

Hell Over Hainan

A Tug Hardwick Adventure By Arch Whitehouse

Those two news-hawks, Tug Hardwick and Beansie Bishop, were well acquainted with Old Man Trouble. And by steering clear of Hainan they were sure they could stay out of his clutches. But what Tug didn't know—though he would soon find out—was that Old Man Trouble could find you anywhere, especially in China where oil flows thicker than blood.

BOTH Tug Hardwick and Alton “Beansie” Bishop were practically bow-legged, by the time they reached the Kwangtung Air Force base at Chen-kiang. When one—or two—has pedaled a bicycle for nearly one hundred miles over Yunnan roads carrying Leica cameras, telegraph keys, toothbrushes, and the fears of Tali bandits that distance, one—or two—is likely to be a candidate for a hospital cot, the soothing ministrations of white gowned nurses, and all that goes with them. The Kwangtung Air Base is called that out of respect for General Wong Wei-cheng, Chief of the Chinese Provincial Air Forces. Wong Wei-cheng is typical of all Oriental Air Marshals. He is small, appears to have been stunted in his early growth through something biological that might have had a marmoset mixed up in it, and he grins perpetually.

He carries, and possibly sleeps with, a sword at his side that must have been forged for some ancestral Manchu giant.

One gets the impression that if a small tail-wheel was fitted into the lower guard of the sheath it would help Wei-cheng's locomotion considerably. If the medals on his chest mean anything, he has been carving up his enemies in every Chinese campaign since the first Ming Dynasty.

General Wong Wei-cheng stood posing in front of the Kwangtung hangar. He was watching the wobbling approach of Hardwick and Bishop with scornful dignity. He gave the hilt of his sword a rattle—and six coolie-mechanics leaped out from the interior of a motor crate which was serving as an “alert-room”. Even the coolies laughed.

The two American correspondents, representing the Amalgamated News Service, allowed their mounts to wobble to a stop. They

stuck out their right toes, steadied their craft momentarily, and then carried out a movement that substituted for a dismount.

Rubber-legged, weary, and exhausted they lowered the bikes to the ground, stood spraddle-legged for security and stared about.

“You are the gentlemen from Canton?” Wei-cheng grated through his dental crockery.

“We're from Canton,” answered Hardwick. “We might have been gentlemen once. But two days astride those bone-shakers getting here makes me feel like a two-pronged parsnip that has been parboiled. You General Wong Wei-cheng?”

“Where's the hotel?” demanded Bishop. “I got blisters on my feet—and other places—that hang down like water-wings. Whew!”

“You don't want a hotel if you're anything like me,” snapped Tug. “You need hooking up to an irrigation system!”

Beansie, the Bish, stood knees bent with both hands supporting his outraged buttocks. His face streamed with perspiration, and he had two day's growth of beard on his face.

“Are you gentlemen from Canton?” old sword-bearer clacked again.

“Er? Oh that. You got your needle stuck in the same groove, eh?” muttered Hardwick, rearranging his pack. “Yes, we're from Canton. We just managed to sneak out by the skin of our teeth, too.”

“You are the gentlemen from Canton?” old Wei-cheng repeated for the third time.

“I get it, Wei-cheng. Sure, we're the gentlemen from Canton. We have your pouch of clinkers. We have the papers, General. Now where's the ship?”

Wei-cheng grinned broadly now, showing his dentistry to the full.

“His mother must have been frightened by Teddy Roosevelt,” mooned Bishop. “Or else he’s the result of listening to too many tooth paste programs on the radio.”

Wei-cheng ignored the sally and led the way into the hangar, which was a cross between a Chinese pagoda gone to seed and a net-drying shed after a storm. Inside were the skeletons of a few Breguets, one or two ancient Curtiss Hawks, a Junkers bomber and—the most beautiful airplane either Hardwick or Bish had ever seen!

Wei-cheng waved a murky open palm toward the beautiful airplane. Another smile plowed ducts across his dial. Then he fawned and rubbed his hands together.

“You have the papers and the pouch, gentlemen?”

“Sure! Sure! Here. But are you sure this is the ship?” inquired the puzzled Hardwick. “We thought it was a Northrop we were to pick up.”

“That’s what Jamison, in Canton, told us,” added Bish, waddling in behind them.

Hardwick stood staring at the ship and pondered on the mysterious web of Secret Service weaving that had hurried them out of Canton, carrying mysterious papers and a leather wallet for a General named Wong Wei-cheng. They were supposed to pick up an American Northrop fighting plane—one of a new type that had been sent out to China for demonstration work.

“This is the Northrop, gentlemen,” the General persisted. “Perhaps you can fly it. None of my men will go near it. To be frank, it frightens even me.”

“Wait a minute,” Bish broke in. “Don’t you remember, some time ago, something about a Northrop experimental fighter being lost on a test flight off the Pacific coast? I’ll bet a buck this is it.”

But Hardwick was busy unlash a leather pouch from a shoulder strap. He handed it to the General, still staring at the strange but striking machine. The pouch had a cheery metallic clink—the clink of gold.

“An Allison engine up front,” whispered Bish as he patted the bullet-like nose. “But look where the pilot and gunner sit!”

“An almost exact copy of that French Delanne,” husked Tug.

“What do you mean, copy?” fumed Bish. “This bus was built months before the Frog job. They must have copied this.”

“Lord, that’s right! We can only hope she works after these fellows have been messing with her.”

They both slipped under the cantilever wing and moved back to the tandem cockpit, which was set in line with the tail-plane. Both were covered with Piralin hatches, and the rear-pit was rounded off snugly to provide a very elaborate gun turret in the tail. The rudders were carried on twin-fins set at the outer tips of the tail. She carried Chinese National Army insignia.

The plane was dusty, but in fine condition. She was all-metal in construction, and it was obvious that she had not been abused in flight or landing.

Hardwick went back to the General. “What’s the story, General?” he asked. “How did this get here?”

Wei-cheng grinned broadly again, making the most of his exalted position: “It is very simple, gentlemen,” he said, counting out stacks of gold coins on top of an oil crate. “We wanted planes once, and this ship was delivered a short time ago for demonstration purposes. There was no question of its worth. But we had no pilots capable of flying such a ship.”

“And since the bus was secreted out of the United States, the birds who pinched it didn’t know what to do with it, eh?” Bish chimed in.

“Exactly! Now, you have been ordered to carry out a mission calculated to assist both China and the United States, and for suitable remuneration I am turning it over to you,” the Chinese General bowed, pursing his lips.

“Is that all?” asked Hardwick, questioningly.

“No. Here is the rest of the bargain. Your orders.”

He handed over a small envelope which he had kept in his breast pocket. Then he went on with his gold stacking.

Tug opened the envelope and took out a thin sheet of paper. It was a Chinese National telegraph form and on it was printed:

Proceed at night to Kiungchow, on the island of Hainan. Report to Birchfield at International Oil Company hangar on Kiungchow public airport.
Blaisdell.

“WHERE the hell is Hainan?” blustered Bish.

“That’s that island just off the coast of the Kwangtung Province which the Japs are said to be fortifying. They say they’re not—but the French report that they are. This smells like dirty work, Bish.”

