

Death Flies to Fukien

By Arch Whitehouse

Those two-hawks, Tug Hardwick and Beansie Bishop, knew where they could find Old Man Trouble if they wanted him. Shanghai was the place—for the welcome they'd get there would be a rousing one profusely punctuated with bullets! But meanwhile, Old Man Trouble had grown tired of waiting for them. That was something those two Yanks didn't know—until a man fell at their feet with a knife in his back!

THAT laboratory floor was spotless—except for the small brilliant drops of scarlet that had spattered a few inches from the man's head.

Professor Huang Chai Tao was dead—murdered. Never again would he peer through his thick-rimmed glasses at his retorts and test tubes. He lay there, one leg curled up under him, his heavily embroidered Canton coat thrown back across his knees.

In spite of the widening greenish-blue bruise that marked his forehead, Professor Tao's face was not distorted. It simply bore an expression of utter dismay—the dismay of a man who had seen his whole life's effort snatched from his hands.

One hand was partially clenched as if he had been holding some small priceless object. The other was flat, back down to the floor.

Beyond that, all was peaceful in Professor Huang Chai Tao's laboratory on the second floor of the University of Hongkong. Nothing was broken, nothing moved. There was no evidence of any great struggle.

Suddenly a door opened from the far end of the room and a young man in a white smock sauntered in with three ledgers under his arm. But something stopped him as he made his way along the row of enamel-topped tables. He drew in his breath, peered about, finally sent his gaze toward a stand-up desk near the center of the room. On it was a small lacquered box, a jade ink well, and a strange, broad-tipped pen.

"Professor Tao?" the newcomer called. "*Professor Tao!*" his voice ran up the scale as his heart thumped madly. In his three years of association with the famous Chinese chemistry

professor, nothing had ever broken the normal routine of their work.

At 3 o'clock every afternoon he had arrived on the dot with the complete daily entries made in his ledgers. And he had always found the bland-faced Professor just closing a small book and reaching for the lacquered box.

"*PROFESSOR TAO!*" Bud Humphries called louder than ever.

Then he darted through an opening in the line of tables and started to call again. But abruptly he fell back. The shock of seeing the prostrate figure of the Chinese constricted every cord in his throat. He simply made a queer gurgling noise and dropped to one knee beside the fallen man.

Then the full realization of the tragedy struck him. Gasping, he stood up, reached for the lacquer box. It was open—and empty!

He made a hurried search of the floor, but the small book he sought was nowhere to be found. The book, in which Professor Tao daily wrote in that queer Yunnan chirography, was missing.

Placing the ledgers on the stand-up desk, Bud Humphries hurried out of the laboratory, gave the alarm.

THERE is a small restaurant on Des Veoux Road in Victoria, principal community of Hongkong. Des Veoux Road runs parallel to Victoria's Bund and is the main shopping and business street.

From the front windows of the restaurant, two Americans looked down on a mild stream of black enameled bicycles, rickshaws, and white topees. One of them—Alton Bishop—spoke up:

“Are we going to do it? You know what I mean; go back to Shanghai?”

Tug Hardwick glanced over at his stout companion. “With that Ushio Arita mess still hanging fire? We are not!”

“But you didn’t shoot him. It was that Countess Jane, wasn’t it?” Bish asked painfully.

“Sure, but how can I prove it? Those Jap dicks have got to nail someone for it.”

“But we can get that Mureaux job. It’s just across the river at the Whampoia field. I saw it this morning, and it’s a beaut!”

“Okay. You fly it up. And how are you going to get past the Jap lines, into Nanking, and then back to Shanghai?”

Bish let out a low moan, then lit a cigarette: “You know I can’t fly a bus like that. But say, what’s happened to the Countess? We haven’t seen her for days.”

Hardwick said nothing for some time. He just stared out of the windows. But he, too, wondered about Countess Astrid Khitrovo, the girl with the straw-colored hair and the primrose perfume. Was he slipping? Was he falling for that girl?

“I don’t know where she is, and I don’t care,” the American news correspondent finally snapped. But now he lowered his voice as a young man came in, sat down, near them, and spread a copy of the Hongkong Gazette before him.

Hardwick studied the man for several minutes until Bishop was unable to stand it any longer: “Know him?” he whispered.

Without answering, Hardwick got up, went over to the man, who looked up slowly.

“My name’s Hardwick,” Tug said openly. “Isn’t your name Humphries? Didn’t you go to M.I.T.—weren’t you that bug in chemistry?”

“Tug Hardwick, by all that’s holy!” the man gasped, standing up. “What the devil are you doing in Hongkong? I thought you were in aviation—test piloting, or something.”

“I was. But no more. Meet my side-kick, Bish—”

“Call me Beansie,” broke in Bish. “We are—or were—with the Amalgamated News Service. We’re running away from the law just at present. More fun!”

“Shut up!” snapped Hardwick. Then he spotted the headlines of the Gazette.

“Holy Smoke! Look at that!” he barked.

“News correspondents, eh?” said Humphries, with a slight smirk. “Here’s a story for you. Professor Tao was my boss!”

“Whew!” whistled Bishop. “And murdered without a trace of evidence as to who did it!”

HARDWICK sat down. “Okay. Let’s have it,” he cracked. “Take the notes, Bish.”

“Call me Beansie,” said Bishop, snapping out a wad of copy paper and a pencil.

“I’ll begin from the beginning,” explained Humphries, calling for three drinks, “that’s the only way you’ll get it straight.”

“Make it fast if you’ve got something hot, for we may be able to make the ‘Frisco deadline,” said Hardwick as he read the meager and somewhat disjointed details given by the Gazette.

Humphries began: “Professor Huang Chai Tao was once a penniless student in the United States. But he was a brilliant fellow, and he connected up with my father and assisted him in perfecting a formula known as Humphries Hexite, a modern explosive.”

“Your father is president of the Humphries Arms Company, isn’t he?”

“Right. Anyhow, the old gent was so grateful to Tao that he financed him through an American and a German university and then saw to it that he was securely fixed for the rest of his life. Tao has been the holder of the Chemistry Chair here at the University of Hongkong for many years, and the old gent sent me out here to work with him on a new formula.”

“An explosive?”

“Well, in a way. I can give you the dope on that—but it must not be published.”

Hardwick nodded.

“Professor Tao has just perfected a formula for an explosive which requires no nitrates,” said Humphries.

“No nitrates!” both Bish and Tug gagged together. “But how can that be done?”

“It’s somewhat complicated—but it’s a fact. No nitrates of any sort are required in what we’ve called, for the want of a better name, ‘No-nite’. It is four times more effective than tri-nitro-toluol—TNT—and it could be manufactured from materials which are generally considered worthless.”

“But Good Lord, Humphries,” Hardwick sputtered excitedly, “anyone who has that secret can be independent of all nitrates in case of a war. What wouldn’t Japan give for that?”

“There’s the story,” agreed Humphries. “But it wasn’t a Jap who killed Professor Tao—of that I am sure.”

“But there’s nothing here in the story about any one being under suspicion,” Bishop broke in.

“No, you see I’ve kept my suspicions quiet. The University authorities still feel that he was murdered by a Japanese agent. And meanwhile the Hongkong police are working in their usual slow methodical manner. But they do not know what I know.”

“Aren’t you taking an awful chance on withholding evidence?”

“Perhaps. But I’d like to nail that bird myself. That is, I’d like to get my hands on—that girl!”

“Girl?” both Bish and Tug snapped.

“That’s right. I have every reason to believe Professor Tao was murdered by a girl—a girl who took his formula from his lacquer box.” And Humphries stopped a minute and let that sink in.

“The formula is missing?”

“Every word of it. It was inscribed in a small silk-bound book. But that she-devil will have a hell of a time reading it.”

“Why? Is it in code?”

“Might just as well be. It’s in the old Yunnan writing, and there aren’t half a dozen men in the world who can read it. Even I do not know the details of the real formula. I only worked on several stages of the early experiments and presented my findings to the Professor.”

“Old Yunnan! Let’s see, that was the language used by the priests in their communications during the First Ming Dynasty, isn’t it?”

