

HELL OVER CHINA

W DONALD E. KEYHOE

On the twisted body of that ruthless killer they had gunned from the skies, Richard Knight found an ominous message. "I will call again," those brush-written characters announced, and appended was the dread symbol of Mo-Gwei—the sign of "The Devil"! Then "muted death" whipped across those gloomy heavens to fulfill that satanic threat. And as the shattered bodies of wretched airmen plunged to the earth, there came an infernal laugh. The cone of silence had found new victims!

CHAPTER I WHISPERING WINGS

IVE HUNDRED FEET above the Lunghai Railway, the dark-blue Northrop roared westward into the dusk of China. As the lights of Suchow appeared ahead, Dick Knight peered out through the transparent cockpit enclosure, scanned the narrow streets of the Chinese town below. There was a troop-train just pulling out of the station, and he could see supply and artillery trucks on a road nearby.

And now a somber look came into the face of Secret Agent "Q" as he gazed ahead into the deepening shadows. He wondered about the mysterious mission on which Larry Doyle and he had been ordered after their recent escapade in war-torn Spain. But he hid that look of uneasiness when he turned to glance back at the chunky ex-Leatherneck who was his partner in espionage—and in other brands of trouble.

Doyle's crooked nose was pressed hard against the curved enclosure. Suddenly a broad grin overspread his homely countenance. He jerked at the enclosure lock, shoved the top open, and thrust out a tousled head. The sudden sweep of air sent Knight's map and scratch pad whirling. Knight snatched at the map, Doyle meanwhile gesticulating fervently down at a group of staring Oriental girls.

"Close that panel, you crazy Mick!" shouted the secret agent. "We didn't come up here to play with Chinese gals!"

"Aw, I was just wavin' to th' mayor," growled Doyle, as he shut the enclosure. "Just to let 'em know the Marines are about to land—and anyway I've seen some pretty good-looking Chinese dames, if you want to make something of it."

Knight grinned over his shoulder.

"Still sore about being dragged away from Paris, Lothario?"

"Huh? Naw, I got over that—but I still think it was a dirty trick not even stoppin' at Singapore after I met that—"

"I know—after you met that blonde," said Knight. "Too bad, but there seems to be a war on, or something—and it looks as though we've been invited." "I don't mind wars," grunted Doyle. "But I like to grab my breath in between 'em—and grab 'a little fun, too. I ain't got over that run-out we took out of Spain. I'm still out o' breath!"

KNIGHT turned back to the controls, watched the faintly shining rails flash toward the ship and vanish under its wings. Another Chinese town, this one little more than a village, swept by, with a brief twinkling of lights.

"And I still think somebody at Washington has gone nuts," Doyle said aggrievedly from the rear cockpit. "That first code message from Brett—the one we got at Paris—said that 'Q' should contact that Army attache at Shanghai. And when we get there what happens? He's been dead ten days—since before the message was sent!"

"I think they were covering up something," muttered Knight.

"And another thing," persisted Doyle. "How'd they get this Northrop over here from the States in the five days it took us to fly from London to Shanghai on the airline?"

"They didn't," said Knight. "Evidently this affair was planned well ahead. But I can't figure why it had to be this special Northrop, when we could have picked up one of several ships already in China."

"Well, I only hope you know where you're heading," grunted the ex-Marine. "Maybe you've forgotten a little tilt you and I had with the Japs some years ago? Maybe you think they'd pat us on the back if we happened to drop in on 'em by accident?"

"Any patting would more likely be with a spade—and in the face," Knight said with a chuckle. "But don't worry, my Irish friend, we're not anywhere near the Japanese lines. In about twelve minutes we'll be putting down at one of the new air-fields the Chinese have built along this railway—and that's where we learn the answer to all this business."

"How come?" demanded Doyle, quickly leaning forward.

"We're going to meet Hank Larson there," said Knight. "He's organized a bunch of American pilots to fly for the Chinese, and the last thing Pertwell—the Army air attache—did before he supposedly died was to get hold of Hank and send him on a rush errand up to this place."

"What makes you think Pertwell isn't dead?" Doyle said bluntly.

"His secretary practically admitted it. I asked to

see his grave, or at least papers covering disposition of the body. Not knowing that I'm 'Q,' he stalled me, and when I accused him of covering up Pertwell's disappearance he just gulped and said he was under orders not to tell me anything but this thing about Hank Larson."

"Well, if Hank's mixed up in it, I know it's screwy," grunted Doyle. "That bird couldn't keep out of trouble tied up in a padded cell."

Knight tossed a grin over his shoulder.

"Then if he'd been a Leatherneck, you two would be just about on a par."

"Say, any time I couldn't fly rings around a Navy peelot!" snorted Doyle.

Knight turned back to the stick. They were, according to his map, within seven miles of their destination—Air-Field 32, one of a score of emergency stations between Suchow and Kaifeng. He throttled the twin-Wasp to half speed and set the prop at low pitch preparatory to landing. The Northrop roared on above the rails, and in a few moments he saw several twinkling lights. He switched on the powerful landing-lights recessed in the ship's wing, levered them so that the twin beams pointed down at a sharp angle.

A small village became visible, and he noted a pagoda a trifle apart from the cluster of Chinese houses. On the other side of the railway a sizable landing-field had been cleared. A large canvas hangar, a few tents and small buildings showed in the Northrop's lights, and he glimpsed several ships in front of the hangar. As he circled, looking for the wind-sock, a searchlight flashed up at the plane. Its radiance was blinding, and he pulled into a swift climbing turn.