“Call me Beansie,” the Bish broke in again. “I’ll bet we’re in for something hot this time.” Then he barked at the General: “Hey, Gen. There ain’t been a girl here has there. A swell-looking dame who smells like primroses?”

The General did not even look up from his counting, but said: “A young lady who called herself Miss Velox delivered that message. I didn’t smell her, but she had yellow hair.”

“What the deuce made you think of that?” demanded Tug. “We haven’t seen her in two months.”

“Listen! Any time we run into anything like this you can bet that Miss Velox will be in on it,” Bish groaned.

Hardwick tried to figure it all out, and then ordered Bish to look the ship over carefully. He stayed with the General, completed the deal, and then made plans for flying out of Chenkiang that night. The time available would give them time to rest up a bit, check the Allison motor thoroughly, and get in at least one short test flight to become acquainted with the plane.

“It’s a good thing you used to be an Army test pilot,” mooned the Bish. “You wouldn’t get me up in that boiler with anyone else. I’ll bet she does a million miles an hour.”

But Hardwick was thinking hard now. He was the smooth, suave war correspondent again. Gone miraculously were his aches and pains. He stood in the hangar doorway, a tall trim figure, keen of eye, and trigger-fast in his calculations. His face was a study in clean American profile.

So Miss Velox, the mysterious Russian Countess, was mixed up in this? He wondered where she had gone so mysteriously after the Fa Hein and the mysterious explosive formula episode. He was interested in the Countess Astrid Khitrovo who seemed to have such strange powers over the world’s Secret Service agencies. Now she turns up again in a mess of intrigue that involves a secret American war plane, a Chinese island that is being converted into an air or naval

base by the Japs and But there was business to attend to.

The greedy Chinese General informed them where the Browning guns for the rear turret could be found, and provided them with sufficient ammunition to fill all the boxes. He also agreed to provide fuel for the tanks set under the main wing. And for another golden coin, like those in the pouch, he would have sold them the hangars and all the equipment that was left.

Within an hour, they had gassed the ship, run the Allison engine up for a test, and checked the controls. Then, making an adjustment on the tail-plane to compensate for flying with but one aboard, Tug climbed in and took her off.

Once he became accustomed to the strange position of the control pit, Hardwick found no difficulty in flying the new Northrop and putting her through a series of normal maneuvers. At three-quarter throttle and with suitable adjustment on the supercharger, he was able to register 260-m.p.h. on the indicator. A three minute run at full throttle left him gasping. She turned out exactly 365 m.p.h.!

“Whew!” he gasped. “What a boiler!” A plate on the instrument panel explained the use of the flaps for landing and he was able to bring her in for a beautiful three-pointer at a speed well under 65 m.p.h.

“You’ll do, baby,” he beamed, as he opened the hatch and grinned out at the Bish who stood there open-mouthed with amazement.

“Get those guns aboard and see that the belts are full. If I have any imagination, Bish, we’ll need plenty of Ammo before we get to Hainan,” Tug snapped, keen for their new adventure.

“Call me Beansie,” cooed the Bish. “Think we ought to file a story on this? I’ll climb a pole, hook in on some wire, and we can make the morning editions in Chicago.”

“Sure. And have half the Japanese Army down on us,” gagged Tug. “No, nothing doing. We’re on a vacation now, Bish.”

“Okay! But it would make a swell story!”

“We’ll make a better one, or I miss my guess.” They took turns guarding the plane and going into the nearby village for a meal and what went for a bath in Chenkiang. The General, hugging his pouch, accompanied Tug in the squadron staff car—a relic from the 1932 campaign—that still

carried Illinois license plates of that year. Wei-cheng explained that he believed they were trademarks and standard equipment.

"You are going into a dangerous area," the General explained, while Tug made arrangements for a room and bath. "We believe the Japanese have established a base on Hainan."

"Sure!" smirked Tug, for a special reason. "According to rumor, they have bases all along the Panama Canal, on most of the islands of the Philippines, and all through the Aleutians. What's this gag, anyway, General?"

"You don't believe me, eh? You Americans do not believe anyone. You always find out too late, then you argue with us for not telling you."

"You tell me one thing, General. Just one item that will give me anything to work on, and I'll take your word for it," Tug argued back.

"What do you think you're going to Hainan for?" the General asked, signaling to a Peking waiter.

"I don't know. To deliver the Northrop to someone, I supposed," lied Hardwick.

"Two whisky san tans, boy," the General ordered, wondering how Americans could be so dumb and still get on in this world.

Tug swallowed his drink, wandered across the hotel lobby, and gazed up at a Chinese National Railroad map that hung from a long dusty case on the wall. He studied it for some time and looked over the territory they would have to fly over to reach the island.

It lay about 400 miles south of Canton and was separated from the Luichow peninsula by the shallow straits of Hainan which were about 15 miles broad. He checked with the scale at the bottom of the map and figured that Chengkiang was about 575 miles from Kiungchow, the chief town on the northern end of the island. Flying the Northrop at reasonable cruising speed would take about something over two hours—unless something turned up.

He ordered another drink for the General, called to a boy, and had himself shown up to a bath.

A WATERY moon threw its silver beams across the waters of the Yuan River as Hardwick swung the roaring Northrop around from the inland lake. He climbed for altitude over the town

that was a strange shadowy mixture of Manchu and Chinese architecture.

Only a few minutes before, Bish had returned from the town refreshed by food, wine, and the soothing lotions of a bath. He had sold the bicycles for a few dollars and converted the funds into a parcel of Oriental daggers and weapons that would have warmed the heart of any collector. These he stuffed in the space ahead of the pilot's seat.

Hardwick, unmindful of the activity of Bish, had taken off, deep in concentration. He was trying to figure out just what a man named Blaisdell had in mind for him on this particular junket through Japanese-infested territory.

Bish snuggled up in his cockpit and went to sleep just as soon as they left the ground. Tug studied his map for the fiftieth time and followed the railroad that skirted the river as far as Hanoi and then turned almost due east for Taiphong, the last city on the mainland, before he hammered across the Gulf of Tonkin for the western shore of Hainan.

The flight was uneventful, for the Allison purred like a contented kitten as she turned out her tremendous power. The two hundred mile flip across the gulf would cut off many miles of travelling around the coastline. And since the ship was behaving splendidly, Hardwick was content to risk the long over-water hop.

Bish aroused himself once they were well over the bay to ask: "Why this way? You flying the Pacific?"

"Go back to your bug-walk, I'll get you there," argued Tug. "You must have lost thirty pounds on that ride. Get some sleep, or you'll never look like your passport photo."

"Who wants to?" muttered Bish, curling up again.

"Never mind the sleep," Hardwick suddenly cried over his shoulder. "I think we're going to have company. Look over there!"

The Bish aroused himself again and his hands instinctively went to the gun handles.

"Where?" he asked, rubbing his eyes with his pudgy fingers.

"Look, over there—those big babies with underslung bodies. What the deuce are they?"

Bish said indignantly: "What's the matter with you, Tug? They're French Amiot 150's, long-

range torpedo-bombers. We just passed over French Indo-China. They're out of some Frog air base around here."