“Right! It has been saved by a handful of Yunnanese chemists. They use it as the modern medical profession uses Latin to write out medical formulas.”

“Yeah, but what about this girl?” broke in Bish. “How do you know it was a girl?”

“Here’s the inside dope. And maybe you can help me. A few days ago, a girl—a darned pretty girl—attempted to see the Professor on some gag or other. She gave some phony Russian name. Since the Professor was busy, I shooed her off. But when I discovered the Professor dead this

afternoon, I found this handkerchief under one of the tables near the door of the laboratory.

HUMPHRIES threw a tiny handkerchief across the table, and both Bish and Hardwick reached for it.

“Of course neither of us know anyone in this town,” Tug said pointedly with a glance at Bish. “But do you remember the name she gave? I see the initial ‘K’ here in one corner.” Then Tug sniffed lightly at the ‘kerchief, caught a trace of primrose perfume.

“I don’t remember,” Humphries answered pensively. “But I do not believe her surname began with a ‘K.’ I think it was something like Velore, Velan, or something.”

“Maybe Velox,” said Bish, without seeming to be aware he was saying anything.

“That’s it! Miss Velox! I remember now—like photographic paper. But how did you know?”

“I met a jane with a goofy name like that once,” Bish said with no particular stress on the phrase.

“Sure—in Ceylon when you were on that world tour, wasn’t it?” Tug broke in. “You told me about her once.”

“Maybe,” said Bish, “only I never was in Ceylon. Forget it.”

“Yeah?” quizzed Humphries. “Well, if either of you know her—”

Tug broke in: “What the devil would a girl who you say is Russian be doing swiping explosive formulas? Russia has plenty of nitrates. I’m swinging with the Jap idea.” And he turned to stare out of the window.

“She could sell it to the Japs, couldn’t she?” said Humphries.

“And translate that Yunnan for them?” came back Tug.

“They’ll probably find someone, somewhere who can translate it,” the chemistry assistant said pointedly. That idea had seemingly just dawned on him.

“But there’s only about six guys in the world who can translate it,” said Bish. “Why not check up on them—and then sling out a dragnet?”

“This is China, not the state of Illinois,” barked Humphries.

“Still, it’s an idea,” agreed Tug. “It’s not my idea, of course; I would look for a Jap.”

“What about the girl?” demanded Humphries.

“She’s yours. I wouldn’t trespass.”

Humphries eyed Hardwick coldly for several seconds. He couldn’t figure Hardwick.

“What does this book look like?” Tug broke in to shatter Humphries’ visual interrogation.

“Just a book of rice paper of fairly heavy texture. It is bound in leather, which in turn is covered with a fine Shantung silk bearing an old Canton junk design. It is about a quarter of an inch in thickness and about four by six in size.”

Bish was taking wads of notes, but Hardwick could not get his mind off the girl, Countess Astrid Khitrovo, who had played such an amazing, and yet somewhat questionable, part in the mystery of the Japanese aircraft factory on Quelport Island and the kidnapping of General Ling Kai Ching. What was her tie-up in this new mystery? Why had she called on Professor Tao and how had she come to leave such an obvious item of evidence against herself in the laboratory of the University of Hongkong?

“So you suspect no one but this girl?” Tug suddenly asked the young American chemist. “You really don’t believe a Jap could have taken the book and cleared out?”

Humphries hesitated, then said: “Well, I still say it was the girl. Professor Tao lived at the University. He had but few friends. And as far I know, no one in Hongkong but myself knew what he was actually working on.”

Hardwick finished his drink. Then he started to turn in his seat, for there was a sudden scuffle somewhere down the room—a jangle of Chinese voices and the pad-pad of felt-covered slippers. A young coolie, mouth agape, eyes flaming with fear, and arms raised in mute supplication, tottered out of the circle of black-coated waiters who had attempted to bar his way.

“Mist’ Hardwick! . . . Mist’ . . . Hardwick!” the coolie boy managed to get out. He was having great difficulty in speaking.

“What is it?” cried Tug, jumping up.

The coolie boy took more steps forward. Then with a wheezy gasp he fell flat on his face.

“Good Lord! Look!” gasped Humphries.

“A knife—a foot long!” added Hardwick.

“Right in the middle of his back!” completed Bish.

They dropped beside the boy, who was now struggling to get his face around. Hardwick reached for the knife handle, but then realized that to attempt to withdraw it now would only complete what the assassin had started.

“What’s it all about? He asked for you,” Humphries whispered as the excited waiters crowded around. “Look, in his right hand.”

The coolie boy was true to his trust, whatever it was. He struggled again and hit the floor with his clenched right hand. Hardwick reached down, turned the fingers back. There was a small cream colored note there, carefully folded. He took it out, stepped back to read it.

Again he got that unmistakable scent of primrose. He gave Bish a quick glance, and the pudgy newspaperman, quickly catching his cue, directed Humphries’ gaze back to the knife.

“They must have chased him to prevent him from getting here,” he barked at Humphries. “What sort of a knife is that?”

“Horrible thing!” cried Humphries.

“Let’s get out of here,” Hardwick suddenly broke in.

“But you can’t go until the Police arrive,” argued Humphries. “What about that note he was carrying?”

“That’s it. I can’t waste any more time. This is important.”

“But you . . . you can’t leave me here like this,” bleated Humphries.

“Sorry. Got to get off a story. Come on, Bish!”

“Call me Beansie!” insisted Bish as they hurried away.

IN three minutes, Bish and Hardwick were being trundled down Queen Street in two rickshaws. Finally, Hardwick barked sharply and the two runners turned into a wharf entrance.

They paid their toll, darted inside, and hurried past pungent bales of copra, casks of oil, and stacks of oakum until they reached the gang plank of a small canvas-topped steamer.

“Mr. Hardwick!” a voice called. “Over here, Mr. Hardwick.”

“It’s the Countess!” Bish said excitedly. “What the devil!”

They dashed onto the boat, hurried to the girl, who was sitting on the long bench that ran along the side of the engine room superstructure. She

was pale and plainly tired, but she had not lost the aura of aristocratic beauty that had been on Hardwick's mind ever since he encountered her in the Astor Hotel in Shanghai two weeks before.

"I'm so glad you have come. You can get me to Shanghai, can't you?" she asked pleadingly.

"Can all three of us get aboard that Mureaux at Whampoa?" Tug hurled at Bish. "Sure we can," he snapped, answering his own question. "You two can squeeze in the back if we take no bombs. And now what's it all about?" he said, turning back to the girl.

"I've got to get to Shanghai!" the girl said, wringing her hands.

"What about Professor Tao?" Tug came back, watching the deckhands throw off the head-line of the little coastal steamer.

For a moment the girl was stunned. No words came from her throat.

"Come on. We know all about the Professor and his little book—but you pulled one boner, sweetheart. You left your handkerchief on, the floor there. Here it is—Yours, eh?"

The girl took the dainty piece of cambric, clenched it tightly in her fine fingers. "I was too late. He was dead—murdered—when I got there to warn him. The book was gone, too. That's what I went to warn him about."

"How did you know about the book?"

"It was Taro Yoshida, General Nagano's secretary. I spotted him disguised as a Malay gardener in the University grounds."

"But no one knew what Professor Tao was working on," Hardwick charged. "You'd better get this story straight."

"That fool young Humphries let it out one day when he allowed Yoshida to accompany him on a trip to Kowloon. Yoshida went along as his Number 1 boy, and you know how men will talk when they get off on their own."

"But what was Yoshida doing there in disguise in the first place?"

"Tokyo knew Professor Tao was working on something important. He had too much outside assistance and backing to be just an ordinary University professor—so they put Yoshida on his trail."

"And Humphries spilled the beans?" mused Tug staring out at the muddy water. "Still," he

jerked around, "that does not explain how you knew about it."

"My brother—he's recovered now from the injuries he received in Shanghai—went to visit Professor Tao, who was a great friend of my father's back in the better days. It was while he was visiting the Professor that he spotted Yoshida. But not being certain of him, he asked me to drop around. I recognized him and immediately tried to see the Professor and warn him. When I did get there on a ruse, it was too late."