The stick suddenly trembled in his hand, and he flung a hasty look backward at the tail. He could see nothing wrong, but as he swung around to the controls he noticed that the right-hand landing light was out. A second later the left-hand light went out, and simultaneously the searchlight beam vanished, leaving the sky almost inky black.

"What the devil happened?" Doyle bellowed from the rear cockpit.

"Don't know," Knight shouted back. "I'm going to climb up and drop a flare."

He shoved the prop into high pitch, opened up the twin-radial. Below, not a light showed from the village or the field, and above them a solid blanket of clouds hid the stars. As the Northrop stormed up into the night he felt a strange tension come over him. The altimeter showed almost three thousand feet—then suddenly the roar of the Wasp broke off into utter silence!

He pushed the stick forward, thinking the engine had gone dead, then in amazement he realized that it was still revving up. Hastily, he pulled out of the dive, sat for a moment in amazement as the Northrop plunged on in stark silence. For not only had the roar of the engine been hushed, but with it the howl of the ship's wings.

Fear that he had been stricken deaf knifed through him, but as he jerked around he saw that Doyle also was staring around in astonishment. Doyle's lips were moving, but not a sound was audible. An instant longer, the Northrop raced through that eery silence, and then suddenly Knight saw a faint luminance in the sky. He looked up swiftly through the cockpit enclosure, went rigid in consternation.

A huge cone of misty light was shining from the clouds five hundred feet above, and diving headlong inside that cone was a Kawasaki 92 fighter!

IN HIS first dazed glimpse, Knight thought his senses had tricked him, that the ship inside that cone of ghostly light was unreal. But in the next instant, faint tracer lines shot from the cowl of the Japanese plane, swelling to fuzzy thickness as they pierced the outer edge of the cone and probed toward the blue two-seater. Knight whipped the Northrop into a vertical bank and the first burst lanced off into space. His hurried turn took the ship into the edge of the cone, and now the stark silence was broken by a weird whispering sound.

The Kawasaki twisted sharply inside the cone of light, and the queer whisper rose to a ghostly moan. Another burst smoked from the Nippon ship's guns, and bullets ripped through the enclosure above Knight's head. He renversed, clamped the first of the row of buttons on his stick, just as Doyle whirled the rear 50-caliber twin-mount up from its special niche.

Sliding-flaps opened in the leading-edge of the wing, and two high-speed Browning 30's went into action at Knight's touch. He could feel their throb, could see the glow of their tracers as they blazed at the diving Japanese plane. But he could not hear a sound. Even the whisper of the Kawasaki's wings had died out as the Northrop whirled away from the luminous cone.

Doyle's guns flamed up and around in an arc as the Nipponese fighter plunged through the cone. Another

fusillade smoked through the silent sky, and two panels of the transparent enclosure tore to bits between-Knight's cockpit and Doyle's. The tall secret agent yanked the Northrop into a zoom, kicked around in a tight split-S. And as the Kawasaki darted back into the cone, Knight's bullets grazed its wings.

Knight was about to follow up his advantage when a frantic thump on his back made him jump around in his seat. Doyle jabbed his hand upward, and in dismay Knight saw another Kawasaki diving at them. It had just come through the clouds at the point where the luminous cone was truncated. The American's lips formed a silent curse as he realized that the first Japanese had tried to draw him under the second man's guns.

Knight snapped the two-seater around in a fast chandelle. The first Kawasaki pilot whipped back instantly, but skidded to one side as Doyle met him with a murderous blast. The other ship veered to miss the one below, and Knight charged in with all gun trips pressed tight. The wing-root fifties joined the wing 30's and the Brownings under the cowl, and the Northrop shook under the fierce but silent vibration of the guns. The lower Kawasaki reeled under that furious hail of lead, but miraculously the pilot escaped death and pulled back under the diving plane. The second Nipponese struck with all the ferocity of a tiger. A silent, smashing torrent of lead gouged into the Northrop's cowl, tore through the enclosure above Knight's head, and battered the instruments before him.

WITH a savage kick at the rudder, Knight hurled the two-seater sidewise, and the diving Kawasaki shot by with its guns still blazing. The other fighter slid in on bullet-scarred wings, as Knight briefly nosed down to regain full speed. Doyle tripped out a swift burst, and the silent tracers glowed across the intervening space. The Japanese pilot pulled up, ruddered hard to come under the Northrop's tail before Doyle could whip his fifties down to fire through the tunnel in the floor.

Knight's only choice was a hasty turn to the right, and it sent the Northrop straight into the cone. As the misty luminance swept over his wings, he heard again that weird whispering, but this time it seemed to come from his own ship. He had no time to make sure, for with amazing speed the second Kawasaki zoomed up on the opposite side of the cone and then pitched down for a raking broadside.

The queer light, with its strange mistiness, was an obstacle rather than an aid, and Knight barely saw the Japanese plane in time. Gun buttons clamped hard, he threw the Northrop into a furious roll. The blazing

guns, the flashing prop of the Kawasaki spun before his eyes. As the two-seater whipped aside, he saw the dark face of the man in the other ship. It was only a blur, a blur swiftly hidden by a cloud of flame which burst from the Nippon craft's cowl.

The flaming Kawasaki shot up on its tail, fell off, and went into a spin. In a horrible silence, the doomed plane plunged earthward with its ill-fated pilot writhing in the inferno. In that stark stillness, it was like a fantastic nightmare, and for a second Knight forgot the other ship as his fascinated eyes watched the gruesome scene. A sharp sting on his wrist brought him back to his peril. Glass was splintering from the tachometer dial, and a jagged fragment had cut his arm. He crouched as a soundless barrage from the remaining Kawasaki ripped into the top of his cockpit. The Northrop had lost speed in that fast, tight roll, and the crippled Japanese plane was closing in to take a hasty advantage.