Tug held his tongue at that. Bish was right. They were French seaplanes, and they had probably come out of one of the French Colonial bases along the Indo-China shore. Still, as he watched them, he began to wonder what the deuce they were doing out there at that time of night heading for Hainan or possibly the China Sea.

There was only one way to find out.

He swung the Northrop over hard and raced toward them, climbing for a position, well above. He remembered now that the Amiot seaplane was one of the best-armed military planes in the world. All three principal gun-turrets had double-gun mountings and a single supplementary gun mounting in the prone bomber's position on the floor. On some of the models, provision had been made for the mounting of one 20 or 25 mm. quick-firing cannon.

"I wouldn't like to tangle with a flock of those birds," he reflected. But still he continued his investigation.

Bish lay in a reclining position, resting his fat chin in his fat hand, watching with bored interest.

The Northrop was well above now and Tug was about to flash an international signal with his riding lights when something splashed a light directly at them. The glare from the powerful beam blinded the American pilot for a moment, and he seemed to be rooted to his seat. It was the pudgy Bish who really moved first.

Bl-a-a-m!

A high caliber shell blasted at them from a point under the port wing-tip. That was the air cannon speaking.

Bla-a-m!, it spat again.

The Northrop rolled over on her back as Hardwick tried to clear. Bish bashed his face into an extra ammo box, let out a yell that could be heard as far as Singapore, and scrambled around for his guns again.

Hardwick kept the Northrop on her back, and then rammed down the glare of the searchlight. He took a quick sight, and the fixed Browning guns in the wings spat flame.

Streaks of blistering tracers raced across the skies from all angles. The gunners in the twelve-ship formation took up sights on the glare-silvered

monoplane fighter. The Northrop crashed on past the tail of the rear sub-leader, snapped over in a half-roll, and the pudgy one in the rear opened fire from his hornet's nest.

Bish directed the fire of his high-caliber guns point blank at one of the Amiot. He spewed leaden death at the French ship from the blazing muzzles of his Brownings in a steady, unflinching stream.

An Amiot floundered out of the play, swished around hard, vomited a wing and one Gnome-Rhone radial, and went into a flaming side-slip.

Hardwick ripped the Northrop up into a wild climb again and Bish slammed in to them with all the .50 caliber guns at his command. Lead spanged back at them. A cannon belched and tracer zipped across the sky, drawing a crazy patch-work design that vied with the gleam of the moon and the glare of the blinding searchlights.

"Get the hell out of here!" screamed Bish. "We can't stand this. Those lights have me seeing spots."

The piercing beams from the searchlights were actually blinding. This was a new method of attack. And since they had no black goggles to counteract the effect, they were now both flying and fighting blind.

"Hold 'em off somehow. I'm clearing out," yelled Hardwick.

Bish swayed his guns back and forth as Hardwick dived her. The French torpedo-bombers came down on them hard. But the speed of the Northrop was too much for them, and they eventually cleared and raced away, zipping at headlong speed over the water with but feet to spare.

From above, the cannon blazed away and Tug had to zig-zag back and forth to avoid being hit by the intense fire of the French gunners. But, eventually, they were in the clear again. Tug gingerly tested his controls, and was relieved to find that nothing serious had been suffered in the short but harrowing adventure. He climbed to a safer height and headed for the Strait of Hainan. By now the lights of Suwenyen and Kiungchow were visible and he was relieved to discover how much progress they had made during the battle.

"What was that all about?" demanded the Bish over his shoulder.

“You’ve got me, Bish,” replied Tug. “There’s something queer to all this. French seaplanes firing on a ship carrying a Chinese National Army insignia over open water is slightly screwy.”

“Where the devil are they going in that direction?” the Bish asked, mopping at a gash over one eye with his handkerchief. “And the next time you decide to look up at the water, please let me know so I can put my football helmet on.”

Tug ignored the remark and went on: “I get it. They saw this boiler, figured it was a stolen French Delanne, and decided to shoot it down—even though it had Chinese markings on it.”

“Yeah. But, boy, those lights! That’s a new one on me. Wonder how they do that. It’s a beaut of an idea for night fighting. We ought to try that sometime.”

“Sure. We’ll buy a flashlight in the dime store when we get to Kiungchow,” grinned Tug. “But in the meantime, we’ll try to find this Chinese airport and the International Oil Company hangar. I wonder what that is all about.”

“Dont worry, we’ll find out—the hard way,” mooned Bish, curling up again.

THEY reached the Hainan city and circled it twice while Bish tried to figure out an Inter-Avia map and find the airport. Finally, it was discovered in the outskirts with clumps of bamboo palms offering boundary markers. Hardwick raced for the open area, caught a flash of light directed from a control lamp, and sensed that they were expected. He adjusted the flaps, curled around for the longest runway, and then saw a shadow-bar light throw a gleam down the runway.

“We’re expected, at any rate,” Tug said, as he let her drift in.

“More lights,” winced Bish. “Wonder what happens to us here.”

“You’ll just find a hotel, a dining room, and order the poor waiters to stuff you again.”

The Northrop touched the hard packed earth, bounced slightly, but Tug caught her with a blip of the engine. She steadied, dropped her tail, and rumbled in.

They could see a bleary sign marked “International Oil Company” above a hangar. Tug ran her in, and, before they could climb out of the cockpit, men in overalls and face masks rushed at

her, bearing long rubber tubes fitted with brass nozzles.

“What’s the idea?” boomed Tug out of the open hatch.

“Never mind. Get out and let them work. I’m Birchfield. You’d better beat it quick. We have rooms for you at the Hotel Victoria in the city.”

Numb with surprise, they got out and saw that the men in overalls were hurriedly, but expertly, spraying the Northrop with a new coat of paint. It was a garish silver-aluminum paint that completely covered all evidence of the Chinese insignia and type markings.

A pungent tang of special lacquer assailed their nostrils, and they took out their belongings and hurried after Birchfield toward a hangar office in the rear.

“You got the message at Chen-kiang?” he asked anxiously.

“Sure. That’s why we came through here. What’s the idea?”

Birchfield was a large man with a big stomach. He wore high boots, striped trousers, and a black felt hat. He was large of head, and had eyebrows that looked like the thatched eaves of a collier’s cottage.

“Sit down,” he said, pointing to two oil-drum crates fitted with backs. “There’s some fire water in a bottle in that lower drawer. Help yourself.”

Bish reached first, took a generous swig, and handed the bottle over to Hardwick who put the cork back without taking a drink. He wanted to hear what Birchfield had to say.

“I suppose you are wondering what this is all about,” Birchfield said, putting his big feet up on the desk. “You’re down here as newspapermen, of course.”

“But this Northrop business?” Hardwick asked.

“Don’t ask me how it got here. That girl friend of yours gave us the tip on it first, and she had to do some swell work to get that Chinese general to turn it over. The Japs are looking for it, too. I suppose you found that out, eh?”

“I don’t know about that,” said Hardwick, studying the bottle. “But if you look her over, you’ll see she’s been in a battle already. We ran into a beaut on the way across the Strait.”

“Japs?” asked Birchfield, anxiously.

“No. French Amiets. About a dozen of ‘em.”

The Bish chimed in: "They have lights they direct at you and you can't see a damned thing! We shot one down, though. Tug did, anyway. Then we cleared off."

