Kung Chan, camouflaged to look like trees and brush. All you have to do is to kill the leader. I—”

There was a sudden whirl in the air. A gleaming object flashed through the open tent door from the blackness without. Chung Keung gave a throttled cry and crumpled to the ground—the handle of a dagger still quivering in his neck.

Doc Kuo was on the scene within two minutes, but the faithful Keung's soul had started the final trek.

“We will strike while the iron is hot,” growled the Dragon chief, as they stood over the inert body of the spy. “These Bats of Bodos will be out until daybreak. The leader must be killed. Ah Im and I will do the job or die in the attempt. St. John, you have already done your part, so you will remain in charge here. Captain Goyen and Ah M'aaan will take off at the same time we do and fly in a semi-circle, plotting a course so as to end at Ming Kung Chan. You will carry four twenty-five high explosive bombs each, and blow the top of Ming Kung Chan from the face of the earth!”

The lanky Britisher saluted. “Please,” he begged, “allow me to perform the mission with Captain Goyen. If you three should not return, I wouldn't want to carry on.”

Grogan was silent for a moment. Then he turned to Ah M'aaan.

“I am going to grant Captain St. John's request,” he stated. “If none of us should return, you will take command. After all, it is only fitting that *jungkwok* should have one of her own sons in command of the Dragon Squadron.”

THE American and his faithful chum, Ah Im, cruised through the blackness of the night high over Kiagnan. The Yank did this for a purpose. He wished to force the combat to that side of Ming Kung Chan so as to give St. John and Goyen a chance to come in from the other.

Suddenly Grogan rocked his wings violently.

Far to one side, but approaching rapidly in their direction, came a line of beady lights. They looked like lights, but the Yank well knew they were not. This time there was no chance of being deceived. The lights were the eyes of the Bats of Bodos!

Grogan changed his course so as to meet the formation head-on. He pointed directly at the center. There, flying in that position, would be the gigantic leader of these winged beasts. Ah Im dropped back and took a position fifty yards in a direct line behind his chief. The two had gone over a plan of attack very carefully. The Oriental had insisted, and Grogan had agreed, that their only hope of success lay in a surprise attack.

On came the birds, and above the drone of his motor, the Yank could hear their hideous screams. He headed straight for the leader, just as he had done before. He and Ah Im were gambling their all that the giant beast in the lead would repeat his maneuver of earlier in the night.

When he was within a distance which he calculated at less than fifty yards, Grogan's guns began to chatter. Straight at the oncoming bird his tracers lanced. He was positive his bullets were ripping into the winged creature, but the beast did not deviate from its path.

Straight toward the American he came, his followers stretched out in a V formation behind him. And again the gigantic bird arched upward over Grogan's plane. As he did so, he flew through a torrent of lead from Ah Im's ship. The instant the creature passed above him, Grogan pulled up in a tight loop. Behind him. Ah Im did the same.

Just as he had calculated, the Yank found himself on his back, with the giant bird directly in his gun sights. Again his Brownings poured forth a stream of lead. This time the creature shook violently. His monstrous wings flapped up and down with furious speed as he lunged forward at his attacker. But the faithful Ah Im had followed his chief, and at that moment his guns started spouting.

The giant bird had almost reached Grogan's ship, and his enormous curved beak was in striking position. The tremendous blow—a blow which would have crushed the Yank and his plane together—missed by a few scant feet. The monstrous bird turned suddenly on its back, and a hideous scream wailed out on the night air. Then the massive wings collapsed, and the bird plunged into the darkness beneath.

Fascinated, Grogan and Ah Im throttled their motors and watched. Not a single one of the other birds offered to attack them. Down they swooped

in a shadowy cluster, seeking their fallen leader. Soon they had disappeared, never to be seen again.

Slowly, thankfully, the two Dragon hellions turned their ships and headed for home. Suddenly, off to their right, a huge spurt of crimson stabbed upward into the sky. Grogan waved across the few intervening feet to Ah Im, and the Oriental waved in return. St. John and Goyen had performed their mission.

As the two Dragon planes neared their nest, they were joined by two frolicking, capering planes—the Frog and the Limey. The four came in together, and as their wheels touched the ground, the clouds overhead broke away, and the gleaming Southern Cross shone forth in all its brilliant splendor.

On the ground, kneeling in a vast group, was the entire Dragon crew. They had knelt there ever since their chief had taken off, praying for his safety. When the low drone of motors came to their ears, they peered anxiously out into the blackness of the night. And when they saw four ships land, they knew their gods had once more been kind. As one man, they surged to their feet—and a mighty war cry rent the skies.