With lightning decision, Knight slammed the stick forward to throw the belly of the Northrop toward the Kawasaki. Doyle threw the fifties down to fire through the tunnel, as he had intended, and for a moment two silent, murderous streams flashed between the two planes. The Northrop gave a jerk, lost speed again, and Knight flung a quick look at the riddled instrument board. The tachometer was ruined, but he could see the manifold pressure dropping, and he knew the engine had been hit.

The two-seater was already hurtling down at the village near the air-field, and over the slug-gashed cowl he could see the flamer. It was dropping near the railway, close to the edge of a dim-lit circle where the weird cone of light touched the ground. Casting a look backward, he saw Doyle trying to haul himself up to fire over the rail. The Kawasaki was pitching down after them, one of its guns still blazing. The deadly tracers struck the Northrop's dural flippers, and Knight felt the pound of solid slugs as they set the stick to trembling. The tracers lifted, smoked past his head—then a fierce throbbing shook the two-seater as Doyle flung his guns into range. The whirling disk of the Kawasaki's prop instantly broke and was gone. Knight pulled up with a silent gasp of relief as the Japanese fighter drilled by.

The misty light of the eerie cone suddenly brightened, like an electric bulb flaring up. It rose to a ghastly color—then abruptly went out. And as it did, the uncanny silence was instantly ended, and a cacophony of sound crashed into Knight's ears.

CHAPTER II THE SIGN OF MO-GWEI

PON HIS SENSES, the screech of the Northrop's wings and the pound of the crippled engine struck with stunning force. He cringed at the impact on his ear-drums, then gritted his teeth and fought the ship out of its dive. Another crash of sound broke through the lessening howl of the wings, and he saw the second Kawasaki tumbling earthward, a burning mass of wreckage.

The glow of the mysterious cone having completely faded, the glare of the burning ship lit the sky and the ground. On a road near the village, Knight saw pigmylike figures fleeing southward—a few of them scurrying for the pagoda-shrine nearby. The flamer had struck along the border of the field opposite the railway, and as the Northrop came closer Knight saw the wind-sock atop the hangar. He landed, braked the ship to a halt near one end of the line of planes, which he saw included two Curtiss Shrikes, four Boeing fighters, and a Boeing twin-motored transport which had been converted into a bomber. He turned off the fuel cock, switched off the engine, and turned to stare at Doyle. The ex-Marine shook his head dazedly.

"Don't question me, fellow! I'm not sure yet it really happened."

They both gazed up into the night, but there was no longer any trace of the eerie light-cone, and no sound to give any hint of what had caused it.

Doyle drew a long breath. "I'd give five bucks for a drink right now. Maybe if we look around we could find one."

Knight followed him from the ship, wiping the blood from his wrist.

"The place looks deserted," he muttered. "Everyone must have run for it when that silence hit."

"I don't blame 'em," said Doyle grimly. "If I'd have had my feet on terra firma, I'd have lammed out, too." He started toward one of the small buildings, but Knight stopped him.

"Never mind about that drink. There's just a tiny chance that the pilot of that other ship isn't dead. We might get something out of him."

"If he's alive he must be two-thirds cat," snorted

Doyle, but he turned toward the shattered Kawasaki. But Knight and he had not gone fifty feet when the drone of motors sounded from up in the blackness.

"Whoever they are, they're coming from the north," exclaimed Knight. "Get back in the shadow of the hangar till we find out what's what."

"And maybe get a Jap bomb dropped on our necks," said Doyle. "Why not grab one of those Shrikes and get in the clear till we're sure?"

"We won't have time, unless the motor's been warmed recently," returned Knight.

But Doyle was already half-way to the nearest Curtiss. "Come on," he howled "Take the switch while I wind up the starter."

Knight ran to the plane as Doyle seized the inertiawheel crank and fitted it into the socket. The wheel was beginning to whine when a sudden movement at the other end of the hangar caught Knight's eye. He jerked around and saw a rakish gray car skid past the Boeing bomber and race toward them. There were two Chinese soldiers on the running-board dressed in the uniform of the Peace Preservation Committee for Hopei Province. As the car squealed to a stop, they jumped down and ran forward with bayonets held at a significant angle.

"Hold everything!" shouted Doyle. "Amigo—ami—friends! We're Americans—Yanks!"

Knight had jumped up in the front cockpit, one hand inside his leather coat;

"Lih ding! Halt!" he snapped out, and the two Chinese stopped short, staring from him to Doyle.

"Don't let him trick you!" came a sharp command in Chinese. "He is a *tan-dz!*"

The two soldiers stiffened, but Knight's automatic had appeared, magically, as they hesitated, and he swerved the muzzle toward the man in the car.

"I am no spy," he said curtly. "We're Americans—on a friendly mission. Order your men to put down their guns and I'll identify my friend and myself."

The man at the wheel stared at him for a second, then slowly climbed out. He was tall for an Oriental, and Knight surmised that Manchurian blood flowed in his veins. He came forward, one long, thin hand twitching at the stringy black mustache on his upper lip. His black eyes never left the gun in the secret agent's hand. "If you are not a spy," he said with a grim calm, "then why were you stealing that airplane?"

THE increased rumble of the approaching ships prevented Knight's answer. He saw the other man look

apprehensively into the sky. Then one of the soldiers broke into an excited jabbering.

"Ni kan! Look, my captain—there is no danger! It is the mad American and his men."

The tall officer stared up as five Shrikes dived into the light from the burning ship. Then a look of relief came into his black eyes.