Birchfield's face clouded: "French Amiets?" he asked. "Those seaplane jobs? How the hell do they fit into the picture. We're worrying about the Japs building an air base out here."

"I don't know whether they were coming to Hainan or not. They were evidently out of French Indo-China somewhere. But where the devil were they going? I don't know. They might be heading for that French possession of Kwangchowan just south of Canton. But why should they fire on us—with Chinese markings on our bus?"

Birchfield lit a cigar as big as a jack handle, rolled it around in his mouth, and glared at nothing in particular.

"I give up," he said finally. "You'll have to figure that one out, too. But we've got to find this Jap base. It's somewhere near here. They're running our fuel out of our tanks—somehow. At least someone is. And they must have a sunken pipe line they can hook up and get it out. We lost more than 20,000 gallons last month!"

"They probably need it," said Hardwick, with a grim smile. "What's your plan, if any?"

"Me? I've got no plan," said Birchfield. "All I can do is to service you, daub that bus of your's up, and change her as much as possible. You'll have to figure a way out yourself."

"You've seen Jap planes around here?"

"No. Only heard 'em at night. They've been coming down from Canton, but they never seem to go back. If they continue on, they go to French Indo-China or the Malay States—Singapore. But they don't seem to be ships with that kind of range."

Birchfield roused himself with: "Well, there's no use wasting any more time here. I'll get you into town, see you fixed up for the night, and tomorrow we'll see what can be done."

"Sounds easy," muttered Hardwick, drawing the cork of the bottle and taking a drink. "Still, maybe we'll get a story for Amalgamated, eh, Bish?"

"We got one only you won't send it," the Bish mooned.

Birchfield snapped off the light, barked orders out into the hangar, and led the way out of a side

door to where he had a car parked. They climbed in. Birchfield took the wheel without a word and pressed the starter button.

"I'll take you to the Victoria Hotel. There're faucets there and you can get water out of them sometimes," Birchfield said, ripping the wheel around and heading into the roadway. "At least I've heard you can."

"I'll bet it's a rumor," the Bish said. "Do they have anything to eat?"

"Mondays, Wednesdays, and Friday's," Tug said. "What do you want? You ate yesterday."

"It's still a rumor," growled the Bish. Birchfield headed the car through several villages that seemed to be composed of houses with fronts but no backs. Bamboo grew in patches all along the roads. A few natives stood off to one side, blinking at the lights in the darkness. At last they crossed a pontoon bridge and wobbled into the edges of the city of Kiungchow. There seemed to be innumerable creeks and small bridges for the car to bump over. A few high-wheeled wagons were making their way from the outlying farms for the city market places. They clacked, groaned, and squeaked under their loads.

Then they came into the more modern section where granite-fronted buildings stood sleeping in the early hours of the morning. Banks, office buildings, cinemas, and Chinese theaters lined the main street. Electric signs, darkened but clear enough to read, might have been borrowed the day before from lower Manhattan.

On a corner, as Victorian as its name, stood the hotel. It had great stone windows, massive flower boxes, billboard signs, and tilted flagpoles. Three taxi-cabs stood outside. Birchfield pulled up at the doorway.

A tall Chinese-Manchu boy came out, took the bags, and led the way in. A Frenchman was behind the counter, holding a long fountain pen, and twisting the register at the correct angle. The only other person in the lobby was a young girl. A girl with straw-colored hair, jaybird blue eyes, and a complexion that would have made a New York deb sign her life away to own.

"Velox!" cried the Bish.

"Countess!" cried Hardwick, practically running toward her. "Where the devil—?"

"Do you guys know this girl, too?" mugged Birchfield.

“BOOK your rooms,” the Countess said, giving them a sly glance. “Then we’ll slip into the bar and have a talk.”

“You ought to be in bed,” argued Tug. “What the deuce are you doing up at this time of night?”

He went over, signed the register, and sent Bish up with a boy to put their things away. Then he and Birchfield followed the girl into the small bar set in one corner of the lobby.

“Sherry,” the girl ordered to the little London waiter who was reading a month-old Daily Mail behind the bar.

“Two double whiskeys,” said Hardwick.

“Singapore Sling,” added Birchfield. “I’m going to need it, the way this night is running.”

They sat down at a small table and waited until the waiter brought the drinks around.

“The extra double whisky is for the General, Sir?” the little waiter asked.

“The General?” asked Tug. “What do you mean?”

“I just thought you were expecting the General, Sir. He has been in here looking for you. You’re Mr. Hardwick, the American test pilot, aren’t you?”

Tug exchanged glances with Birchfield and caught a knowing glance from the girl. “Well yes,” he said. “But I didn’t think he’d be here tonight. This is for Mr. Bishop, my assistant. You say the General has been here?”

“Why, yes, Sir. Practically all night. He seemed to want you badly, Sir.”

“A lovely room!” barked Bish, coming into the group. “Looks like the interior of a dog infirmary. Red curtains, teak dressers, 1894 water basins, and pillows stuffed with hack-saw blades.”

“Twisted hack-saw blades, I’ll bet,” Tug said, moving over so that the Bish could sit down. Then he turned to the waiter and shunted him off with: “Thanks, George. The General knows where I am, I guess.”

They drank a silent toast and talked volumes with their eyes until Bish came out with: “What’s the General gag?”

“I know. It’s General Nagai Toson,” the Countess said, quietly. “He’s been here for two days.”

“Who is he?” asked Tug.

“None other than the head of the Japanese Imperial Expeditionary Air Force. He’s supposed to be in Mukden on an investigation. I trailed him here from Canton.”

“Here we go!” gurgled the Bish. “We’re gonner get it now!”

“Shut up!” argued Tug. “Let the Countess talk.”

“This General Toson is a devil,” the girl went on, taking another sip of her sherry. “He thinks up all the tricks the Japs pull on the Chinese. He’s here for something bright, you can bet on that. But I can’t figure out what he can want with you, or how he knew you were coming here.”

“Well, it’s the only hotel in town worthwhile,” argued Birchfield. “If he knew you were on your way here, he’d naturally think of the Victoria. He’s staying here, I’ll bet.”

“Certainly,” the girl said. “But I’m not worrying about that. He’s up to some trick. You’ll have to watch him, Mr. Hardwick.”

“I think we’re going to have some fun out of General Toson,” Tug said, rubbing his hands together. “We might even get a good story, Bish.”

“I don’t like it,” Birchfield said, quietly staring at his glass. “I wish we were well out of all this mess. That guy Toson sounds like bad news to me.”

“But,” persisted Hardwick, “Don’t you see, it’s a lead. We at least make a contact. He’s running after me, so he wants something. If he wants anything from me, he’ll have to give something.” “You’ll probably get a full clip from one of those twenty-shot Mausers those guys carry around,” the Bish said cheerlessly.

The girl winced, and then said: “You’ve got a tough enough job without trying to beat General Toson. We’ve got to find this hidden air base before we do anything else.”

“Yeah. And unless we file some more stories, we’ll be in a breadline,” the Bish broke in again. “Amalgamated don’t care about the Secret Service. They don’t like ‘em, as a matter of fact. You can’t ever get a story out of ‘em when there’s a good spy show going on.”

