

Traitor Truce

A “Battling” Grogan Adventure by Robert Burt

Gone were the hours of battle-mad conflict, when the roaring flames from shell-torn Chapei reached their hungry tongues high into the sky. Gone the anxious moments on the Dragon tarmac when Jap bombs rained from the sky as thick as hailstones. A truce had been declared. No longer was the Dragon squadron allowed to fight. And then, before the very eyes of Battling Grogan and his men, a fleet of swift Jap Kawanishis opened their guns on a lone Chinese ship, and Battling Grogan gave the forbidden signal—“Attack.”

FIFTEEN saffron-tinted planes rocked and swayed as they thundered along a northwesterly course under the bleak March sky. The famous Dragon Squadron of China was awing.

“Battling” Grogan, bronzed Yank ace, who skippered the illustrious crew, flew point. Snuggled against the wing tips of his sturdy Boeing were two of his olive-toned pilots. Behind, and to the right, roared a three-ship element. The lead plane was piloted by “Monty” St. John, lanky Britisher. In the same position to the left flew another element led by the dapper Frog, “Hank” Goyen. Directly to the rear, flying in the lookout position, was a fourth element led by the famous Chinese ace. Captain Cheung Sun Im, boyhood chum of the American, and known to his friends as Ah Im.

A chill wind swept down from the bleak steppes of Mongolia. Battling Mord nestled down in his cockpit and drew the furred collar of his flying suit closer about his neck. Before doing so, however, he cast a lingering look behind him. He was looking back in the direction of Shanghai, but the smoke and soot that hovered in the sky over that war-racked city had long since faded away in the gray horizon.

Regretfully the Yank forced himself to turn his eyes ahead. He peered forward through the silver propeller sheen, and a slight tremor shook his muscular frame. Gone were the furious hours of battle-mad conflict, when the roaring flames from

shell-torn Chapei reached their hungry tongues high into the sky. Gone were the anxious moments spent in the humble barracks on the Dragon tarmac at Hunjao, when Jap bombs rained from the sky thick as hailstones. Gone were those days, and yet their memory would always live in the American’s soul.

Grogan’s lips compressed into a livid slit as he thought of the lonely row of rounded earth mounds on the edge of Hunjao Field. And there were others, too—Dragon hellions who had gone West in the flaming wrecks of their ships, and who were never to know the comforting arms of Mother Earth.

The American’s soul sorrowed for his comrades who had gone on. Yet, feeling the stinging slipstream against his goggled face and the comforting vibration of the plane which was his winged steed, he knew they had gone in the way he would wish to go.

With an effort, the Dragon chief snapped out of his mood. He marked the reading of his compass and glanced out of the pit, down at the level plains which made up the land of the honored Sons of Han. A mighty stream lurched into view, and the Yank recognized it as the lower waters of the Hwang Ho, that famous river whose headwaters were in the mountains of Tibet. He noted that the stream divided itself into two parts. Raising his eyes to the right, he looked out and saw the tossing whitecaps of the Gulf of Pohai. It wouldn’t be long before the slanting tile roofs of Tientsin would loom into view.

Suddenly, out over the waters of Pohai, a steel-gray hulk attracted the American’s attention. In another moment Grogan knew what that gray hulk was—a Jap aircraft carrier! The Yank kept to his course, although he had an almost irresistible desire to signal his trusty pack for a curving dive to the attack. But he resisted the impulse. After all, a truce had been declared. The war, at least at Shanghai, was supposed to be over, but Grogan

knew full well the truce was merely a lull in the storm.

And what was this Jap aircraft carrier doing up here? It was a large ship, and there was only one such vessel in Chinese waters. Obviously it was the *Kaga*.

It was in that second that Grogan's earphones crackled. "*Taipan!* Captain Cheung speak. Jap ship off to left." The crackling ceased, but as it ceased, the Yank's eyes were photographing the skyways to his left.

Suddenly he spied the enemy aircraft, a large flight of small ships. Kawanishis—the cream of Jap pursuit ships! Immediately the only logical solution jumped into the Yank's mind. They were Kawanishi shipboard fighters from the *Kaga*. But this was a different story. It might be all right for a Jap battleship to cruise along the shore line, but it was obviously a violation of neutrality for these planes to be flying over Chinese territory.