"It is well," he said. "We shall soon know whether these two are spies or not."

The leading Shrike rolled up and stopped, and the motor had hardly gone silent when a roly-poly figure scrambled from the pilot's seat and bounced from the wing to the ground. His round blue eyes—mild-looking as a baby's—went wider than ever as he saw the tableau.

"Hello, Hank," said Knight. "You're just in time for the party."

"Dick Knight, by all that's holy!" erupted the plump little man. "Say, what's going on here?"

Knight lowered his pistol, and the Chinese captain stepped forward. "These two men were about to steal this airplane, Mr. Larson," said the Oriental in English.

Hank Larson burst into a fit of laughter which threatened to burst his tight-buttoned blouse. "Better lock 'em up, Li Sin! They're the two most desperate characters this side of Chicago."

The Chinese drew himself up stiffly as Hank went into another fit of mirth. "From your manner, Mr. Larson, I take it that you then vouch for these two persons?"

"Afraid I've got to," said Hank, subsiding. "This handsome duke is Dick Knight, and the tough-looking bozo is Larry Doyle."

"You're no beauty prize yourself, you fat lummox," growled Doyle.

Li Sin's saffron face cleared. "Ah, I understand now. These, are the two secret agents from your country, Mr. Larson."

Knight looked sharply from the Chinese to Hank. "It doesn't seem to be much of a secret," he said dryly. "Who told you that, Hank?"

"Pertwell," replied the little man. "But don't worry. This is Captain Li Sin, of the Chinese Air Service. He's in their Intelligence, and he knows how to keep his trap shut."

Li Sin bowed. "As your honorable countryman has intimated, my lips shall be sealed. I apologize for my most regrettable error."

"It's okay by me," grunted Doyle, "as long as you tell your boy scouts to put away those frog-stickers."

Li Sin gave a sharp command, and the two soldiers stepped back several paces. By this time two more Shrikes had landed and the others were leveling off. Hank pulled off his helmet, revealing a prematurely bald head which made him look more than ever like a cherub. He looked at the wrecked Nipponese ship and the flamer.

"Dick, if this is just a sample of your work, we should have had you here before," he said, chuckling.

"If it's of any interest, I was in the ship, too," snapped Doyle.

"That's what I meant," grinned Hank. "He'd have to be good, with a dumb Leatherneck sandbagging behind him. How'd you' come to tangle with those Japanese, Dick?"

Knight hesitated a moment. "Let's go over to that Kawasaki," he said. "If the pilot's alive we may learn something important."

The next Shrike had stopped rolling, and as the pilot and the gunner jumped out Knight recognized Ben McCloud and Art Summers, former Navy men who had been with Hank during his duty as a special test pilot for the Navy. The pilot of the third plane was an Oriental, shorter in stature than Li Sin and with an olive pallor which Knight recognized as the mixed blood of an Eurasian.

"You know Ben and Art," said Hank Larson, as the two pilots hurriedly approached. "And this is Wu Kang—our liaison man with the air force office in Nanking."

WU KANG silently inclined his head. Knight saw the look which came into the man's eyes as they rested on Li Sin. It was gone in a flash, but he knew that no love was lost between the two.

"Looks like you had a little fuss here," said Ben McCloud, gazing around at the battered Northrop and the wreckage of the Kawasaki.

"More than that," Knight answered grimly. He described briefly the blacking-out of the lights, the uncanny silence, and the mysterious cone of light from which the Japanese ships had emerged. Hank and the others stared at him in amazement.

"Now if it was Doyle, I'd know that was a crazy lie," said Hank. "But from you—"

"It's no joke, and I'm cold sober," Knight cut in.
"From the way this place is deserted, you ought to be able to tell that something queer happened."

The roly-poly flight leader looked around at the tents and sheds.

"Your men fled," said Captain Li Sin. "I saw them running away as I came along the Suchow road."

"You must have seen the scrap!" exclaimed Doyle.

"I heard gunfire and the motors roaring," replied Li Sin. "But I could see very little of the battle until one of the planes caught fire. I saw what followed and hurried here at once."

"Could you hear during that time?" asked Knight. "Yes," said Li Sin. "I noticed nothing unusual with my hearing. But I did see all the lights go out. I thought the men at the field were afraid of a Japanese raid, and that you had turned out your wing lights to keep from being a target."

"And you didn't see the cone at all?" Knight said. Li Sin shook his head.

"No, it must have been directly above and hidden by the top of my automobile."

Knight nodded. "Yes, it was pretty faint, and your headlights would have been bright enough to blot it out along the road."

"By golly!" said Hank. "That call we got must've been crooked. Somebody wrorked it so we'd be away while those Japs pulled this stunt."

"A call? What call?" Knight asked quickly. "From Tamingfu. Listening post said they picked up Jap planes headed south. We took off and followed radio code signals supposed to be from Tamingfu, but the rangers finally said the sound had faded out. We circled around a while and came on back."

"I don't think it was a fake report," said Knight.

"The sound fading fits in with what happened here."

Li Sin looked puzzled. "It is most peculiar. What could cause such a phenomenon?"

"I don't know," answered Knight. "But let's see what we can find here."

THEY had now reached the broken fuselage of the Kawasaki. The glow from the blazing ship had begun to fade, but one of Li Sin's men produced a flashlight and spotted the crumpled cockpit. A mangled arm was revealed, sticking through a mass of wreckage. By now, all the pilots and gunners from the Shrikes had gathered around, and in a few moments the Japanese pilot was lifted from the ship. As Knight had feared, the man was dead. While Doyle peeled off the dead man's flying-coat, he peered in at the battered remnant of the instrument board.