"You got there on a ruse, you say?"

"Yes, I had Ching Let, one of our agents, get Mr. Humphries away on a false errand."

"That the lad you sent with the note?" asked Bish.

"Yes, that was Ching Let."

"Well, you sent him on his last errand," said Tug. "They got him, somehow, just before he arrived." And he explained the tragic ending to the China boy's errand. The girl burst into tears, and the two Americans walked up the deck for a few minutes.

"We've got to nail this Yoshida bird before he gets away with that formula," husked Hardwick. "Got any ideas?"

"The book's no good without someone to translate it," reminded Bish.

"That's right. But if this guy Yoshida has the book, he'll try to finish the job by getting hold of someone who can dope it out."

Hardwick hurried back to the girl. She was now composed again.

"Look here, Countess," he half-whispered sitting down beside her. "Do you know anyone—who knows the Yunnan tongue? This is important, so think fast."

"Yunnan tongue?"

Hardwick explained hurriedly.

"Well," replied the girl, "we had a Chinese professor who was familiar with Yunnan formulate, a secret code for the White Brigade some years ago. Let me see . . . It was a Buddhist priest by the name of Fa Hein who was at the Vinaya Monastery outside Shaowu. As a matter of fact, I went to Shaowu and got the code. I know the section well."

"Shaowu is about halfway between here and Shanghai, isn't it? Somewhere east of the Bohea Range near the end of the Min River?"

“That’s right.”

“Then we’ll have to break up your trip to Shanghai, eh?”

“You seem to have my plans fitting perfectly into yours, don’t you?” the girl said with a wry smile.

For the rest of the trip across the bay to the mainland, they sat and made sketchy plans. The night began to fall fast now, and they tried to guess the actual movements of Taro Yoshida. Would he race to Shanghai, or would he seek refuge on the island of Formosa where he could be picked up by a Japanese war vessel and hurried to Japan?

They got their answer when they arrived at the Whampo aerodrome.

WHAMPOA’S tiny field sat in a swamp a few miles north of the old city. It buzzed with a strange tang of activity unlike that experienced at any other airport. There were three frowsy canvas-covered hangars that groaned in the light wind. A bleary light tried its best to illuminate the tarmac, but it only managed to bring out the worst in the layout.

Hardwick had hired a wheezy motor car of uncertain vintage and make. It clanked them up to the hangar door, deposited them near a drab circle of clacking Chinese mechanics. From the group strode a Chinese officer, complete with sword, belt, and holster in which was rammed a monstrous monkey-wrench. He recognized Bish at once and began the usual line of “Honorable Sirs,” after illuminating his greeting with a number of profound bows to the girl.

“Where’s the Mureaux?” demanded Bish, shading his eyes and peering into the dim confines of the first hangar.

“But, sir,” expostulated the Chinese, “the-Russian gentleman and his Number 1 boy have taken it—but a few minutes ago.”

“Taken it?” gasped Bish and Tug together. “By what authority?”

“The Russian gentleman had credentials from the 19th Route Army to deliver the plane to General Ting Chao at Nanking. I saw the papers myself.”

“And he had a number 1 boy with him?” asked the girl. “What sort of a boy?”

“I not look, miss. I am occupied with the Russian gentleman. I have been very busy with getting these French planes through to our fronts.”

Hardwick spat, walked up and down. They were stuck now—and they’d have to like it.

“Didn’t I tell you,” Bish spluttered, “that Mr. Hardwick would come for it tonight?”

“But we have wait—and you no come,” the Chinese explained. “But Captain Borgroffo, come with suitable papers.”

“Captain Borgroffo?” Countess Khitrovo cried. “Captain Borgroffo?”

The Chinese looked even dumber, whereupon Tug stepped in with: “You know this Captain Borgroffo, Countess?”

She drew him away: “He’s the man who suggested that Fa Hein, the Buddhist priest, draw up our White Brigade code. He knows Fa Hein very well.”

“There’s the story,” muttered Tug. “He’s in on it with the Japs—probably getting a sweet cut. And Shaowu is about 450 miles away. Swell!”

“There’s no other plane here?” asked the girl of Bishop.

That was the last one of the consignment. No more for about a month, even if then? They wanted me to fly it up. What the hell did you want to go to Shanghai for, anyway?”

“I thought Yoshida would report with the book to the Japanese officials there. I hoped to head him off.”

“Well, I must say you have more than your share of nerve,” said Tug, “Considering how the Japanese must love you after that last mess.”

“Isn’t there something we can use to get to Shaowu? Something—anything that will fly?” pleaded the girl.

“Sure there is,” whispered Bish. “There’s an American Bellanca Pacemaker in the other hangar. It belongs to the National Geographic Society’s exploration crowd. They’re working out of here seeking for some ancient ruins.”

“What’s the plane look like?” demanded Tug out of one corner of his mouth. “Does she appear as if she can ‘take it’—if she has to?”

“Pretty good. I saw it this morning. No armament but a rifle or so—but there’s no other ship here now.”

“All right. We’ll take that.”

“How?”

Hardwick did not answer. He simply pulled his wallet out of his pocket and extracted a card. Then he carelessly strode across to the Chinese officer and presented it.

"We will take the National Geographic Society's Bellanca. Will you see that it is properly fueled?"

The Chinese squinted at the card, gulped once, saluted, then bellowed a tangle of clacky orders which sent the gaping mechanics scampering toward the closed hangar.

"What did that?" asked the amazed Bish.

Hardwick handed over the card with grave solemnity. Across it printed in impressive type Bish found:

H. G. HARDWICK

This is to remind you that your subscription terminates with this issue. We suggest that you send us a check to cover your renewal of the magazine.

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Bish read again, clicked his heels and saluted to complete the impressiveness of the startling announcement. "Why didn't ya tell me, pal?" he said out of the side of his mouth as he bent in a deep bow.

The Countess Khitrivo repressed a grin. "There's nothing like having the right connections," she agreed.

THE Bellanca turned out to be a machine of the 1936 vintage powered with a 420 h.p. Wright engine. It was in fair condition, with new fabric on the wings and new dope on the fuselage. It bore the Geographic Society's insignia.

"Let's speed it up. This Chinese mug may take it into his head and call someone before we get away," Bish said.

"You can join Mr. Hardwick in checking the plane. I'll engage the Oriental gentleman in conversation to keep him out of mischief," the girl said with a smile.

"Okay," cracked Bish, and he toddled off toward the hangar where Hardwick was already inspecting the fuel gauges.

Together they helped in pumping about 150 gallons of gasoline into the wing tanks, then saw to it that there was enough oil. The cabin had been

fitted up as a four-seater with a portion of cargo space converted into a flying laboratory. Inside they discovered dark-room facilities, several types of aerial cameras, mapping devices, and the usual display of exploration equipment including four Winchester rifles, which Bish stroked fondly.

"Very nice," observed Bish. "Let's go on a picnic."

"Don't worry, I have a feeling we're in for a beaut!" offered Tug. "Call the Countess now so we can get going."

Tug barked signals, then started the Wright engine and let it rumble until the temperature needle crawled up the dial. Bish handed the Countess up, and lastly they explained to the still puzzled Chinese officer that they would return in about twelve hours and that there would be no necessity for reporting them to any of the authorities. They stated that they were simply flying up to Amoy, the treaty port, for some special supplies.

The Oriental saluted, bowed, and backed away.

Tug took the Bellanca off across wind and let her climb gently until he got the feel of the controls. The Countess sat up front with him, while Bish pottered around somewhere in the rear, checking the ammunition and what not.

Now they turned north over Fatshan, curled east at Lienping, then skirted the foothills of the Ta Yuling Mountains. Finally they set their nose on Shaowu, which lay more than three hundred miles away.

"There's a small field at Ting-chau where we can get down in case we have any mechanical trouble on the way," the Countess explained to Tug, holding a small map before him and pointing out that little town in Fukien Province.

"I don't think we'll have to. We have gas enough for about 750 miles, and she seems to be working like a top," explained Tug. "But what are our chances for a landing anywhere reasonably near this Vinaya Monastery?"