Grogan hesitated. What should be his course? The *skibi* flight outnumbered the Dragon crew almost two to one, even counting the three Curtiss attack planes belonging to the squadron, two-seaters which had started from Hunjao but which the faster Boeings had overtaken en route. Should he give these invaders battle?

Suddenly the question was answered. Out of the gray mist to the left—on the farther side of the Jap formation—sped a lone plane. With a start, Grogan saw this ship was yellow. The lone ship speared straight toward the Dragon Squadron. It had about a thousand feet of altitude on the *skibi* hawks, and was obviously trying to reach the protection of Grogan's flight before it could be intercepted. But the Japs suddenly zoomed upward to cut off the Chinese plane.

In that second, Grogan ripped into action. He depressed his transmitter, shouted an order into his mike.

"Attack!"

Even as the word screamed from his throat, his plane started to bank. And as one man, each of the Dragon planes behind him turned. Farther back, almost out of sight in the gray haze, the three-ship flight of Dragon attack planes saw and swerved, also.

The Boeings were at the same altitudes as their foes, but even as they turned and thundered to the attack, Grogan knew they were going to be too

late. Only by a miracle could the lone *tong* plane escape.

VIVIDLY, against the gloomy gray curtain of sky, was the drama enacted. The lone Chinese pilot had his motor wide open, headed straight for the Dragon pack, who were now rushing to meet him. But below, their blunt noses pointed upward, lanced the *skibi* hawks. When within firing range, vicious streams of tracers rocketed upward from the three leading Jap ships. Six separate streams of crimson doom converged at a point through which the Chinese ship had to come.

Grogan drew in his breath with a sharp hiss. No plane made could stand that punishment. And now he saw the Chinese ship was rocking violently from side to side. It swerved and slithered, and seemed to come to an abrupt halt in its headlong rush for safety. It stood on its tail—and in that second black clouds of smoke gushed from its vitals.

The Yank saw a dark speck which was almost a blur on the gray background behind. Then this gray blur resolved itself into the somersaulting figure of a man, hurtling earthward with terrific speed. Suddenly this speed was abruptly halted by a puff of white which snapped into a huge white petal, swaying and rocking as it floated downward.

In that same instant the noses of the Jap ships curved over, as they pounced down at the swinging figure under the swaying parachute with the ferocity of falcons. Again streams of tracers appeared, this time directed downward.

A fierce curse on his lips, Grogan signaled his men and shoved his stick forward. Down roared the Dragon pack, and the staccato bellow of their descent was a thundering crescendo which reached high into the heavens. A moment more, and a fluttering parachute was the core of a madly gyrating saturnalia of destruction.

In making their attack, the Japs were spread out fanlike, and of necessity the Dragon crew were likewise. For the first few seconds there was no opportunity to single out an individual foe for combat. It required all a pilot's skill to avoid collision, either with friend or enemy. Momentarily, the air around the fluttering parachute was a furious whirlpool in which planes were merely chunks of driftwood swirling vainly

in the grasp of a mighty current. Then, out of the insane fantasy, a vicious dogfight developed.

The first ship that crossed Grogan's gun sights was one of his own. He repressed his eager fingers, and in the next second a red-disked plane appeared in his line of flight. Black-mouthed Brownings quivered hungrily on their mounts, and green and blue flames danced eagerly at the end of the steel barrels. Steel-jacketed projectiles vomited forth in an unceasing stream. The Yank, one of the most experienced aerial marksmen in the world, led his quarry by the exact amount of distance necessary. The twin streams from his guns melted together at a point directly in the middle of the Kawanishi motor and stitched backward. Pieces of fabric, chunks of iron and wood spewed forth and were caught by the swirling air current. The line of lead drilled straight through the *skibi* cockpit. With a terrific lunge, the Nipponese lunged upward. An arm, flexed over the cockpit cowling, stretched taut in death's agony.

The doomed Jap ship yawed violently and scuttled sideward in a grotesque movement. As it did so, there was a violent crash. It had hit another plane flaunting the radiating banner of the Rising Sun.

Without wasting another second, Grogan screamed back to the protection of the unfortunate pilot dangling below the fluttering parachute. And it seemed as though each one of his men had the same idea. In a twinkling the falling figure was surrounded by a protective cone of saffron-winged planes which kept up a furious circling.

Out of the corner of his eye, Grogan saw three plumes of smoke hurtling to the ground. Desperately he prayed that his own men would be spared.