A torn section of a map hung there, spattered with blood. The section showed the area from just north of Peiping, extending to the coast and southward toward Shanghai. Evidently the map had covered the entire region of Sino-Japanese hostilities. No courses had been laid out on it. He searched for the rest of the map but could not find it.

An exclamation from Wu Kang made him turn quickly. Doyle had now removed the flying-coat, disclosing the uniform of a lieutenant-colonel in the Japanese army air force. But it was not this which had caused the Eurasian's exclamation.

The dead man's uniform blouse had burst partly open, showering at least two score English poundnotes upon the ground.

Knight knelt, swiftly unbuttoned the rest of the blouse. A leather packet came into view, strapped around the dead man's waist. The impact of the crash had broken its lock, spilling out the banknotes. There was a bundle of still more currency inside. As he lifted it out, a small envelope fell to the ground. Li Sin's black eyes dilated at sight of the two Chinese characters brush-painted on the envelope.

"Look!" he whispered. "It is the sign of Mo-Gwei!" Hank Larson jumped, and the two Chinese soldiers stared as if hypnotized by the symbols.

"Who the devil is Mo-Gwei?" demanded Doyle.

"You have answered yourself, Mr. Doyle," Li Sin replied with a harsh sibilance. "Mo-Gwei is Chinese for 'devil'—and that particular one has lived up to the name!"

Hank Larson scratched his bald head.

"Wait a second, Li Sin. This can't be Mo-Gwei."

"I understand that," said the Chinese, with an impatient gesture. "I was but thinking that if this miserable wretch had lived, he could have told us the secret."

Knight had opened the envelope. It contained a single sheet of paper on which two Japanese words and a number of figures were written.

"Mata agarimasho," Knight muttered. "That means, 'I will call again."

Li Sin glanced at him with lifted brows. "So you understand Japanese as well as Chinese, Mr. Knight?"

"I can make it out," said Knight. "But just what is all this about Mo-Gwei?"

A bitter expression came into Li Sin's oblique eyes. "Unfortunately, there is little to tell. 'Mo-Gwei' is the name given to a spy who has taunted us ever since the Japanese began to steal our country. He has made away with valuable information, time and again, and has caused Marshal Chiang Kai-shek much unhappiness."

"Besides slitting a number of throats," put in Hank.

"Not to mention poisoning important officials right and left."

"It is so," assented Li Sin moodily. "We thought we were rid of him—that he had died—when nothing was heard during this past year. But now—"

"What makes you think this Japanese wasn't Mo-Gwei?" Knight asked. Hank Larson answered him.

"It's generally agreed that Mo-Gwei isn't an Oriental. From bits of information, Chinese Intelligence has doped it out that he's a foreigner playing the spy-game while he's traveling around the Orient pretending to be in some business or other. He might be anybody from an Englishman to a Turk."

"There are many nationalities in China," Li Sin said dourly. "We have watched them all, but in vain."

He glanced around the group. Doyle glowered down his crooked nose.

"Don't look at me. I haven't been in China since the big fracas in 1932."

Hank turned suddenly to Li Sin.

"Say, that reminds me! Just before the call came through from Tamingfu, I caught a radio flash that hell had broken loose in Shanghai. What about it?"

Li Sin's face hardened.

"It is the truth. China has finally begun to fight."

"Then we ought to be back there instead of hanging around here—" Hank broke off, looked guardedly at Knight. "Unless you've brought other instructions—you know, the Pertwell business." .

Knight stared at him.

"But I came here to ask you about that."

Hank's cherubic face creased into wrinkles.

"Now isn't that a sweet state of affairs! He told me to join the gang here and wait till you arrived with special orders."

Knight looked around at Li Sin, who had taken the envelope and message and was holding them up to the light.

"Do you have any knowledge of this matter?" he asked bluntly.

Li Sin slowly nodded. "I was instructed to meet Lieutenant Pertwell, of your Army, at Nanking two days ago to discuss a secret task he wished to have this special group undertake both for America and China. But he never appeared."

"That settles it," said Hank. "We're going back to Shanghai and take a hand in this war!"

"Wait," said Li Sin. "This mysterious occurrence Mr. Knight described will require investigation. Nanking perhaps may want you and your men to move up to the base at Paoting-fu, instead of Shanghai. There is still war in the North, Mr. Larson."

"Well, we're going one place or the other," Hank insisted. "We didn't join up to sit around and knit."

"I'm going to Nanking tonight, after a brief mission at the base near Hwaianfu, if you will permit me to use one of your planes," Li Sin responded. "I will explain the situation, and return with orders—or send you word by telephone."

"The wires are down," put in Ben McCloud, pointing to where the Kawasaki had torn down a pole near the tracks.

Li Sin turned to Wu Kang, and Knight caught the veiled contempt in his voice as he addressed the Eurasian.

"Mr. Wu, you will station yourself in the radio office. Be ready to intercept a message in our Number Three code, and decipher it for Mr. Larson."

"It is understood," said Wu Kang curtly. He made off toward the radio shack, which stood at a little distance from the other buildings. Li Sin turned to Hank Larson, handed him the money they had found on the Japanese.

"Please, you will guard this until I return from Nanking, or until a Nanking official requests it with proper credentials. Also, will you be so kind as to have some one make a copy of this code message for transmitting to my superiors in the event that misfortune should overtake me?"

He glanced a trifle nervously toward the dark sky. The burning Japanese ship was now little more than embers, and the clouded heavens showed ominously black.

"Maybe you'd better go to Nanking in your car," spoke up Hank.