"The Monastery stands on a high bluff overlooking the river. There's plenty of space around its grounds which the priests and the Buddhist students cultivate. There are a few open fields used as pasturage for cattle. But what are your plans?" queried the girl.

"I have none. I believe we shall have to make them up as we go along. Right now we can only

hope to arrive at the Monastery in time to get to this Fa Hein friend of yours and try to stop him from translating the book. Possibly we can get possession of it."

A light came into the girl's eyes. "Why are you doing all this for me?" she asked. There was a softness in her voice.

Tug hesitated, then made a hurried answer: "I've got a hunch we're shoving our nose into something hot this, time—and there may be a great news story in it."

They raced on for another hour, with Bish still dabbling around in the cabin space behind.

"What the deuce is Bish up to back there?" Tug finally asked the Countess. "I'll bet our fat friend has gone to sleep."

The Countess went back to investigate, then came back smiling.

"He's enjoying himself with the photographic material. Says he's trying some experiments."

"He's nuts!"

And Tug Hardwick settled down to checking his position over Ting-chau, which the Countess now identified by a small aerodrome below.

TUG'S reveries were abruptly broken by a clatter from behind, and he suddenly found Bish leaning over his shoulder.

"Holy smoke!" bellowed the stout newsman. "The Mureaux is right behind us! It came up from somewhere below!"

"They must have landed, for some reason, at Tingchau," the Countess gasped, her eyes wide with fright. "What are we going to do?"

"Listen!" Bish barked back. "They may try to down us. I'll bet they called back and found out that we took the Geographic Society plane. That would be enough excuse—if they saw us on their track."

"Of course," the girl cried. "They'd know we're chasing them—especially if they learn that I am with you."

"Where are they?" demanded Tug.

Bish pressed his face against the window, then called: "They're dead behind us. Start throwing this peanut wagon about, will you? Come on, Countess!"

He dragged the girl out of her seat while Tug began to sling the Bellanca all over the sky. Bish

and the girl then scrambled up the aisle and disappeared into the freight compartment.

From above, a gull-wing French Mureaux—a fighting job with Hispano-Suiza engine and a three-bladed prop—slashed toward them. It looked like the Geographic plane would be cold meat.

In the Mureaux, a heavy-set Russian in the front cockpit was enjoying his position immensely. He was watching for his chance with his front armament, while a small Japanese behind him fingered a machine gun mounted under the streamline covering of the double cockpit.

"Which wing would you like me to shoot off first, Yoshida?" Captain Borgroffo asked, with a knowing grin. "With this cannon fitted to the motor, it is too easy, eh?"

"Never mind your trick shots, Captain," Yoshida warned. "I want to see you get a direct hit and put them in flames. That's the only assurance we can have that we have completely destroyed them."

Captain Borgroffo nodded grimly. He'd show this Jap what a Russian could do. Thereupon the Hispano motor cannon spoke twice, causing the Mureaux to vibrate from stem to stern.

"You have not shot off a wing, Captain," hissed the Nipponese. "Allow me to try my luck."

Meanwhile, a pitiful single flash of gunfire spat up at them from one of the windows of the Bellanca. And the Russian swore as a slug smacked against the Mureaux's all-metal wing, making him cringe in the cockpit.

Behind, Yoshida pressed the trigger of his machine gun, sprayed a hosing of lead down on the helpless commercial plane.

Hardwick fed more gas to the Bellanca, then looked up. Mercilessly the Mureaux was diving upon them, spitting a hail of death from both machine gun and cannon. Frantically Tug kicked rudder to escape—then he gasped in horror. For a sickening trail of fiery smoke was billowing from the cabin ports of the Bellanca, and from inside there came a fierce scarlet glow that indicated that the whole interior was aflame.

"There you are," the Russian Captain beamed over his shoulder. "I told you I could do it."

"I do not agree," Yoshida replied. "I feel that it was my burst that put them in flames."

Both now looked down to watch the Bellanca twist and spiral in her plunge. The flaming smoke was now pouring back in longer streaks. And finally the lines of the plane were lost in the dull nothingness below.

Borgroffo and Yoshida strained their eyes to catch sight of the ultimate crash of the American ship. There then came a fearful mushrooming of dull whitish flame and a cloud of smoke then trickled along the low valley. They saw no more of the Bellanca.

"Now," the Russian said, "we can continue our way in security. Since your Countess friend is not likely to bother us further, we can complete the rest of our task in comparative freedom. And I might say that I long for the serenity of the Vinaya Monastery and the fine viands of our Buddhist friends. You are satisfied, yes?"

"I am," Yoshida answered blandly, "satisfied that it was my gun—not your heavy voiced cannon—that destroyed the plane. However, we will forget that now and, as you say, rest secure that we have at last eliminated our most persistent enemies."

The Russian sniffed, turned back to his piloting.

THE Bellanca rolled to a thumping halt on a fairly open stretch of tufted ground with her round ports still smoking.

Hardwick was frankly scared and unable fully to comprehend what had really happened. Every second on his way down he had expected to feel the fuselage leap away from the wings and start its final lurch earthward for the splintering climax. But nothing like that had happened. The Bellanca had held together, allowing Tug to steer her dead into the open area that had come up out of the black-green nothingness below. And still expecting to be consumed by the gulping flames behind him, the newsman finally set the craft down and cut the switch.

When Tug leaped clear, he was greeted by the laughter of both Bish and the Countess. They were at the cabin ports, grinning like a couple of mischievous school-kids.

"Get out of there!" called Tug. "Get out of there before she goes up."

"You're goofy," cracked Bish with a ribald cackle.

Tug hurried up, took a zinc-covered metal holder from the hands of the girl. He looked at it a second or two, then it all came to him.

"You two devils staged that?" he gasped. "You used Taylor flares and the like to make believe we were on fire?"

"It was Beansie's idea," the girl went on to explain, coming out of the cabin door. "He made two flares of some sort, using the photographic flash powder he found in there."

"But it was all so fiery. I thought the whole cabin was in flames," argued Tug.

"Oh, I fixed that by mixing some other stuff here. I can make it burn any color," Bishop went on. "One flare that I fixed up in an old oil can worked swell streaking out of the upper hatch. Then to make it more realistic I set off another powder which made it look as though we were on fire inside. It was all quite realistic."

"Yeah, too realistic for me. And what were you doing during all that madness?" demanded Tug turning to the Countess.

"Just sticking those Taylor flares out of the window and pulling the wire igniters. Lovely, wasn't it?"

Hardwick was finally satisfied, and he now glanced up into the sky. "I wonder how they came on us that way," Tug said, stroking his chin. "They must have landed at Ting-chau, just as you said. I wonder what for?"

"Yoshida probably wanted to know whether you had turned up. I guess he wanted to make sure whether he was being followed. He's a very methodical man, this Yoshida," said Countess Khitrovo.

"Maybe. But that hardly answers the question. He has something in the back of his nut—something we don't know about."

"Perhaps he tried to get a message through to this Vinaya Monastery, so that he would be sure of contacting this priest guy who knows the Yunnan lingo," suggested Bish.

"No," said Tug wagging his head. "He wouldn't do that. He's certain Fa Hein will be there, otherwise he wouldn't have started. But he certainly is in a hurry to get there, you can bet on that, or he would never have taken the risk of swiping that Mureaux. Still, he stopped at Ting-chau for something—something hot!"

“Well, let’s get moving. That guy will be there and have the whole blamed book translated before we get going again,” argued Bish. “And won’t they get a surprise when we waltz in on them?”

“I wonder,” said Tug. “Those birds—Hello! What’s this?”

“Horsemen . . . bandits,” husked the girl. “We must hurry.”

“Bandits? This far south and east?” demanded Tug.

The muffled thunder of hooves came closer as they started for the cabin door of the *Bellanca*. There were fully fifty men cantering toward them. They carried lances and rode with that certain ease of men born to the Saddle. Before Tug could get the girl up into the cabin, the leading patrol group thundered up, and a small squat leader barked an order. The others simply reined in smoothly, drew short carbines from their rifle scabbards, and covered the three before they could make another move.