Now they were approaching the ground. The Yank saw that the Jap ships had drawn away from the battle and were headed out to sea, evidently to their floating home cruising in the Gulf of Pohai.

The Chinese pilot ended up in the bare branches of a tree, but nearby was a pasture of extensive dimensions. Grogan came in and landed, and his hellions followed suit. When the pilot had been rescued from the branches of the tree, the Dragon chief gasped in surprise. The man was white!

He proved to be uninjured. "I am Jules Guinotte," he introduced himself. He spoke in English, but with a French accent.

Hank Goyen stepped forward and let loose a veritable barrage in his native tongue. The man replied in the same tongue, and with equal volubility. Following its conclusion, Captain Goyen turned excitedly to his chief.

"Captain Guinotte was in the French air corps during the war. He has been flying here for the Mandarin of Wuting. He was making a patrol and on his way back to Wuting when he met these Japs. At the same time, he saw the Dragon Squadron in the distance. He tried to reach us, but was shot down before he could do so."

Grogan turned to the rescued man. "Do you wish us to fly you back to Wuting?" he asked.

The Frenchman's dark eyes burned into those of the Dragon chief.

"I have often heard of the famous Dragon Squadron," he replied. "I would like to join your ranks. The plane I was flying is the last of three that belonged to the war lord of Wuting. I am sure he would have no objections."

The Yank looked at Goyen, who nodded approval. Instantly Grogan made up his mind.

"You shall go with us," he directed. "We can make room for you in the rear cockpit of one of our two-seaters."

AN hour later, the Dragon Squadron landed at Nanyuan Drome, the field from which they had originally started many months before. The official car of young Marshal Wang, sponsor of the Dragon outfit, was waiting for the American, and a half an hour later, Grogan was driven into the courtyard of Wang's *yamen*. The Prince of Manchuria received the Yank ace in his study. His greeting was warmly affectionate. He indicated a carved teakwood chair and then seated himself behind his elaborately carved desk, the surface of which was inlaid with priceless mother-of-pearl.

Grogan sank into the seat with an air of relief. There was something about Wang's study which induced a feeling of relaxation. From somewhere in the interior of the palace came the discordant wail of a flute, which was joined by a two-stringed *sanh'in*. And softly there came the melody of cadenced voices chanting the endless "Virtuous Lady."

Upon the *tuchun's* desk reposed a gorgeous *L'ien* box with a metal top, which had an elaborate scroll ornament in old gold against a salmon-red background. Engraved in the middle was a beautiful bird with widespread wings of delicate blues and pleasing greens. At one time the box had contained rich carmine and kohl, which went to make a dowager empress more beautiful.

But as Grogan's gaze returned to the young prince, his heart sorrowed. Wang was no longer the light-hearted youth of six months ago. There were deep lines in his face, and in his eyes shone an ineradicable fatigue.

"I trust the health of your honorable family is well?" asked the American.

The young marshal bowed. "The health of my family is most excellent," he returned with a gracious bow. "But," and he looked Grogan straight in the eye with a directness the American loved, "my own health is not so good."

The Yank looked at his chief in surprise.

"Physically I am most excellent," explained the *tuchun*, "but my mind is tormented by doubts and fears. The Nationalist Government has signed a truce with the Japs. China could have won, I am convinced, a decisive victory at Shanghai, but weakly they compromised. I have reason to believe that Japan is now transferring her activities to the north. That will place upon me the burden of defending China from her most hated foes."

He paused, and Grogan took the opportunity of recounting the incident of the battle with the Jap flight and the presence in the Gulf of Pohai of the Nipponese aircraft carrier, *Kaga*.

"That is not surprising to me," replied Wang. "It only confirms my information that the Japs are concentrating in North China. But tell me, what did you do with the pilot you rescued?"

"I brought him with me here to Peiping," answered Grogan, "and with your permission, I am offering him a commission in the Dragon Squadron."

The young marshal nodded absently. His mind seemed to be on other things. Finally he spoke.

"Frankly, General Grogan—and I am saying this to you both as my friend and one of my officers—I am in a very precarious position. The Japs have taken over Manchuria and are eager to

gobble up the rest of North China. To the west and north are the Soviets of Russia, who are encouraging Communism in our western provinces. I am in need of the tact of a diplomat and the cunning of a god. The slightest mistake on my part, and the Nationalist Government at Nanking will cry for my head. My only chance to recover my hereditary lands in Manchuria is to stay here and fight. I must have support."