“General Toson would double-cross his grandmother,” the girl broke in, again ignoring the bleating of the Bish. “We’ve got to watch him carefully.”

“Well, you birds can argue it out here all night. I’ve got to get back and see that your back-seat pea-shooter is okay,” Birchfield said, wearily, as he got up. “You figure out what you’re going to do tomorrow and let me know in time. Send a message out with one of the taxi-men.”

He bowed bruskiy to the Countess, wagged a mournful mug, and went out. “Who is that guy?” asked Bish, after Birchfield had gone.

“Don’t worry. He’s all right,” the Countess assured with a smile. “One of the smartest men out here. He knows the Japs and Chinese better than any of the Army or Navy Intelligence men. I’m glad we have him with us.”

“He says his fuel tanks are being tapped somehow,” Tug explained. “He’s certain they are running it into this mysterious hidden air base. If so, it can’t be very far away from the tank field.”

“It can be anywhere in Hainan,” the girl said, sitting up closer to the table. This business has been going on for years. It would be a simple matter to have the pipe lines put in without digging trenches all over the island. While Hainan is approximately 160 miles long and 90 miles broad and has a total area of about 1,300 square miles, it is most suitable for this sort of thing. For instance, if Birchfield’s tanks are being tapped, it would be a simple matter to do so by tunneling under the field from the wooded area on one side. Once the actual contact has been made, it would be a simple matter to run an open pipe line through the heavy tangle of forest to points in the lowlands along either coast.”

“That’s right. I guess the vegetation in this section is pretty heavy.”

“It’s practically jungle foliage! You can get plenty of the Sheng-li natives to work for almost nothing, and a pipeline could be brought in in sections and laid with no trouble at all. No one asks questions out here, and the Sheng-li natives are too primitive to wonder what anything is meant for. All they ask for is food, shelter, and a reasonable amount of native ceremony.”

“Even as you and me,” the Bish added. “Look here, let’s have another drink and then buzz off to bed.”

Tug agreed and signaled to the barman. “Set them up again, George. Two double whiskies and a sherry. Then you can put the corkscrew away and go bye-bye.”

“And you might add one whiskey and bitters,” a voice behind broke in. “I am joining Mr. Hardwick’s little party—if I may.”

They all glanced up and around and saw a broad-chested, little man in a Japanese uniform. He was grinning through spectacles that had lenses about a quarter of an inch thick. He had a set of yellow teeth that appeared to have been sadly mixed in a rough scuffle. His tunic collar was fully four inches high, and he had enough decorations across his chest to sink a ship.

“Buzz off,” said the Bish. “You make me want to stand up and salute.”

“Shut up!” ordered Tug. “Sit down, General. I presume you are a General. This is Miss Velox.”

The General bowed, closed his eyes and said: “It is good to see you again, Countess.”

“Don’t gag with him, Tug,” the Bish argued. “He knows all the answers. Let’s give him a Mickey Finn and stuff him down a sewer.”

“This is my portly pal, Mr. Bishop,” Tug went on, ignoring the Bish’s sallies.

“Call me Beansie, General. We know all about you too, so we’re all even and can start off from scratch, as the lady said to the vicar.”

The General bowed again, and then sat down just as the barman brought the drinks.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime, General?” the Bish went on. “I thought all Generals went to bed early so as not to get hurt.”

“Will you shut up, or do I have to conk you?” demanded Tug.

“Send him away. He’s curdling my drink,” Bish mumbled, turning to gaze at the crystal behind the bar.

“Now, General,” said Tug, “I understand you have been looking for me.”

“We will drink first to a great Empire and a great democracy,” the General said, raising his glass. “After that we will talk business—if the Countess here has no objections.”

They drank silently until Bish said: “You know, Tug, if we could put wheels on him, he’d make a good limber for a heavy field piece. Boy, how he’d take the recoil with that belly of his!”

“I’m going to punch you right on the nose in a minute,” Tug growled. “I object to your childish remarks directed at my guests. If you can’t behave, go to bed.”

“No wonder Japan is short of war metals. It all goes into making medals for the . . .”

“Shut up!”

“I’m shut!”

DURING the gagging, the Countess was silent but her glances carried volumes of words. She registered fear, hatred, and disdain. Tug missed none of it, and he was determined to see just what it would all add up to.

The General had been enjoying the sides clacked by Bish and Tug. He was there for a mission, and was willing to put up with any amount of insult. After all, his time would come, and he knew it.

“Now, General, what was it you wanted?” asked Tug.

“You are, I believe—or were, an American Army test pilot before you took to the happy life of a war correspondent?” the General said.

“I was,” smiled Tug reflectively. “But that was some time ago. I only fly now when I have to. I don’t really like it. It—it . . .”

“It musses your haircomb,” added Bish.

Tug gave him a glance that would have knocked an ordinary man down.

“Ah, yes. But once a man has been trained as a test pilot in the American Air Service, he always has something left. And, I am willing to pay well for the work.”

“You mean you want a test made of a Japanese plane?” Tug asked, somewhat incredulous.

“Well, hardly. You see, we are considering the purchase of a number of French Dewoitines. They are single seater fighters of a new type, and I have no pilot in Hainan or at Canton who is capable of carrying out the tests we require.”

“Why don’t you get the Frogs to test their own planes?” growled Bish.

“Why don’t you shut up?” demanded Tug.

“Unfortunately, we do not care for the French method of testing,” the General said, taking up his glass. “We want a test made by an outsider—a neutral party.”

“You’ll be neutral when you get through,” said Bish. “You’ll be so neutral, we’ll be able to pick you up on a shovel.”

“Beansie!” snapped the Countess.

“Just what I bin waiting for, Countess. Now I’m satisfied.”

“Go on, General,” Tug said. “No more interruptions, Bish.”

“We will pay well, Mr. Hardwick. We simply require a terminal velocity dive from 12,000 feet, a full maneuver report staged at 6,000 feet, and a nominal test of all controls in all normal military positions.”

“This is a Dewoitine fighter?”

“Yes, the new Dewoitine D-520—their latest export model. It is said to have a top speed of 325-m.p.h.”

“And it has been turned down by France? Why?”

“That, I can’t say. We have bought other Dewoitine models and they have proved worthy, and we wish to get more if they come up to our specifications. We will pay you \$15,000, American money. Five thousand before the terminal velocity dive and the rest upon completion of the test.”

“That’s a lot of money. Where’s this ship?”

“We have made special arrangements with the French government to have the plane delivered tomorrow morning at a field not far from here. It will be tuned and checked by noon. I can pick you up after an early lunch and take you out. You can finish the test by three o’clock.”

“You have an air field near here, General?” the Countess asked. “How is that, since this is Chinese territory?”

“We do not consider it Chinese territory, Countess,” the General replied. “We feel that it belongs to us by right of conquest.”

“The conquest of an undeclared war? The other powers do not recognize your conquest.”

“True. But the other powers can do nothing about it. They are too busy with European affairs.”

“You will discover that your hidden air base here on Hainan will not last long once they discover where it is,” the girl replied.

“You hope that, Countess? I am afraid you have taken on too big a task. There is no Japanese air base on Hainan.”