Tug, Bish and the Countess could only stand there in the half light of the clear night and watch the rest ride up and circle the plane. The horses stood swishing their heads and waving their long manes while their riders sat motionless and expressionless. A tall, Mongol-type man rode out of the circle and drew rein before the three who stood close together at the cabin door.

“These are Kansu Tartars from the West,” whispered the girl. “What on earth are they doing this close to the coast? They are far from their own territory.”

“There goes the book and all the business,” moaned Bish.

The big Mongol rode like a Cossack. His head-dress, a cross between a Russian bearskin and a Punjab turban, glittered with crude silver ornaments. And his blue tunic bore two leather bandoliers heavy with Lee-Enfield clips. To complete his outfit, a picturesque ivory-handled revolver, rusty yet foreboding, was stuck in his wide leather belt.

The man smiled. He was handsome, in a bandit way. And now he saluted and bowed in his saddle in a somewhat affected manner.

“I am so sorry to bother you in this way,” he said, “but I am afraid I shall not be able to allow you to leave—that is, for some time. We have use for your plane.”

“And to whom are we indebted for this interruption?” asked the girl, moving forward from the cover of Tug’s shoulder.

“I am Kwang Kei—a bandit king, I suppose you would call me. These,” he bowed again and swung his arms in a half-circle, “are my Kansu Tartars.”

THERE was a certain fascinating timbre to the man’s voice which bespoke a certain culture. He used his words well and smiled as he explained his position. Obviously he was proud and every inch a leader.

Tug moved forward.

“I wish you to understand that we are Americans, and that we are on a survey mission sanctioned by the Chinese National Government. We must object to any interference, and any untoward move will be reported to the proper authorities,” he said plainly and slowly.

“Of course, I understand,” Kwang Kei said quietly. “You are supposed to be Edward Farnsworth in charge of the Geographic Society’s exploring venture. But of that, I am not sure. You see, I happen to know that this plane was stolen this evening from a hangar in Whampoa.”

“Now I know why Yoshida landed at Tingchau,” Tug whispered to Bish out of the side of his mouth.

“However,” the bandit chief went on, “I will not detain you any longer than necessary. I can feel for a fellow robber. There is honor among thieves, you know.”

“What’s your game?” asked Tug.

“Just a little matter of some Chinese gold intended for the Nationalist Army headquarters at Nanking,” Kwang Kei explained blandly.

“He means the money the Canton government has raised to help fight the Japanese,” the girl said in a low tone.

“A train is now moving north with a substantial sum which is really intended for the coffers of foreign munition makers,” smiled Kwang Kei. “It was collected from the poor and needy of the southern provinces, who do not realize in what manner it will be frittered away.”

“It’s for the defense of their country, isn’t it?” demanded Tug.

“That might be one explanation, since it was the excuse for levying the taxes,” the big Tartar

said, "but we who are more acquainted with the wiles of those in power know that it will be wastefully spent for weapons of death—armaments paid for at exorbitant Occidental rates. I deem it my duty to intercept that money and—"

"And spend it on your own bloody pastimes," broke in Tug.

"Not all of it. Our requirements are small and our demands not too unreasonable. We require good horseflesh under us, sufficient arms and ammunition for our defense, and sufficient food to keep up our physical strength."

"You know," muttered Bish from behind Tug, "I'm beginning to like this guy."

An idea was forming in Tug's mind, and he made a quick decision.

"All right," he said. "If you feel that way about this war chest business, we'll let you carry on. What are your plans?"

"Still, I do not trust you. But I will explain my plans at any rate. There are always bullets for betrayers. You understand, I think."

KWANG KEI gave an order, whereupon his men dismounted and loosened their saddle girths. He, too, dismounted, turning his charger over to an orderly who moved up from out of the darkness. This bandit leader was more suave than ever now as he strode up and down before the three captives.

"Within an hour," he opened, lighting a long black cheroot, "an Army train bearing a strong box of true Chinese gold will pass through the Fu Nang Pass north of Lungyen and into the Valley of Black Blight which runs north toward Yungyan. You may not have heard of the Valley of Black Blight, but regardless, you will take me there in your plane. With," he added, "a couple of my loyal men as a suitable guard."

"You mean you want me to pilot you?" asked Tug.

"Of course. Who else? I am not a skilled pilot, and none of my men are acquainted with petrol engines."

"You're taking an awful chance," warned Tug.

"I ignore the threat. Within the hour my second troop will have attacked the Army train and will have waylaid the wagon carrying the gold. I propose to arrive there in time to remove the gold chest, take it back to this troop, and hurry it away

into the hills of Kiangsi—where we will see that it is properly distributed among those who need it most."

"Forgetting, of course, that to do so your murderous gang will have to kill a few dozen of the poor devils you so sympathetically profess to be aiding," smirked Tug. "Still, you're in the saddle, so I suppose we shall have to go through with it. By the way, you don't know a gentleman by the name of Taro Yoshida, do you?"

"Or Captain Borgroffo?" added Countess Khitrovo.

The bandit chief went white. He stopped his striding, faced them with jaw set.

"You devils," he hissed, as he reached for the massive weapon at his hip. "Then you—you know?"

"Now the cat's out of the bag," moaned Bish. He turned to the Tartar: "Call me Beansie. You can carve it on my headstone. To the tender memory of Alton 'Beansie' Bish—"

"Shut up!" Tug barked. Then he faced Kwang Kei: "Of course we know," he raged. "You have been working with Yoshida and his gang all the time."

"That's why you are here so far from your mountain country seeking an Army train of gold," the Countess added.

"Yeah," broke in Bish. "But why is he here? We were supposed to have been shot down in flames."

That statement caused Kwang Kei to replace his guns. He turned, chattered in some strange tongue to two of his lieutenants. Evidently, the Tartar was puzzled about something. He pondered a moment, suddenly made a decision. Then more orders and rapid action sounded somewhere behind. Four bandits, hairy and smelly, came up, grabbed Bish and the Countess. Tug tried to interfere, but he only walked into the curved blade of a massive cutlass. Bish and the girl submitted to having their hands tied behind them, and then they were walked away toward a shadowy copse of trees nearby where some of the bandits had already lit a campfire.

Tug wanted to help them, but he could not keep his mind off what Bish had said. Why had Kwang Kei turned up here—even though he might have been tipped off by Yoshida? There would have been nothing left if the plane had

fallen in flames, as they had planned. He might have figured that all three might have escaped by parachute, but even so, anyone coming down in this desolate territory would be days getting out and would stand no chance of intercepting Professor Tao's explosive secret.

He stood there watching them march Bish and the girl off.

"You need not fear," Kwang Kei said thoughtfully. "They will be taken care of—unless." Then he adopted a new tone: "You know Yoshida?"

"No. I only know of him. He's something in the Japanese cabinet, isn't he?" replied Tug, appearing sincere.

"You are not Edward Farnsworth?" Kwang Kei prodded.

"No. My name is Hardwick. I'm simply an American newspaper correspondent connected with the Amalgamated News Service."

"I seem to have heard your name—somewhere. But I cannot recall," the big Tartar said.

"Probably it's just as well for me. But I admit that I've done a few articles on Chinese bandits—and their peculiar methods of torture."

"Well, come on, my friend. We had better be going, and it will be best if you, what you call, 'play the game'—or you and your companions will get a taste of those bandit tortures—first hand."

Then, while Kwang-Kei completed his plans for the flight to the Valley of Black Blight, Hardwick was left well guarded, to ponder over the problems at hand. But somehow his mind continued to wander back to the business of the Geographic Society plane, and the question of why Yoshida had been so keen about making certain that it was destroyed, or at least safely taken into custody.

Kwang Kei finally selected two of his chief lieutenants and they climbed aboard the plane. Before getting in himself, the big Tartar showed Tug a map of southeastern China and indicated where he wished to be flown.

"We are now at a spot a few miles east of Tingchau," he explained. "I wish to be flown east toward Lung-yen, here. It's about sixty miles by air. You should do it well within forty-five minutes, eh?"