He paused, and there was a momentary silence.

"At the moment, a matter of paramount importance has arisen," he continued. "I have just received a communication which requires an immediate answer." He reached to one side, and from the gleaming surface of the desk he lifted a massive red envelope. He turned it over and reached forward, handing it to the American.

"You wish me to read this?" asked Grogan.

"That is not necessary," replied Wang. "Only examine the seal, I beg of you."

The Yank took the envelope in his hand and examined the seal, which had been broken in two when the missive was opened. He fitted the two parts of the seal together. This done, a gasp of astonishment broke from his lips.

"The official Dragon Seal of the Emperor of China!" he breathed.

Wang nodded in silence and reached forward for the envelope. "As you well know," he said, "this could come from only one man—Hsuan Tung, the tenth Manchu emperor of the Ching Dynasty, otherwise known as Pu-yi."

"Yes, I know," replied Grogan. "But I thought he was in hiding."

"He was," replied the young prince. "But this looks very much as though he is out. This communication is an invitation from him to attend a conference at a *yamen* of his near the village of Fenging in the Province of Jehol. He says the future interests of China demand my presence."

"That is across the Great Wall," muttered the Yank. "Do you think it is safe to go? Perhaps it is a trap."

"I have considered that," replied the *tuchun*, "and I have decided not to go unless every precaution is taken against that very thing. There have been rumors of late that Pu-yi has been very friendly with the Japs. In fact, I know he was harbored in the Japanese Legation at Tientsin for many months."

“Have you a plan?” demanded Grogan.

“Yes. I shall fly up in my tri-motor cabin plane, and your Dragon Squadron will escort me. With such a show of force, I do not believe he would attempt anything. I think I know what he has in his mind.”

“To sit again on the Dragon throne of China?” Grogan guessed.

“Exactly,” smiled the marshal. “And I am quite frank in saying it might be a good thing to revive the monarchy, especially if it could be done in a limited form such as that of the British Empire. I would support Pu-yi if he were aggressive and a man of sound judgment. Under the present conditions, I am afraid that China will always be the plaything of a group of war lords who are only interested in self-aggrandizement.

“Perhaps it would be better to reinstate the House of Ching. My father was loyal to them for many years, and I must admit to a certain feeling of duty toward them myself. In any case, I feel I should attend this conference.”

“When is the meeting scheduled?” asked the Yank.

“Tomorrow at noon,” returned Wang. “If you will make the necessary arrangements with your squadron, we will take off at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“It shall be done,” assented Grogan, rising to his feet.

“Just one thing more,” added the marshal. “My tri-motor pilot is away on a leave of absence. Will you detail one of your men to fly my plane?”

Grogan bowed and took his leave.

BACK in his quarters at Nanyuan, the Dragon chief sent for Ah Im. To his trusty henchman he related his interview with the Mandarin of North China.

“A tiger’s mouth is bad place for man’s head,” Ah Im quoted, when the American had finished.

Grogan grinned at the old Chinese proverb. “That’s almost exactly what I told Wang,” he returned, “but Wang thinks there will be no danger if the Dragon Squadron goes along as protection.”

Captain Cheung’s dark eyes gleamed with pleasure. “Such news better than wedding announcement!” he exclaimed. “Ah Im have big fear lead too quiet life here.”

The Yank smiled. “I don’t think you need to be very much afraid of that,” he returned. “We have never led a quiet life since this squadron was organized. Now, will you make all the necessary preparations? See that every available ship is ready to leave the ground at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning. We can easily make the trip up there and back on one tank of gas. One thing you must do. Marshal Wang’s tri-motor pilot is on a leave of absence, so you had better pick one of the pilots who has had plenty of cabin plane experience to fly Wang’s ship.”

“Have good man,” intoned Ah Im. “Much tri-motor time. Ah Toi.”

“Good!” returned the Yank. “By the way, has Captain Guinotte been taken care of?”

“*Hi-la*,” murmured the Oriental. “Him guest Captain Goyen.” He drew in a breath with a sudden hiss. “Captain Guinotte most fortunate.”

“How’s that?” returned Grogan, curiously.

“*Skibi* hawks shoot him in plane—shoot him under parachute. No hit. Him lead charmed life.”

The Yank laughed. “He had a miraculous escape, all right, Ah Im, but then, you and I have had some that weren’t slouches. Well, you’d better start making the necessary arrangements.”