“Don’t lie, General!” the girl snapped, her eyes blazing. “I know there is, and we are determined to unearth it.”

“We may even blow it off the map, General,” Tug added quietly.

“Yeah, he’s afraid of that,” broke in the Bish again. “What the hell do you think he wants you to test that Frog bus for?”

“I have an idea, but I’m going to take him up just the same.”

Both the Countess and Bish twisted in their seats and stared at Hardwick as though they had not fully understood what he had said.

“Come again?” said Bish.

“That’s right. I can use fifteen grand,” Tug said calmly. “We’ll forget the air base for the time being and concentrate on making some dough. I’ll take that job, General.”

General Toson beamed and signaled for more drinks.

“Yeah,” snarled the Bish. “We’ll have another drink on that. We’ll have a lot of drinks on it. Maybe we can get enough into Tug to keep him in bed for a week. He’s nuts, Countess!”

The girl was speechless, white, and trembling with curbed rage. She knew it was a trick to catch Hardwick in a crash. The Dewoitine, she knew, would be “fixed.” The cockpit would be “fixed.” Even the parachute would be “fixed.” General Toson never left anything to chance. There were a million ways to fix a plane set for a terminal velocity dive.

“You don’t want any Amiot’s tested too, do you, General?” Tug said, when the drinks were brought in.

“Amiot’s? We have no Amiot’s, Mr. Hardwick.”

“No? That’s strange. I had an idea you had a lot of Amiot’s hidden away—perhaps in your secret air base?”

“Amiot torpedo-bombers would be very handy for a raid on the Philippines, or Singapore, General,” the girl added, sipping her sherry.

“Unfortunately, we have no Amiot’s, Countess. I wish we had.”

“You know,” said Bish staring at the ceiling. “This guy should be on the radio. He could run a swell liar’s club.”

“We are wasting good sleep,” the General said. “You had better get to bed, Mr. Hardwick. I will be back tomorrow at noon. You will be ready?”

“Waiting with my hand out for the first five grand,” grinned Tug, getting up to shake hands.

“And we’ll be at the florists having a wreath made. You know, wings on it, R.I.P., hands across the sea, and all the trimming. I wonder where we

can buy some large sponges to sop him up,” mooned the Bish.

“Good night, Countess. Good night, gentlemen,” the General said, his finger tips pressed together as he bowed. “At noon tomorrow then, Mr. Hardwick?”

“At noon tomorrow, General.”

“Good night!” bellowed the Bish.

THERE was little sleep for any of the three weary adventurers that night. Tug lay awake, unable to halt the cantering screen of reflection that passed through his mind. His limbs ached, his closed eyes burned, and jolts of nervous tension throbbed through his muscles as he lay trying to blot out one picture from his eyes.

Bish in the other bed was dreaming what Tug was seeing.

A small silver plane with knife-blade wings, a roaring motor, the sickening stall before a power dive. Then the mad screaming dive, the scream of wrenched metal and the searing explosion of a broken wing.

In another room not far away, the Countess huddled against her pillow, trembling. There were no more tears left. The wells of despair had been drained and parched hopelessness burned every fiber in her body.

Tug forced his eyes open again, but the picture remained in spite of his efforts to concentrate on the details of the room. The wing slapped back against the fuselage with the thud of a massive hammer. Dural slashed and gashed, set up wails of banshee hysteria.

“My God! I can’t stand this any longer,” Tug said, sitting up. “I can see that damn ship as plain as day. I can see myself trying to break the hatchway open to get out. I’m getting up.”

He dressed quietly in the early dawn, slipped on a light felt hat, and started for the door. Then he stopped, glanced at his wrist watch, and muttered: “I have a few hours. I wonder if I could find out?”

A decision was made. He slipped out of the door, closed it quietly, and tiptoed away.

It was well after 10 o’clock the next morning before Bish came out of the stupor substituted for sleep. He rolled over, stuck one eye out of an aperture in the bedding, and peered over at Tug’s bed.

He was out of bed in a flash, his heart pumping madly. Tug was not there. He glanced at his wrist watch, fearing Tug had gone off with Toson alone.

“Whew!” he gasped, staring about the room. “Where the devil did he go?”

He leaped for the wall telephone, called the desk, and somehow managed to get the Countess. He told her that Tug was missing.

“I have an idea he went to find a new parachute,” the girl said.

“Where the devil will he get one in Hainan?”

“Didn’t you bring any with you from Chenkiang?”

“No. We had enough trouble getting there on bikes.”

“Then he will have to use one provided by the General,” the girl said hollowly.

“Yeah. How do you like that?”

“I don’t. Come on down and have breakfast with me, I need support of some kind. Never mind the whiskers, come right down.”

Bish hung up and literally leaped into his clothes and eliminated his morning shave.

He found the Countess in the lobby reading a two-month old magazine. She dropped it quickly when Bish appeared, and started for the dining room with the Bish trailing behind.

“He’ll be in swell shape for a show like that,” Bish said, grumbling.

“But if he gets a good parachute, it will be worth it,” the girl persisted as he ordered breakfast.

“But if he don’t get it, old Hair-and-Teeth will slip him a phony.”

They ate their breakfasts in silence, and then went out into the lobby and inquired about Tug.

“Mister Hardwick left very early this morning,” the desk clerk said. “He left no message and did not say when he was coming back.”

“The thick plottens,” muttered Bish, leading the way to some large dusty club chairs near the window.

They sat there for what seemed hours. At noon on the dot the General appeared with a large Daimler-Benz touring car that rumbled like a tank. He had a uniformed chauffeur, a uniformed body guard, and three extra medals up.

“Ah, good morning, Countess,” he beamed through the ivory farm. “Good morning my friend. Where is Mr. Hardwick?”

The Countess nodded coldly. Bish got up, threw the General a salute that almost knocked a row of potted palms over and said: “Morning, General. How’s the troops? Any mass assassinations today?”

“Mr. Hardwick is in his room?” the General asked, ignoring the quip.

“Mr. Hardwick ain’t in his room, he ain’t in his hotel, and we don’t know where the hell he is,” explained the Bish. “I think your diving swallow has gone down a chimney. He’s flew the coop.”

It was an involuntary gesture and the General almost gave the show away, but his hand did move toward the covered holster that carried his Mauser machine pistol.

“But he said he would be here. He gave me his word,” the General said with a hollow croak.

“Maybe he went to find your secret air base. He did take my box of matches,” offered Bish.

“He had better be here,” the General said. “We might make things very unpleasant for you on Hainan, otherwise.”

“Do you think you’re entertaining us now?” demanded the Bish. “Personally, I can think of several other people I’d rather have around than you. There was a guy named Dracula and another called Frankenstein, for instance.”

“I have never met the gentlemen,” the General smiled, trying to purse his lips.

“I had an idea you slept with both of them. Where the hell do you get all your perfumed ideas, anyway?”

“Never mind,” a voice behind the General said. “I’ve got a better one than he can think up.”

It was Tug!

He looked like death warmed up. He needed a shave, his cheeks were hollow, and he was exhausted—and yet, there was a certain light in his eyes that gave Bish some hope.

“Where you bin?” demanded Bish.