Tug nodded: "With any luck.

"From that point, I will direct you."

Tug climbed up, glared at the two pig-faced men who sat in the two rear chairs with heavy pistols snuggled in their laps, and took his seat at the controls. Then he stole a glance back toward the rear of the cabin. He was trying to find the secret of the Bellanca.

There was nothing there but the jumble of pots, cans, bottles, and landing-flare standards that Bish had so usefully employed in evading the attack of the Mureaux.

At least nothing that Tug could see.

Now the cabin door slammed and Kwang Kei came up, shoved his way into the co-pilot's seat, and nodded with a grim smile to Tug.

THE flight out toward Lungyen was uneventful. Tug quietly ignored most of his captor's questions, while he gave himself up to a careful contemplation of the situation. He wondered, for instance, why this gold was being moved through such dangerous country by Army wagon train, and then he realized that considering everything, it was probably the safest measure to take—if it were carried out in complete secrecy. Had they tried to ship it by sea, it would have had to pass through the Japanese naval blockade, and its movement by rail would have been most obvious and certainly dangerous.

They reached Lungyen in about forty minutes, and by that time Tug had partially formed a plan of escape. Still, there was one point that was not yet clear in his mind.

Over the Fu Nang Pass, they circled at about 4,500 feet. To the right lay the Valley of Black Blight, a sinister piece of topography. The trees, what there were of them, were gaunt spikes, reminiscent of the frousy spines on a beast that had moulted badly. To the east ran a thin black line—the Fu Nang Pass through which the Chinese Army pack train with its load of gold must now be crawling.

Tug watched Kwang Kei, saw the lines on his face change as he stared down. Suddenly a portion of the black, spine-like line below seemed to crinkle. There were spattering slashes of light and the dull slow movement of lice-like patches moving across the dirty back of some monster.

"They have attacked," Kwang Kei said smiling. "It will take but a minute now."

“Too bad you don’t have courage enough to go down and give them a hand,” smirked Tug. “But I presume you are too valuable a leader to take any such chances. What price the starving coolies of Canton now?”

The big Tartar laughed. “You have all the stock phrases of the American newspaperman,” he said. “You all make the same statements. They belch from you like stamped biscuits coming out of a hopper.”

“Maybe, but that still does not answer the question.”

“The answer would be equally as stereotyped,” agreed the Tartar. “Something about men willing to die for an ideal, even though that ideal may only be a Tartar chief.”

“Bunk!” snorted Tug.

They waited for a few minutes more, then the bandit nodded: “We will go down now,” he smiled. “Try and land as close as possible.”

“I can get right down in the pass,” said Tug. “It looks safer there.”

The engine was throttled back and Tug S-turned the Bellanca back and forth until the ship was floating over the heads of the men below. Tug set her down a hundred yards or so beyond the frenzied ring of Tartar tribesmen that surrounded what was left of the wagon train.

As Kwang Kei jumped out, he gave stern orders to the two guards. Then he went over to the mad milling mob, and after quieting them with a gesture, he inspected the wagons. A few Chinese still groveled near the wheels and a horse with a broken leg was trying to hobble away into the darkness.

From the darkness beyond, a few desultory shots continued to ring out and fierce flashes of flame became golden javelins through the underbrush. The Chinese were still trying to get up enough courage to make a counter attack and regain their lost gold.

But Kwang Kei was a born leader. He snapped orders thick and fast. The stragglers were recalled and the raiders who were still after blood were warned to return and re-form their lines. The wagons were run together, the dead bodies piled into the tangle, and the lot was fired with flaming torches.

And while the blaze leaped up, Tug could see the treasure chest being moved toward the

Bellanca. It took the efforts of four monster men to lug it the few yards that separated the plane from the center of the barbaric ceremony.

And as they came on, Tug finally got a nubbin of an idea. He smiled grimly, looked about the cabin again. The two guards were still watching him, but they were also acutely interested in the gold chest that was being portered toward the plane. Tug could have taken a chance right then. Once he got into the air the guards would not dare shoot him, because he was their only chance of getting them down again safely.

“No,” he muttered to himself. “I’ll give my other plan a whirl. Besides, I’ve got to get Bish and the Countess out.”

The cabin door was now yanked open and the two guards came forward to help drag in the heavy chest. Kwang Kei was just behind, and his great eyes gleamed as he saw the box containing the treasure shoved into position against the freight compartment bulkhead.

After a few more orders, he climbed in. The porters backed away, uttering deep gutturals, then hurried off to where the rest of the band was preparing to mount and ride away.

“How do you want this stowed?” Kwang Kei asked. “Will it be all right back here?”

“You’ll have to move it farther front, behind those seats,” Tug said. “And,” he added thoughtfully, “We’ll have to drop one of these guards of yours. That gold must weigh plenty. I wouldn’t try to take her off with all this load, especially over ground as rough as this. Still, it’s your party.”

KWANG KEI considered for several seconds. He could not afford to risk a crack-up now. They had to get off with the gold immediately and get it well away from the Valley of Black Blight.

The Tartar decided quickly, ordered one of the guards out. The man scampered off, plainly delighted to get out of this unfamiliar mode of transportation.

“We might make it now,” said Tug with a satisfied air. “Get up here and let’s get off.”

“Back to your friends,” said Kwang Kei, with a slight smile.

“But where to after that?” queried Hardwick.

“That I shall decide when we get back to my main body.”

“Well, I’ll bet you’ve decided already.”

“You must not forget, my friend,” Kwang Kei smiled, “that I hold all the cards, as you Americans say.”

“Sure, but do you know how to play poker?” taunted Tug.

He watched the lone guard pull the cabin door shut, then he started the engine. Since it was still warm, he soon had a suitable motor temperature and was able to take off. But all the time Tug held her down, gave every indication that the Bellanca was having great difficulty in getting away. Kwang Kei was plainly worried. He gripped the sides of the co-pilot seat until Tug had her well into the clear.

“I’m not taking any chances on this trip,” Tug said after a few minutes. “I’m taking her well upstairs—just in case. I want plenty of room to get down in event of an emergency. She’s laboring now.”

For ten minutes Tug climbed her, continually heading back west toward the plain where Bish and the Countess were still captives. But he studied the dials and frowned, posing as a very worried airman.

“What is wrong?” demanded Kwang Kei.

“Our fuel. We seem to be losing it fast somehow. We’ll never make it this way.”

“What had we better do? Go down and wait for the band to come along?”

“Look here,” suggested Tug. “You know something about flying, don’t you? You can hold this wheel steady for a few minutes, can’t you?”

“Something about keeping the nose on the horizon, eh?” smiled Kwang Kei. “Yes, I can do it. What do you intend to do?”

“I’ll have to look over the tanks. I have an idea there’s something wrong with the by-pass valve. The fuel in one tank is not running through into the line that registers on the dash. Either that, or we’ve stopped a stray bullet somewhere and will have to go down.”

Kwang Kei studied Tug for fully a minute. He saw grim lines of worry in the American’s face.

“If we’re losing fuel, I’m going down now while we are in the open,” Tug said, getting from under the wheel. “You just hold her steady.”

And before Kwang Kei could think of an excuse, Tug had slipped out and had turned the wheel over to the starboard side. He first began to

fumble with the movable panels high in the cabin roof, faking an inspection of the wing tanks and the piping system they used. Then wagging his head, he slowly made his way back until he reached the door leading into the freight compartment. Still looking up, he moved slowly along to the door, opened it quietly, and moved inside, still checking an invisible something that ran alone above.

The guard, not quite certain what Tug was up to, started to follow him down the aisle. Tug slipped inside the dark rear compartment quietly—then moved like lightning.

Just in time, he grabbed something from behind him. It was one of the repeating rifles Bish had spoken of. He sharply brought its black barrel down upon the hand with the gun that came out of the semi-light behind.

There was a low cry of rage, and the automatic pistol that had been held in that groping hand went to the floor with a clank. As the man started to stoop for it through the doorway, Tug brought the gun barrel down once again. There was a sickening thock—and the bandit guard fell flat.