Ah Im rose, bowed, and left. There came a knock on the door, and, in response to Grogan’s invitation, Captain Goyen entered, followed by the newly rescued pilot, Guinotte.

Grogan turned to Guinotte. “I have mentioned the matter to our Commander-in-Chief, Prince Wang,” he said. “We are offering you a commission in the Dragon Squadron. There are only three foreigners in the outfit. Captain St. John, Hank here, and myself. Perhaps it would be a good thing to have another one with us, anyway. We might not get on each other’s nerves so much.”

The dapper Guinotte laughed uproariously. “*Eet ez ze grand plaisir, Monsieur le Commandant.*”

“After what happened today,” continued the American, “you would perhaps welcome an opportunity to do a little fighting with the Japs. I can assure you that sooner or later you will have such a chance. The fighting at Shanghai is over, but it looks very much as though we are going to have to do some up here in North China. In fact, I

have a great desire to drop a few bombs on the Mikado's palace at Tokyo some day."

Captain Guinotte's eyes glittered feverishly. "I have *nevair* had *ze plaisir* to see Japan, but I would be most happy to make *ze* premiere visit with big load of bombs."

Grogan rose to his feet. "I am sure that your countryman, Captain Goyen, will make you comfortable," he said. "We welcome you most heartily to our family circle."

The two visitors bowed and retired.

After squadron dinner that night, the Yank called a meeting of his three flight leaders. Every detail of the next day's flight to Fenging was gone over. Wang was to be the only passenger in the tri-motor, so Grogan directed Ah Im to see that a full load of two hundred-pound bombs was carried along.

In the meantime, Captain Jules Guinotte, now an officer of the Dragon Squadron, left the main gate of Nanyuan Field and took a rickshaw downtown. For one who was on his first visit to the Heavenly City, he showed a surprising knowledge of the town. He finally ordered his runner to deposit him in a gloomy side-street. When the rickshaw had disappeared from sight, he walked about fifty yards and disappeared down a flight of stone steps leading to a disreputable *kahn*. Inside, he walked rapidly to a door across the main room and disappeared into an interior chamber, closing the door behind him. The proprietor, an ugly-featured Asiatic of doubtful descent, followed him. Captain Guinotte muttered a few words to him, and the man left.

Within a few minutes, the door opened again and a slight figure in civilian dress, a furred overcoat collar up around his ears, slinked in.

"*Ze* plan work perfectly," whispered Guinotte. "*Ze Commandant* Grogan *eez ze* big fool. *Ze* Dragon Squadron do not savvy *ze* Japanese pilots use blank cartridge and tracer. I am now an *officier* of Dragon Squadron. You have *ze* plans made for tomorrow?"

The slight-statured man in civilian clothes nodded his head rapidly. "The plan has been worked out perfectly," he returned with a Nipponese accent. "Prince Wang will probably have the American Grogan with him at the conference. When the time is right, you will give the signal. For a long time now we have schemed

to get rid of this Wang and his Dragon Squadron. At last success is assured. The silly Pu-yi thinks he will again be Emperor of China. He will be—for a few days!"

Twenty minutes later, Captain Jules Guinotte was back in his quarters.

FLYING a course slightly east of north, the Dragon Squadron crossed the sinuous Great Wall of China at ten thousand feet. The squadron flew in five separate three-ship elements. Grogan flew point of the leading formation, and behind, on his left, were the two elements commanded by Ah Im and Captain St. John. On the right was the three-ship flight of Boeings led by Hank Goyen, and behind him came the three Curtiss attack planes commanded by Ah Fan. Captain Guinotte flew one of the Boeings in Goyen's element. Ah Toi, in the tri-motor with Prince Wang, flew in the center of the great V.

Looking ahead and down, Grogan spied the village which was their destination. On one side were the extensive grounds and gardens belonging to the *yamen*, where the conference was to be held. On the other side was a huge stretch of woods. Peering into the distance, the Yank could dimly make out other fields, but the one in which he was primarily interested was the one in which they must land. Coming closer, he saw this to be none other than a meadow adjacent to the low wall surrounding the palace garden.

But even after he had made up his mind to this, the Dragon chief did not give the signal to land. Slowly he headed in a large circle, his ships following behind in close formation. He studied the ground below him minutely. Nowhere did he see any evidences of a concentration of troops or other signs of treachery. Finally, satisfied that all was as it should be, he gave the landing signal. One by one the ships came in and set their wheels on the ground, Grogan first. In a short time all the Dragon planes were drawn up in an orderly row at the far end of the field, their noses turned into the wind, ready for an instant take-off.