"No, it would take too long," replied Li Sin. He motioned to the two soldiers. "Return with the machine to Suchow. Mr. Knight, will you make a copy of this message while a plane is being started for me?"

DOYLE went along with Knight and Hank Larson into the drab flight headquarters. Hank shut the door and swung around eagerly to Knight.

"What's the dope? Spill it, before somebody comes in."

"Hank," said the secret agent, "I'll swear on a Bible I told you the truth out there."

"Then it wasn't some crazy stall to cover up about the Pertwell business?" exclaimed the little man.

"No; have you been covering up?"

"I'm practically nude," said Hank. "But I know this: Pertwell was acting on a secret request from General Brett, the chief of G-2. They were all het up about some bird named Brown. Pertwell said he had to be found or there'd be hell to pay."

"Any particular Brown?" Doyle grunted sarcastically. "Or would John Brown's body do?"

"Pipe down, Lothario," said Knight. He finished copying the message, as the rumble of an engine sounded. They went out into the gloom to find one of the Boeing fighters being hurriedly warmed by Art Summers. Li Sin took the Japanese code message, bowed.

"One thousand thanks, Mr. Knight. And again, my humble apologies for mistaking friends of China for enemies."

"Forget it, captain," said Knight pleasantly.

"Yes, but don't forget we're sitting here waiting for orders," said Hank Larson.

"You will hear before midnight," Li Sin promised. He took the cockpit from which Art Summers had swung his brawny figure. "Please, you will hold your flashlight against the hangar, so that in taking off I can see to avoid it?"

Summers swung the torch, and Li Sin taxied down the dark field past the row of tents and buildings. The sound of the engine died away, then boomed again as Li Sin turned into the wind. In a few seconds the fighter came roaring out of the darkness, lifted smoothly, and was swallowed up in the night. A little hush fell over the assembled men as they stared upward, listening to the Boeing speed off to the East.

Doyle gave a sigh of relief when the drone of the ship had dwindled away. "Well, no magic lantern stuff this time. What do we do now?"

"We eat," said Hank, promptly. "That call from Tamingfu broke in on the important business of feeding the inner man."

"Judging from appearances," retorted Doyle, "your inner man must be quintuplets."

Hank patted his plump stomach.

"And all five of them hungry," he said.

CHAPTER III THE DEATH CONE

HIRTY MINUTES LATER, as the hurriedly assembled meal was being finished, Knight idly lighted a cigarette over the chimney of a smoking oil-lamp. A troop-train was rumbling along the nearby track, rattling the canvas-covered windows, and conversation for the moment had been suspended. He took the opportunity for a more careful scrutiny of the nine men who composed Hank's pilots and pilot-gunners.

Besides lanky Ben McCloud and Art Summers, he knew two or three by name. The rest were strangers, and though he knew that Hank would try to have none but square-shooters it made him uneasy to realize that all of them knew about his and Doyle's espionage work. There were foreign offices in several countries which would pay well for that information. General Brett must have been desperate over the case of the unknown Brown to have let the secret become so widely known.

The troop-train roared on past, and the windows ceased to rattle. Hank Larson looked up from his emptied plate.

"I clean forgot about Wu Kang. Hey, Ben, how about lugging some chow out to the radio shop, seeing as how Wu's stuck there?"

"Oh, all right," grumbled McCloud. "But why pick on me?"

"You've got long legs," said Hank. "They get you over the ground—"

There was a sudden ripping sound, and the blade of a knife sliced through the canvas at one window. With incredible speed, it cut out a ragged opening so that the lower part of the canvas fell down over the sill.

Knight jumped to his feet, snatched at the gun under his coat, but a bright light instantly shot through the hole and with it the muzzle of a sub-machine gun was visible.

"Raise your hands!" a voice rasped from back of the light.

Knight swore under his breath, but obeyed, and the rest of the group hastily lifted their hands.

"Tres bien!" the unseen man said in oddly guttural French. "Stand to one side, Monsieur Knight—or should I say Monsieur 'Q'?"

Knight hid a start at the reference to his secret designation in Army and Navy Intelligence. Complying with the command, he stepped aside. It brought him closer to the opening in the curtain, but the brilliance of the light kept him from seeing anything but the muzzle of the machine-gun.

"Sit still, you others!" came a sharp order from the man back of the weapon. "Now, *Monsieur* Knight—unbutton your coat—very carefully. Now, take it off—and remove that pistol with thumb and forefinger on the stock."

Knight held his breath, estimating the chances of a leap to one side of the machine-gun while he drew his pistol and fired. The sinister black muzzle twitched toward him a fraction of an inch.

"I should not advise any trifling, my esteemed contemporary, unless you wish to be cut in two."

Knight gingerly lifted his gun from its holster, laid it on the floor at the unseen man's command.

"And now, if you please," the guttural voice said mockingly, "the message which was addressed to me—and the money which came with it."

"Holy snakes!" gasped Hank Larson. "It's Mo-Gwei!"

"Vite!" snapped the man outside the window. "The message and the money!"

Knight took the message from his coat, and dropped it on the window-sill, with the muzzle of the machine-gun almost touching his waist. A chair scraped behind him.

"Sit still, you fool!" he heard Doyle snarl. "He'll shoot Dick if you try anything."

"The money!" said the unseen man fiercely. Knight took the banknotes which Hank Larson reluctantly produced, dropped them also on the sill.

"Now, get back in your chair!" came the curt order.

Knight sat down, his aching eyes straining to see past the light. A gloved hand flicked through the hole in the canvas, snatched up the message and the money. As it disappeared, the black mouth of the gun slowly traversed the group at the table, then came to rest on those nearest the window.