Tug worked fast now. He grabbed the automatic, rolled the man clear with his foot, then advanced cautiously toward the control pit.

Kwang Kei was too engrossed with the problem of keeping the Bellanca’s nose on the jagged horizon to catch on to what had happened. He did not realize that anything was amiss until he felt Tug’s arm creep over his shoulder and remove his big Luger. He turned swiftly—glared straight into the muzzle of Tug’s new gun.

“And now that pig-sticker you carry on the other side,” said Tug, taking the long curved knife in Kwang Kei’s belt. “No, sit there—and keep her nose on the horizon, for I’ve still got another trick to pull. You needn’t worry. We have plenty of fuel. That was just a tricky little gag of mine. See, Kwang Kei,—the needle goes up again! I just monkeyed a bit with the three-way fuel petcock.”

Tug now darted down the aisle again and came back with some short lengths of heavy cord.

“You can move over. We’ll let Johnny Robot fly her for a while,” said Tug snapping in the gyro-control set. “I could have done that before, but you know how it is.”

Kwang Kei fumed as he realized how he had been tricked. He was in an uncontrollable state of

anger, but the cords Tug Hardwick fitted to his ankles and elbows kept him under a reasonable degree of management.

All that settled, Tug then bound up the unconscious guard and rolled him into the space between the chest of gold and the freight compartment. Then he went forward and took over the wheel.

The rest is up to you, Kwang Kei," he said with a tight-lipped grimace. "Of course I could dump you out of the door right now, and as far as you are concerned that would be all there was to it. You wouldn't know whether I got my friends out or not—and of course you have their welfare at heart."

Kwang Kei just snorted. He was beyond normal conversation now.

"Now, you can retain what breath of life you are entitled to," Tug went on as he guided the big monoplane westward. "You can act right and say the things I want you to say—or you may get nasty and force me to blow out your cerebrum. I think the medicos call it 'cerebrum,' but maybe the word 'brains' is more understandable to you."

"You are in the driver's seat now," Kwang Kei admitted with a growl. "We shall see how it works out for you. I suppose you do know how to play poker."

THE big Bellanca had arrived back and was circling the open space below. The campfire was still blazing, and the horses of the bandits were carefully picketed off toward the north. Tug watched Kwang Kei for some time, then said: "Well, here we are. Now it's your turn to talk—and to talk right. The less said the better, for unless—"

"You are in the driver's seat, Yankee!" stormed Kwang Kei.

"All right. Don't forget that. I have a very itchy trigger finger."

Kwang Kei frowned.

"And after we get through with you, Sir Bandit," taunted Tug, "there's a little matter of one Taro Yoshida and a certain Captain Borgroffo." Then he slipped the gun into his pocket and turned his attention to the landing. He jockeyed back and forth for some time until he had the layout well in mind. Then he steadied the

Bellanca into a long glide and let her roll to a stop not far from where they had taken off.

"Now remember," he said out of the side of his mouth. "You speak to your mob out of that side window. You order them to release the captives and allow them to enter this ship. You will explain and act the part—just as if you were not any too keen about their getting too close to so much gold. You understand? And remember that you won't get out of this alive if those two friends of mine are even scratched."

The big bandit nodded grimly.

Tug left the motor idling, rammed his covered gun into Kwang Kei's ribs, then opened the side window of the cockpit. Four bandit lieutenants came up, and Kwang Kei barked at them in their own tongue.

For several spine-tingling seconds, Tug sat there, tried to figure out what the Chief was saying. But the language was unintelligible to him.

"No funny business," he warned.

"They've gone to get them," the Tartar muttered, "And now what are you going to do with me?"

"I'll keep my word as long as you keep yours," Tug snapped.

There were several more minutes of distrustful anxiety. Finally Tug could see the Countess and Bish being led through the shadows of the trees with the flames of the camp-fires dancing behind them. Kwang Kei watched too—intense hatred reflected in his heavy face.

Bish and the girl came up. They were bedraggled and puzzled figures. Tug leaned over the Tartar and yelled to them: "Get inside, quick!"

Hardwick heard the door open down the fuselage. He called down again, told his companions to look out for the guard. Then he gave the engine the gun and let the plane roll away.

"What about me?" bawled Kwang Kei. His eyes were glassy with rage.

Without replying, Tug let the Bellanca roll as far as he dared, then rolled her around.

"All right, Bish," he called. "Come and cut this cookie loose."

Bish, still startled and unable to figure it all out, took the knife from Tug and slashed the cords that held Kwang Kei.

“There you are, old topper. Back to your smelly minions.”

But Kwang Kei did not move. He simply huddled there with his head on his chest.

“It’s the fortunes of war, old boy,” said Tug. “This time, you lost—and you might as well be a good sport about it.”

Bish tugged at the man’s shoulder, but had to grab quickly to prevent his falling forward on the wheel.

“Say!” gasped Tug. “He’s out!”

“You mean we got to get him out,” jabbered Bish.

They shook the man, then shoved his head back. The face was a dull yellow and eyes were closed. Then Tug spoke up again:

“Maybe he swallowed some kind of poison—an attempt to ‘save his face’ among his men. But we can’t stop to see about that. Get him out—quick!”

They dragged the heavy Tartar down the aisle and hurriedly shoved him out of the door. Next they carried the injured and well-bound guard out and deposited him near his Chief.

In the middle distance they could see the Tartars mounting their horses.

“Get going! Get going!” yelled Bish.

Tug raced back inside the cabin, leaped for the wheel, and rammed the throttle forward. Once he heard the cabin door slam, he let her have her head. The *Bellanca* then took up the challenge, slammed toward the galloping horsemen.

Bish huddled up in the co-pilot’s seat, stared at the thundering riders. Tug held the *Bellanca* on its course, regardless of the menace, and at the last second, the horsemen wheeled. Another instant, and that roaring juggernaut would have hit them.

Tug hoiked the *Bellanca* hard, and luckily she cleared. A spattering of shots rang out in the crisp night air, forcing him to nose down again. But gaining distance, he lifted her again, hopped over a belt of scrubby trees, and roared upward.

“What’s this all about?” asked Bish finally.

“We got away.”

“Yeah, but I mean what’s the story about Kwang?”

“Oh, we got together on a little understanding—after he swiped the cash, which, incidentally, is all back there in a box.”

“Whew! What a night!” cracked back Bish!

COUNTESS KHITKOVO was very happy. She came up and took over Bish’s place while the pudgy one trimmed the ship, rearranged the somewhat displaced cargo, and set out the stage for the next sequence in this mad night of adventure. So far, they had triumphed beyond their wildest dreams.

Tug gave the girl full details of his experiences while they raced on toward the Vinaya Monastery at Shao-wu. “But,” he said, “I still can’t get over the idea that your friend Yoshida had plenty of reason for wanting this bus destroyed. There’s something aboard here that they either want, or—no, I guess it’s something they want to get rid of.”

The girl pondered, and Tug took many opportunities to gaze at her. She was, he kept thinking to himself, really beautiful.

“Plane . . . Geographic Society,” she mused. “Cabin . . . freight . . . camping stuff . . . photography equipment . . . pictures . . . Wait a moment—Pictures! It might be pictures of some sort!”

Tug nodded: “It might be pictures. Go get Bish off the top of that gold chest and see if you two can’t rustle up something in that back room—something besides smoke bombs,” he grinned.

THEY reached Shaowu in about two hours. There were already faint indications from the east of the coming dawn, and Tug realized that they would have to work fast. He was worried about his fuel now, for they did not have any too much since the trip to the Valley of Black Blight.

The Countess came back finally, somewhat worried. “Not much luck,” she said. “We found a lot of pictures, but none that seem to hold any clue to what we are trying to get at. And what are we trying to get at?”

“I’m not sure. Something, I suppose, that Yoshida wanted to get rid of. I can’t figure it out. But say, is that the monastery ahead there? That big gray mass?”

“Yes—that’s it!” cried the girl. “Notice the open space off to the right? That’s the pasture—the open field where they graze the few cattle they require. Can you get the plane in there without using your engine further?”