In accordance with his plan, the Yank sent one of the Curtiss attack planes aloft at once to do patrol duty. The Curtiss ships had more gas, and with an observer in the rear cockpit, a better lookout could be maintained. Grogan chose Ah Im, Goyen, and the new man, Guinotte, to

accompany Prince Wang and himself into the *yamen*. St. John was left in charge of the ships.

Ten minutes later they were ushered into a gorgeous reception room. A dignified scholar, clad in the flowing robes which proved his right to the rank of Admitted Savant, informed them that His Most Eminent Majesty, Hsuan Tung, would receive them presently. He clapped his hands, and servants appeared with sweetcakes and tea for the honored guests.

The little group sat upon gorgeously carved teakwood chairs with straight backs while they partook of the refreshments. Silence reigned for a few minutes. From above, and penetrating through the tiled roof of the reception chamber, came the low drone of an airplane motor—the Dragon ship on guard.

Scattered around the room stood the servants who had waited upon them, their backs to the walls. Grogan was suddenly conscious that the palms of his hands were moist. Looking across from him to where the Prince of Manchuria sat, he became aware that Wang was wiping his hands. Grogan shook himself impatiently. What was the matter with him? Why this strange attack of nerves when there wasn't a thing that had even the aspect of threatening danger?

Captain Guinotte was nearest to him, seated a few paces away. Grogan's glance rested upon the Frenchman's hands, and he noted tiny beads of perspiration on the man's wrists. Raising his eyes, he saw that the same condition existed on the Frenchman's face.

By now the Yank was thoroughly conscious of a sense of oppression in the air, a weird tenseness which pricked at the skin. If only something would happen! Where was the weakling Pu-yi, and why was he keeping them waiting? Unable to sit still longer, the Yank rose and made a tour of the chamber, marking with admiration the carved crossbeams and the beautiful tapestries that hung upon the walls. Presently Wang joined him.

"This was one of the most beautiful possessions of the Ching Dynasty," he said. "It has been in their family for centuries. I had thought it was forfeited at the time of the revolution, but it seems not."

"There is something in the air," muttered Grogan in a low tone, "something I don't like."

"I have that feeling, also," murmured Wang in a low tone, "but nothing seems to be amiss. We can hear the drone of the guard ship above."

WHILE conversing, the two had reached the end of the chamber. Before them, hanging upon the wall, was a gorgeous tapestry. It was of heavy blue silk, and woven in its center was a beautiful golden bird of paradise. Below the tapestry, standing upon the floor, was an elaborate teakwood stand, and upon the stand was a little carved image with wind-blown robes—the Wind-God. The two men, Oriental and Caucasian, stood a pace apart, and their gaze was fixed on the image before them in rapt admiration.

Suddenly a man stepped between them. He spoke, and his voice was strangely tense.

"*Eet ez* most beautiful image of Wind-God I have *evair* had *plaisir* to see."

Wang and Grogan both looked up in astonishment at Captain Guinotte.

"But you are right!" exclaimed Wang. "This is the most perfect image of the Wind-God in all China. I know of none other to equal it."

As the *tuchun* spoke, Grogan gazed at the Frenchman curiously. There were not many foreigners, he reflected, that could look at a Chinese idol and tell which of the tong deities it represented.

"There *ez* one *othair* image," quavered Guinotte. "*Eet eez* in possession of my frien', Colonel Moreau, in Paris."

Wang bowed in acknowledgment of the Frenchman's statement, but Grogan felt a strange sense of suffocation creeping over him. Iron bands seemed to tighten around his chest, while red-hot points of steel stabbed at his brain. Colonel Moreau! Where had he heard that name before? The Yank felt as though he were treading upon the brink of a volcano—a brink which would be shattered any second by a terrific explosion.

"Your friend is indeed fortunate to possess such a treasure of art," he said, looking at the Frenchman fixedly. "I was telling Prince Wang yesterday of your miraculous escape from the Japs near Wuting. Without doubt, the *skibis* are already offering twigs of the sacred—" he hesitated for a moment, as if searching his mind for the right

word—"well, whatever twigs it is they offer to the spirits of pilots killed in combat."