“Knocking around. Well, here we are, General. Hand over the dough, get me a drink, have the cook pack up a lunch, and I’ll eat it on the way out.”

The General was flabbergasted. He fumbled in his pocket for a wad of American bills, flipped their edges, and handed them over. Bish called the

waiter, ordered a double brandy, and a stack of sandwiches.

“Count it, Countess,” Tug grinned, throwing over the wad. Then he dropped into a chair and stretched his long legs.

“You will be ready to leave in fifteen minutes?” the General asked.

“I’ll be ready as soon as they pack up the sandwiches, General. Sit down and shove your beak into a beaker.”

The girl counted the money, nodded, and handed it back.

“Stick it in your stocking, Countess. When we get back we’ll buy the General a little silkworm. It’s all set—if you’ve got a parachute out there, General.”

“Of course. We wouldn’t want you to do a test without one. We have a brand new one all ready for you.”

“I’ll bet it is. I’ll bet you packed it with glue,” the Bish barked.

THE Countess was requested to stay at the hotel. Tug gave her a few words on the quiet and sent her to her room before they left.

“Don’t worry,” he explained, “I have an idea that I think will work. I’ve been in the cable office all morning trying to find out something.”

“But what about a parachute? You know the General has that plane ‘fixed’ for you.”

“Don’t worry. It’s all attended to. The General will provide a parachute, but he knows nothing about it. It’s just one of those things.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so. Now you be ready to move fast when we send the word.” And with that, Tug Hardwick kissed the tip of his finger, tapped the Countess lightly on the nose with the finger, chucked her gently under the chin, and went back to where the Bish was still sitting at the table.

“Come on, Bish,” Tug said. “Let’s go and make another ten grand.”

“They finished their drinks and Tug took the package of sandwiches and went out to the Daimler-Benz. All three men sat in the back seat and pulled heavy bear robes up over their knees.

The General sat in the middle, and said nothing until they were well on the outskirts of the town. Then he decided to begin to break the story.

“You must of course understand, Mr. Hardwick,” he said, “that while you are in the

employ of my government you must consider yourself a loyal member of the Imperial Air Service.”

“Here it comes,” mooned Bish.

“By that I mean,” the General went on, “we shall expect certain concessions on your part—certain loyalties and the maintaining of certain confidences.”

“What you are trying to say, General,” Tug replied with a No. 4 size smirk, “Is that I’ll see things I’m not to remember or even speak about—if, and when, I get back.”

“Hey, Toson! Why don’t you bump us off now?” the Bish snarled. “You got your chopper guys up front, haven’t you?”

“Shut up,” laughed Tug. “How can he? There’s one thing he hasn’t got yet, and he’s not quite sure where it is.”

The General nodded like some automatic billikin. “I think we understand each other, Mr. Hardwick. Now let us enjoy the scenery of this beautiful little island.”

“We’d better before you guys blow it all to bits to do some more face-saving,” the Bish argued.

The rest of the fifty-mile journey along the road that followed the Ta-Kiang river was uneventful. The road was good macadam and linked the port of Kiungchow with the interior. The Daimler-Benz made the trip just under two hours.

The field was sheltered in the bend of the river, a bend so situated that planes coming in could take the prevailing wind just above the river, lose height below the rim of the trees on the other bank, and drop beautifully on the jutting landing ground. It was a perfect layout for a hidden squadron, and both Tug and Bish gasped when they saw it.

The car swished over the turf. They could see that many landings had been made there from the wheel marks through the dark green grass. Back, hidden in the trees, were at least six wide-mouthed canvas hangars, their doors closed, and a row of Japs on guard with rifles.

Tug sat there for several minutes before he got out. He was pondering on the whole layout. Here, to all appearances, was the secret air base. There could be no question about that. Since this was so, why had General Toson brought him here to test one French single-seater fighter? Why had he

taken this chance when he could have finished both Bish and himself ten miles outside Kiungchow? He was certain that the fighter had been “fixed” to break up in mid-air and kill him.

But wait a minute—had the fighter been fixed? Was it intended that he actually carry out a normal test for the General? If so, then it was more than likely they would never be allowed to leave the field alive, once Toson was satisfied that the fighter was all it was supposed to be.

They were bringing the fighter out now from the far hangar. The General got out first and hurried toward it. Tug waited until he was out of earshot, and then pulled Bish out and walked toward the plane with him.

“Look here, Bish,” he said. “I frankly don’t know what the game is now. I thought I did, but you’ve got to do two things for me while I engage the General in earnest conversation.”

“I wish I knew one thing to do, Tug.”

“You check the ship as best you can. But make sure there’s a long tube in the tail of the fuselage. It will look like a pneumatic buffer for the tail-wheel. Remember, this is a French plane.”

The Bish’s eyebrows went to his hair line in amazement. “A spinner? You don’t mean you’re gonner rely on that. It ain’t big enough!”

“It’ll have to be. Leave that part to me, but when I hit—and I most certainly will—you duck back here to the car and be ready to get us both the hell out of here. Is that understood?”

“Good bye, Dolly, I must leave you,” sang the Bish.

“Shut up and obey orders. You want to file a story. I’ll get you a beaut.”

“I said a story, not an obituary.”

The two guards were close behind them now, and they had to move on. Bish went straight to the low-wing monoplane, and began a routine inspection of the controls, wing-fittings, the cockpit, and instruments. He went over the sleek fuselage, and quickly opened an inspection panel under the tail-plane. He opened a small slot in a long metal tube, satisfied himself that it was properly fitted and equipped, and then checked a cable back to the cockpit.

Tug came up with the General and two young Japanese officers. One of them was carrying an Italian Paulus parachute in his arms, which

seemed to be in good condition, and, from outside appearances, properly packed.

“Now, Mr. Hardwick,” the General said with authority. “You will take off in the usual way, fly her at will for as long as you like, and then do the terminal velocity dive. I feel sure that once we have that over, the rest of the routine test will be simple.”

“That’s the way I was planning it,” Tug said, looking the plane over. “I presume she’s fully loaded, fuelled, and checked?”

“Absolutely. Here is a parachute, but I sincerely hope you won’t have to use it.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. You have the proper recording instruments aboard, barograph, accelerometer, and all that?”

“Of course. They are mounted and sealed.”

“I don’t know whether I’ll take that parachute at all. It might be in the way.”

“But that would be foolhardy, Mr., Hardwick,” the General said. Then his face changed and he added: “Of course, if you are planning to get away with the plane, I must remind you that we shall be keeping your annoying friend as a hostage.”

“Okay,” smiled Hardwick taking the parachute and climbing into the webbing. “If I must wear it, I suppose I must. But I shan’t really need it.”

“You have rare confidence in the plane.”

“I know all about it, General. This morning I talked with the bird who built it. I’m sure it will hold together all right.”

The General was puzzled at that, but he waved it off and watched Tug climb into the cockpit. But a cruel smile creased his face when Tug’s back was turned.

THE 900 H.P. Hispano-Suiza opened smoothly when Tug pressed the Elektron starter. Bish got up on the wing root, bellowed in Tug’s ear, and pointed to a release lever fitted low in the cockpit on the right. “You’re a dope, you know. That won’t be big enough.”