"Sit still, with your hands up, until I have counted this money," the man behind the gun said coldly.

A tense silence fell. Knight saw beads of sweat on Art Summers' face; he was the one nearest the leveled gun. The others sat staring at the window, faces white and strained in the glare of the light. Seconds passed into minutes, and Knight felt his arm muscles begin to ache. Not a sound had come from back of the weapon. He shot a quick look toward Doyle, but before he could signal his purpose Art Summers broke the stillness.

"We're being tricked!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "That devil's gone and left the gun propped there while he makes a getaway."

The man at his left twisted his head around, wet his lips as he gazed into the muzzle. Suddenly, both he and Summers leaped toward the gun.

FLAME spurted! The gun had crashed into action, and Summers went screaming to the floor. The other man toppled over his chair, half of his head blown off. It was only a second, that murderous pounding, then the gun went silent and the voice came again as powder smoke floated in the dazzling light.

"Perhaps that will show you I am quite serious. If another man moves before I finish decoding this message, I will kill everyone in the room!"

The muzzle of the gun twitched around menacingly, came to rest pointing at Knight. On the floor, Art Summers gave a last groan and lay still. Beside him, a pool of blood spread slowly.

Knight sat, teeth gritted hard, looking toward the light. If his guess were right, there was no one behind it now; that first murderous trick had been to impress them. Still—he might be wrong!

Silence had fallen again, and he could hear Hank Larson's heavy breathing, and now and then a muttered curse from one of the others.

Suddenly, the sputtering roar of an engine broke into the tense hush. A ship was being started out on the line. Knight catapulted himself from his chair, struck upward with his fist as he dived under the machine-gun. The weapon flipped out of sight. He snatched up his pistol and joined the mad rush from the building.

Doyle was in the lead. Knight saw him sprint around to the window, where a portable spotlight had been centered on top of a box. The Tommy-gun lay on the ground, with no one near it. Doyle seized it, whirled toward the hangar.

The thunder of the engine had been swelled by the roar of a second one, and as Knight ran toward the line he saw the converted Boeing transport begin to roll.

"Stop him!" bawled Hank. "That ship's loaded with bombs!"

Knight triggered two swift shots at the pilot's compartment, and Doyle cut loose with the machinegun, but the bomber gathered speed and taxied hastily into the gloom. Ben McCloud came racing up, dragging the spotlight unit. Doyle lifted the Tommygun again, but Knight stopped him.

"You might hit a bomb! Get a ship started before he has time to drop those eggs on us!"

Hank and his men were already swarming toward the planes. The Shrikes, motors still warm, were quickly started, and three of the ships sped out onto the field just as the big Boeing came roaring from the darkness. Knight saw one of the P-12 engines spit flame from its stacks as Hank Larson jerked the prop. He ran to the side of the fighter, gripped Hank's arm.

"I'll take this bus, Hank! Doyle's already got your ship revving!"

The little man ran with surprising speed to the Shrike, and Knight jerked the chocks from the fighter's wheels. Forking into the pit, he sent the P-12 trundling downwind, its cold motor spitting. The bomber was midway of the field, with two Shrikes cutting in diagonally from both sides. He saw the huge ship swerve, forcing one of the two-seaters into a hasty turn. The second Shrike kicked around to pass behind the bomber. Then with a terrific crash it rammed its mate.

Fire instantly enveloped both ships. Knight saw one gunner leap to the ground, dragging his injured pilot to safety. The other two men were lost in the flames. The huge Boeing straightened, lifted in a careful climb. Hank's ship, with the remaining two Shrikes following, dodged around the burning planes and shot after the bomber. As Knight reached the end of the field, his motor now running more smoothly, he saw the big ship swing back in a vertical turn at less than three hundred feet.

Two bombs pitched down, and the Shrikes frantically whipped to right and left. The bombs struck in the middle of the field, and two blasts of flame shot up. Knight kicked into the wind, hurled the P-12 into a narrow lane between the bomb-craters and the hangar. The Boeing twisted to pass above him, but Hank Larson zoomed with guns spurting, and the huge ship was forced into a quick turn.

BUT even as it banked, the pilot pulled his toggles and the remaining bombs came plunging down at the field. A furious explosion sounded behind Knight's ship, and the concussion drove the P-12 forward as though a giant hand had struck it. He hauled the stick back, felt another terrific blast shake the fighter as the rest of the bombs hit the ground. The P-12 was

buoyed up on a hot, rising draft, its controls abruptly useless. He saw Hank's plane slithering down in a crazy turmoil of air, with Doyle half way out of the rear cockpit. Then the fighter suddenly ceased to rise, and the nose dropped steeply. He waited until he felt the stick take hold, then zoomed across the railroad, away from the field.

The bomber was streaking eastward away from the glare of the burning ships and buildings. Knight pointed the P-12 after it, hastily charged his Browning guns. Hank had pulled out of the bumpy air currents, was swinging around to the North with the two other Shrikes following. Knight guessed that the little man could not see the big Boeing. He tripped his guns, saw Hank turn as the tracers glowed in the smoky gloom beyond the field.

The P-12's engine skipped a beat, picked up again as Knight nosed down. He could barely see the bomber as he climbed back to its level. For another minute he kept up the chase, with the other ship little more than a blur ahead. He held his fire, hoping the faster Shrikes would catch up and help him force the spy down alive, but when he looked back he could not see them. The bomber changed course, diminished its speed a trifle. Knight pulled up above it, shot a look at his compass. The spy had straightened on a course of 130 degrees.