Captain Guinotte laughed nervously. "Twigs of sacred *sakaki*, *eez eet* not, *mon commandant*?"

Banked flames lurked in the depths of Grogan's gray eyes. He was suddenly aware that Ah Im had come up behind the Frenchman, and in the Oriental's eyes was a hidden gleam of dismay, of dire warning.

The Yank stepped back and pretended to be again rapt in admiration of the tapestry that hung above. From his tunic, he drew forth a small pencil and a bit of paper. He placed the paper upon the teakwood stand and pretended to sketch the design of the bird.

"It is indeed beautiful!" he exclaimed again, going on with his work. Another stroke of his pencil, and he replaced both paper and pencil in his pocket. He turned away from the stand, looked at his companions.

"I fear we are neglecting Captain Goyen," he suggested.

They moved down the chamber, and, light as a feather, his fingers brushed those of Ah Im. When they arrived in front of Goyen, Grogan turned suddenly to Marshal Wang. His eyes telegraphed a hidden message of warning to the young Prince.

"Has not Your Worthiness forgotten something?" he asked. "What about the gift you brought for His Majesty, the Mighty Pu-yi?"

Wang gave an exclamation of chagrin. "How utterly stupid of me," he stated. "It is in the airplane on the field."

The Dragon chief clapped his hands together loudly.

"Attention, Captain Cheung! You will go to the tri-motor immediately and bring back the *tuchun*'s gift."

Ah Im saluted, made an about face, strode off. A servant opened the gate. Grogan, watching Captain Guinotte under veiled lids, saw the Frenchman's features twitch momentarily.

Ah Im had scarcely disappeared when there was a great commotion. The big gate swung open and a cortege appeared in the gateway. An elderly man in the long robes of the ancient Chinese court, upon his head a round, tasseled cap surmounted by a button, which pronounced him to be a *mandarin* of the first rank, stepped forward.

"His Imperial Majesty, Hsuan Tung!"

The official stepped aside and bowed low as a slender youth, clad in the hereditary Dragon Robe of the Manchu emperors, strode forward. He came to a halt before the group of four. Prince Wang stood in front, with the three Dragon officers behind him. As Pu-yi came to a halt, the *tuchun* knelt on the floor and bowed thrice. Grogan and his two fellow-officers bowed, but did not kneel.

"Rise, Most Worthy Wang," commanded Pu-yi. "I have invited you here in order that we may discuss measures that will cure China's ills and restore her greatness."

Wang bowed. "My soul is wholly consumed with a desire to see that done."

"Spoken like a loyal Son of Han," returned Pu-yi. "The question that confronts us, then, is by what means this object can be accomplished. It is now almost twenty years since an emperor of China has reigned upon the Dragon Throne. Has the new regime brought peace and prosperity to our land? I do not believe so. Moreover, I do believe the object we both desire can be accomplished by restoring the rule of the Ching Dynasty."

"Your words may be ones of wisdom," bowed Wang.

"Your father, Wang the Elder, served my uncle, the Emperor Kwang-su, faithfully. Will you likewise pledge allegiance to me?"

Wang hesitated. Then he spoke. "I will gladly do so," he replied, "if the other great War Lords of China will unite in pledging allegiance. I would insist, however, that you, as Emperor, must give the people a voice in the government."

Pu-yi, the weakling, permitted a haughty smile to cross his features. "Under those conditions, then," he cried, "you will be my loyal servant?"

The Prince of Manchuria bowed.

"I give you, then, my first and only command. You will be executed an hour hence in the courtyard of the *yamen*!"

AS Pu-yi finished this cataclysmic speech. Captain Guinotte left his place by Grogan and Goyen and strode rapidly to one side. Then he turned, and his right hand was raised toward the pocket of his tunic.

"Stop!" commanded Grogan in a stentorian voice. But the Frenchman's hand continued upward. The Yank's right arm moved with the

speed of light. A bluish something flashed in his hand. Two rapid explosions shattered the air. Captain Guinotte, drilled twice through the brain, crumpled to the floor.

There was an instant of stunning silence.

"Thus dies a traitor and a spy!" shouted the Dragon chief. Captain Goyen, an expression of utter bewilderment on his features, started forward. Roughly Grogan yanked him back. "A miraculous escape," resumed the American. "That's what Ah Im said. And he was indeed right. I should have known that was a fake fight. Colonel Moreau, eh? I knew I would remember him. He was the French officer who went over to Japan with sixty of his pilots to organize the Japanese Air Service, and among them was Guinotte. He had never been in Japan, yet he knew all about the sacred *sakaki* twigs."