“Watch me!”

“You’ll have to. We can’t take any more chances.”

Tug dragged the big throttle back, and the Bellanca settled into a low whining glide. Bish came forward, peered ahead over their shoulders.

“Getting ready for the flare-up?” he asked.

“Yes, and you’d better see what weapons you can unlimber back there in that arsenal of yours. We may need a little fireworks display again, my dear Bishop.”

“Call me Beansie,” said Bish hurrying back.

Tug was worried now. There were too many things that could go wrong. Still he held the Bellanca in her glide.

Then so intent was he on his landing that he did not see what the girl saw. She grabbed his arm, screamed: “Look! They are at the plane over there. Three of them! They must have made Fa Hein a captive. See, they are pushing him into the plane.”

Tug stared, then saw the silvery Mureaux backed into a corner of the rambling field, its prop shimmering in the half light of the exhaust. They were licked!

Yes, Yoshida had captured Fa Hein and was forcing him to fly with them to some spot where they could make him decode the formula for the mysterious explosive. And the little party in the Bellanca dare not fire on the Mureaux now for fear of injuring the Buddhist priest.

Tug circled once, showed himself completely to the Mureaux pilot. He was stalling for time. And while his mind was a jumble of facts and possibilities, meanwhile the Mureaux was taxiing away.

Then all of a sudden his tangle of thoughts cleared itself. Tug was master of his emotions again. He reached down, grabbed an Aldis signaling lamp, and drew the Bellanca up into a climbing turn.

This was where brains instead of brawn were to work!

He told the girl to hold the wheel steady a moment while he flashed a message. It was to be a decoy message. And it would snare Taro Yoshida—if it worked. The thing was that he still had an idea that some mysterious photographs were bothering Yoshida—and he knew it was little more than a wild gamble.

He snapped the switch, peeped down the signal gun sight, and flipped a message in International Morse. It read:

Stop . . . Wish word with you . . . have photographs—Kwang Kei.

He repeated the message once, then again took over the wheel. “Here’s hoping,” he muttered, explaining what he had done to the girl. “Now have Bish get a couple of rifles ready—just in case.”

The Mureaux was well off the ground now, but her pilot seemed to be hesitating. And now the French plane was banking.

“They’re falling for it,” Tug muttered. “Look, they’re going back to land. Now for it, Countess. Duck back and lay low. They might let us have a blast just for good measure.”

The Mureaux worked her way into the wind again, and finally landed near the middle of the field. Tug smiled to himself, banked in the opposite direction, and finally came in—with the wind.

“It’s an awful chance landing this crazy way, but I’ve got to take it,” he said.

The Bellanca floated down from a position well clear of the field. It was a sickening sensation, but Tug was adamant in his demands on the controls. It seemed that she would never get down. But he smiled again to himself: “They’ll sure think this is Kwang Kei trying to fly the boiler himself.”

The Bellanca bellied over the hedge, and Tug fish-tailed like mad. She swayed back and forth, then bounced high.

“Wow!” gasped Bish from somewhere behind. “What are you trying to do?”

“Call me Bouncy,” gagged Tug. “You watch this landing, my boy!”

The Bellanca still floated along and was now dangerously close to the Mureaux. Tug fish-tailed again and Bish let out a loud cat-call. She dropped, rumbled, staggered, then rolled up until her whirling prop was spinning not ten inches from the whirling blade of the French fighter.

“I guess that will hold them,” grinned Tug. “Now give me a gun—and grab one for yourself.”

Bish was out first—and he took no chances. He snapped a shot at Yoshida, who was huddled over the gun in the rear cockpit. There was a scream, and the Japanese folded up and disappeared below

the edge of the pit. Tug, taking in the situation at a glance, covered the Russian pilot.

“Get out,” he ordered. “Your game’s up. We’ve laid Kwang Kei away, and we have the National Government funds, too. All we want now is the book stolen from Professor Huang Chai Tao.”

The Russian cockily climbed down, his hands raised high the instant he hit the ground. But the instant he saw the Countess Khitrovo he lost all control of himself. He began to curse, then darted around the front of the Mureaux.

Tug tried to block him off with his repeater—but he was not soon enough. Borgroffo stumbled, arms wide, straight into the path of the whirling blades of the Mureaux!

“Good Lord!” cried Tug.

There was a crash and a scream. Then the slashed body of the Russian fell to the earth lifeless.

They turned away from the horrible sight. Then the Countess managed to cry: “Where’s Fa Hein? He was here when they started off.”

Tug darted to the side of the Mureaux cockpit, peered inside. “Here he is—under Yoshida. Come on, let’s get him out.”

They lifted Yoshida’s body clear and extricated the old Buddhist priest. Then the shaken Fa Hein told them that Bish had fired just in time, for Yoshida had not been sure of the message and had only ordered Borgroffo to land to make certain. He had intended to use his guns and inquire later.

“I believe, fair one,” Fa Hein now said to the Countess, “That you will find the book and box you are seeking in that man’s pocket.”

He pointed down at Yoshida.

The Countess was on her knees at once and soon arose with the lacquer box. Opening it, she brought out the Canton-silk covered book that bore the strange junk design. She flipped the pages, smiled at Tug.

HARDWICK cut the throttles on both ships while the Countess continued her talk with Fa Hein.

“Photographs?” said the old priest. “You fooled them about some photographs? But there were some photographs. I heard them say so. That’s why they came back. They wanted some photographs—of some sort.”

“Let’s go and look,” said the Countess.

She led the way into the cabin and showed Fa Hein into the rear compartment. There she switched on a light and drew out a sheaf of 11 by 8 glossy prints. Once more they went through them, studying the pictures carefully. The priest took his time, inspected each one with a large cumbersome magnifying glass.

There were ordinary ground scenes, scenes showing broken portions of the Great Wall, obliques of mountain passes, and vertical shots of rivers and villages. But none provided even a clue—until at last Fa Hein noticed the last four.

He stood and frowned at the first for some minutes, then flipped the print over and read:

“Unidentified workings north-east of Wuchou in hidden mountain pass.”

“I thought I remembered that spot,” Fa Hein said expansively. “I spent many of my early days in that section of China. That particular pass is an almost inaccessible place.”

“And look at this one,” exclaimed the Countess, taking up the next. “Now that I look at it very closely I see what I’m sure are hangars of some sort dug out of the rocks. Lend me your glass, Father—perhaps I can identify those planes.”

The glass brought the photo out in high detail. Here was evidence enough to damn a certain European power—proof of a secret alliance with Japan. Here were fully a dozen gun-bridling war planes. How many more were inside the hidden hangars?

They studied all four pictures for some time and finally figured the story out. It was apparent that somehow the members of the Geographic Society had stumbled on this hideout not 150 miles from Canton. They had taken the pictures; and then to avoid any international complications, they had decided to keep quiet about them until they could be sure of their next move.

But those on the ground must have realized that their secret hangar and landing field had been spotted and perhaps photographed. They might even have caught the glint of sunlight on the camera lenses.

That was why Taro Yoshida wanted the Geographic Society Bellanca wholly destroyed.

After inspecting the pictures again, Tug nodded agreement. “This means bad business if

they get away with it,” he said coldly. “If they are allowed time, they will move in a supply of fuel and bombs. And they can blow Canton off the map. That might even stop the Cantonese from moving north to give help to the Nationalist armies. We’ve got to move fast.”

“Well,” agreed Bish, “you can’t say we didn’t pick up a few fancy items. We nailed Professor Tao’s formula, the gold intended for the north, and now the evidence of an air attack from the south.”

“Yeah,” said Tug. “And now, Bish, we’ll scoop the gasoline out of the Mureaux, pour it into the Bellanca, and be off. Fa Hein will go with us and translate this Yunnan formula en route, and I’m sure the authorities will be happy to make a contribution to his Monastery in the way of payment for his work. Yep, we’ll head north right away—and deliver all this news where it’ll do the most good.”

The Countess looked up with a warmth of regard in her eyes. “No man could have done a better job,” she said, “than you—Mr. Hardwick.”

“Call me Tug,” was the reply.