“It will the way I’ll hit,” Hardwick said, slapping the Bish’s shoulder. “You do the dutiful on the Daimler-Benz and I’ll warm things up a lot.”

The General came up and barked over the other side: “When you go to 12,000 feet, signal us with a series of Very lights, will you, please, so that we can check you all the way down?”

“Sure, General. And when I come down, I’ll put my nose dead on the center of that cinder strip in front of the hangars. You ought to see plenty then.”

“I’ll bet he will,” the Bish cackled.

The motor warmed, Tug swung her around, and rumbled down the field for a point where he could take off direct into the wind. The little silver monoplane took to it like a bird. He swung over the field, crossed the line of hangars, peered down, and saw now that the hangar went even deeper into the woods than he first believed. Then he noticed, too, a large flat something carefully camouflaged with foliage and green and brown daubings.

I’ll bet that’s where Birchfield’s gas goes,” he muttered. “I’ll bet they sunk a pipe line along the river. What could be simpler?”

He climbed again, put the plane through a few smooth maneuvers, and then studied the layout below again as he circled the field smoothly.

The hangars were close together and they ran back through the trees for some distance. The palms and foliage had been left between the hangars so that the branches bent over and covered the edges of the walls. The tops were tinted lush green so that one had to peer intently to discover where the hangars left off and the foliage started. Then there was the matter of the gas tank. That stood in close to the hangars—dangerously close.

“It’s worth the whirl,” Tug said. “I only hope it works out.”

He sent the Dewoitine upstairs in tight circles. Below he could see the General and his group standing near the hangars where he had left them. He sensed that they had the Bish covered in case he tried any queer moves.

The French ship climbed beautifully and in no time he was at 12,000 feet, which was a ridiculously low altitude to attempt a T.V. dive. Still, it would have to do, for it was obvious now that the General had a plan in mind—but so did Hardwick.

At 12,000 he circled again, made a thorough study of the plane, and tried to figure out where the ship had been “fixed.” Everything seemed to work okay. The controls were not sticky and there seemed to be no tell-tale flutter at the wing-tips when he set her in a light dive.

“Oh, well. Here we go!” he grinned. “If it works, okay. If not—the Countess is in five grand, that’s all.”

He selected a Very light cartridge, placed it in the signal pistol, and fired it out of the open cockpit hatch. Below, they would be waiting for it and checking his dive.

He loaded the pistol again with a grimace, stuck it in the cockpit holster, and checked his belt. Then, with little concern for the prospects of a death dive, he hoiked the Dewoitine up, stalled, and let her fall off in a dive.

“So you think I’m going to put her in a power, eh?” he muttered to himself. “Not me. You watch this lovely spin, General.”

Below, they could see the ship start down. A young officer with a gigantic pair of binoculars mounted on a tripod peered up at him.

“But he is not in a power dive,” the young Jap spluttered.

“He’s just trying her out first,” said Bish, chalk-faced.

The Dewoitine came down screaming, and then, at about 3,000 feet, suddenly jerked up, completed half a struggling loop, rolled on her back, and fell off again.

“He’s out of control,” screamed Bish. “Look, he’s out of control!”

The Japs were coldly watching the display. The Dewoitine fluttered and fell into a tight spin. Bish watched, sensed what was about to happen, and he prayed silently, his hands clutched together.

The spin increased in speed. The prop and wires wailed. The French fighter was heading smack for the hangars.

“Why doesn’t he jump?” the General gaggled, hopping about on one leg. “Why doesn’t he take to the parachute?”

“He will. . . . I hope. . . . In a minute,” husked Bish.

The fighter was spinning fast now. There was an ominous crack and she jerked out of her even twirls. A wing came away and she fluttered wildly.

“I can’t look at this,” Bish yelled. “Why don’t he take a chance?”

The Japs stood stock still, unable to believe their eyes. The Dewoitine snagged at an invisible leash and went into a spin again. She was down to

within a few hundred feet of the ground now and still heading for the hangars.

The Japs sensed that something had slipped. They had not intended that the disabled plane would hit there. Still, it was unbelievable that a man would take such a hopeless chance.

“Come on, Tug! Pull it! Pull it, Tug!” screamed the Bish.

Then, as if in answer to the Bish’s appeal, something happened. The Japs stood staring wild-eyed, unbelieving what they saw. A small white something blossomed out from the tail of the Dewoitine. A small white carnation. It fluttered into a beautiful scalloped circle—a spinner chute!

Tug had pulled the safety ring in the cockpit, which had released a spinner chute. It was designed to pull a ship out of a spin and let it down gently so that the structure could be studied after the crash. Certain French and British planes were fitted with them for test purposes, and Tug had learned by cable that morning that the Dewoitines were so fitted.

Bish let out a wild bellow of joy. The Japs stood half stunned as the broken Dewoitine seemed to hang like a rocket of doom over the hangars. Then slowly it dropped full into the center of the hangars with a cracking of roof formers.

Bish stood still, but the Japs raced towards the hangars, shouting wild threats and cries of dismay.

PUG hit fairly hard, but not hard enough to knock him out. He reached forward, yanked at the dump valves, and sent the gasoline gushing all over the hangar floor. Then he stepped out on the far side of the wrecked fuselage, took the signal pistol with him, and stood off to fire the cartridge.

Whrongf-f-f-f-f!

The fuel took the cartridge in one gulp, bonged out in a flaming frenzy, and enveloped three Amiot seaplanes. Tug took one look, dug his toes in, and threw himself at the canvas wall of the hangar. He went through with a rending of material, and landed on his face near the partially sunken gas tank.

He got up, stared about, and then dived for a rock.

He smashed the big stone hard at a hand valve, which broke off with the first smash. The

glittering, pungent liquid bellowed out in a wild cascade of blue-white death.

Tug raced away before he was caught in the surging roll of flame.

He darted between the hangars and came out in the woods. Then he turned to his left, skirting the trees, and made his way toward the Daimler-Benz car. The Bish was already in the seat, treading the accelerator, and peering about for some sight of Tug.

The Japs were running in all directions. A few shots were fired, but Tug made the car with a flying leap as Bish let in the gear. They scrawnched into the road, and Bish let her have it for all she was worth.

“Where to?” the Bish asked.

“Back to Birchfield’s place. The Countess is there and they’ll have the Northrop ready. We’re beating it for the Philippines. She knows all about it. Our stuff will be there.”

“You certainly had me nuts for a few minutes,” the Bish growled. “I thought you were never going to pull that cable.”

“I had to hold off. The damn thing was swinging all over the sky. I had to hold off until the last second, or she’d never have hit that hangar.”

“But she sure did! What a beautiful fire! Look back there!”

“I don’t want to. I hate to think of all those swell busses going up.”

“Was that Dewoitine fixed?” asked Bish.

“Sure. I was supposed to crash. They would have bumped you off, and then gone back and made the Countess cough up with the dope on the Northrop and made Birchfield hand it over.”

“But now old Toson is running around in circles watching his lovely air base go up in smoke. Nice going, Tug.”

“Nice work on your part, too, Bish, getting us away like this.”

“Call me Beansie,” the Bish cooed. “We got a story!”