During all this, Pu-yi had stood like an image carved in stone. Now he raised his hand.

"I agree with you, General Grogan. Thus do all traitors die. But that has not changed the fate of the Prince of Manchuria, nor your own. The executions—not one, but three—will take place as I have commanded."

The Yank smiled, "Perhaps they will," he agreed. "But if they do, the number will not be confined to three. Are you prepared to have your tablet placed in its niche among those of your ancestors? Think well before you answer, because as yet you have no son, and when you are gone, the great Dynasty of the Chings will have ended."

The slender Pu-yi smiled craftily. "And what makes you so sure, honorable *fan kwai*, that I will accompany you on the Eternal Journey?"

Slowly Grogan lifted his arm and pointed to the carved rafters overhead. "Listen!"

All eyes were directed toward the roof. The distant drone of the lone Dragon plane had continued unabated. Now it was joined by a heavy, staccato bellow.

The haughty disdain of Pu-yi's face changed to alarm. "What is that noise?" he cried.

The Dragon chief grinned, "That is Prince Wang's tri-motor," he explained, "It has ten two hundred-pound bombs in the cabin, any one of which is sufficient to level this palace to the ground. It will remain on guard, circling over this *yamen*, until we are all safely in our planes. If we do not come out within half an hour, the bombs

will be dropped, and we will all make that journey I spoke of—together,"

Livid fear transformed Pu-yi's face to a pasty white. Finally he managed a laugh.

"I am afraid you are wrong again, my worthy friend. Please listen again, I beg of you."

There followed an interim of silence. Then, above the bellow of the tri-motor, could be heard a high whine, and Grogan, listening, knew it was not the moan of a single motor, but of many single motors together.

Pu-yi clapped his hands loudly. "Open the gates!" he cried, "Let us step out into the courtyard. Then, after these three have witnessed what is to be, prepare the Dragon sword and make ready for the execution."

He indicated the doorway, and in silence the whole conclave marched out into the court. They all lifted their eyes, and over to the north, across the garden walls and the tiled roofs of the village beyond, there came a spear-point of tiny planes—Jap Kawanishis.

Pu-yi smiled at the American. "What say you now, foreign devil?" he asked.

The Yank smiled in turn. "Even if the *skibis* should be victorious, it would make no difference. The tri-motor will keep on circling directly over the palace. Should it be shot down, it will fall with its load of bombs on the *yamen*, and the journey I spoke of will not be delayed."

The scion of the Chings was visibly shaken. "We shall leave here at once!" he cried.

Grogan shook his head. "The pilot of the tri-motor has his orders. No matter what direction we go, he will always keep over us. But you need not worry about the outcome. Look!"

All eyes followed Grogan's arm. From the direction of the field in which the Dragon clan had landed, there appeared a second spear-point of flashing propellers, St. John and his Dragon pilots were screaming to the attack.

The group in the courtyard watched, transfixed. As the Yank had predicted, the Nipponese formation stayed away from the circling tri-motor.

"See that!" shouted the Yank to Pu-yi. "And I see that you are greatly relieved."

The last of the Chings made no reply. All eyes continued watching the skies. Off to the northwest the two flights met. The furious dogfight which resulted lasted perhaps five minutes. At the end of

that time, three Kawanishis had corkscrewed earthward, trailed by plumes of black and crimson, and one Dragon Boeing limped back toward its field, motor missing. But the Japs had had enough. The shattered remnant of their formation gathered to the north, re-formed, and was soon lost in the dust haze that hovered over the distant Manchurian plains.

Pu-yi looked above at the circling tri-motor, then turned to the Dragon chief.

“It is a great surprise to me to discover such wisdom in a foreign devil. It is not fitting that such sagacity go unrewarded. It is my pleasure that you should return with a proper gift.”

“I cannot find it in my heart,” grinned Grogan, “to ask for the priceless Wind-God image, but I would appreciate having the tapestry that hangs above it.”

Pu-yi clapped his hands and shouted an order. In a couple of minutes the gift, neatly folded, was in the Yank’s arms.

Pu-yi bowed to his three guests. “My *yamen* has been honored by your presence.”

The three bowed in return.

“Come and visit us in Peiping,” invited Wang.