For five minutes, Knight watched the compass, keeping above and as far back as he could without losing the bomber. It was evident that the spy thought he had shaken off his pursuers and was heading for some unknown destination. Knight reached toward a brass rocket pistol clipped at one side, then paused. The spy would probably see the rocket arc across the sky, and besides that it would not be an accurate guide for Hank and the others. He thought a moment, then reached out to the switch. Cutting it for a second, he set the carburetor adjustment for a rich mixture, then switched on the engine again. Flame shot from the P-12's stacks, died out as he changed the adjustment.

He repeated the process a minute later, and thereafter at five-minute intervals, dropping back of the bomber's tail each time. If Hank and the other two pilots had seen the first two flashes, he knew they would follow and watch for others. Twenty minutes dragged by. The spy had not varied his course, though he had climbed through the clouds to an altitude of seven thousand feet. Knight shivered in the chill air, wishing he had stopped to pick up his coat. At intervals, he slapped his cold arms and hands to keep up circulation.

Through broken clouds higher up, he could see a few frosty stars. Except for these, the P-12 seemed suspended in a dark void. Then suddenly the big Boeing nosed down. Knight followed, felt the cold dampness of clouds, saw scattered lights as the fighter broke through. He could not identify his position, but he knew he must be within twenty miles of Hwaianfu, which lay on the Grand Canal from Tientsin to Hangchow. He remembered at the same moment that Li Sin had taken off for Hwaianfu. The spy was probably intending to follow Li Sin there in order to recover the original of the code message.

The bomber was about twelve miles north of Hwaianfu when, without the slightest warning, two streams of tracer bullets sparkled down past the nose of the P-12 and into the big ship's tail. Knight whipped into a tight roll, came out in time for a dim glimpse of a Shrike zooming up from a brief attack. The bomber banked sharply. Its landing-lights went on, stabbed for an instant at the two-seater. The Shrike skidded out of the glow and the spy swiftly turned off his lights. In the resultant gloom, Knight lost sight of the big ship for a moment.

Suddenly a white circle anpeared on the clouds above. Knight flung the P-12 aside, as a hazy luminance became visible in the sky beneath the circle. It grew brighter, became a shining cone of light exactly like that from which the Kawasakis had appeared.

Knight's hasty turn had sent the fighter a hundred yards from the edge of the cone. The bomber was racing away on the other side, nosed down to gain speed quickly. The pilot of the Shrike had cut back in pursuit of the spy, and the maneuver threw the two-seater straight toward the shimmering cone. Knight saw the pilot's face and recognized Ben McCloud.

McCloud cast a swift glance up into the cone, but no planes had appeared. Crouching over the stick, he hurled the Shrike at the conical wall of light in chase of the fleeing bomber.

The nose of the ship plunged into the cone. With an ear-splitting screech, the prop instantly broke into fragments, and pale red fire burst from the Shrike's cowl. McCloud sprang half-way erect, went rigid with one hand like a frozen claw-stiffening before him. The Shrike zoomed vertically, lost speed and hung for a second inside the mysterious cone.

A COLD chill swept over Knight as he gazed on that scene. The gunner was like a figure carved in stone, his face marble-white under the misty light. A look of agony was stamped on McCloud's upturned face, and it too was deathly white, save where the thin red flame from the engine reflected on his cheeks.

A moment more the Shrike hung there, stalled, then its nose whipped down and it pitched toward the ground. No sound of shrieking wings came to Knight's ears, and his stunned mind realized for the second time that night all sound was swiftly fading.

The light-cone brightened. With consternation, he saw the shimmering, conical wall leap toward him.

He slammed the stick to his belt, climbing at full gun. Whatever the secret, a sudden and frightful death lay within that luminous space. His only hope was to zoom into the darkness of the clouds.

Five hundred feet above him, another Shrike was frenziedly climbing, and he saw the remaining ship off to the west and below him. The one above was zooming close to the point where the light pierced the clouds. With a swiftness which made Knight dizzy, the cone flashed past him and tilted toward the Shrike. The two-seater snapped around in a wild turn, climbed again for the clouds. It was almost lost in their sheltering gloom when the deadly light closed about it.

Bits of smoking metal came plummeting down the sky. In the sinister hush which had fallen, Knight heard nothing, but his awestricken eyes saw the evidence of the terrific force which had wrecked the two-seater. The engine seemed to have disintegrated, taking the nose of the ship and half of one wing with it. A twisted body, with a mangled but bloodless face whirled before him as the remnant of the plane spun by.

Dazed with horror, he saw the death-cone swerve toward the zooming P-12. He saw he could never reach the clouds in time. He renversed furiously, yanked the stick back to fire straight up at the top of the cone. The curved edge of the misty wall was within two hundred feet of his wings, and in a frenzy he tripped the guns.

One shot smoked from each Browning, then both weapons jammed! Black despair engulfed him and he gave himself up for lost. The death-cone brightened. A numbing cold swept over him—and suddenly the light vanished!

The roar of the Wasp engine crashed upon his eardrums as the silence also ended. For a second, he could hardly believe he was alive—that by some miracle he had escaped the fate of Ben McCloud and the others.

Something plunged from the clouds, materialized into the bulk of a huge plane, on fire. He thought at first it was the stolen bomber, but as he looked back after hastily banking away he saw that it was a much

larger ship. It was spinning wildly, and the flames mantled it before he could tell anything else.

As the monster plunged earthward, a faint whitish glow shone in the clouds above. He backsticked, sent the P-12 drilling up into the nists. The glow died away, and he emerged in comparative darkness. With nerves at a raw edge, he circled, ready to dive back into the clouds at the first reappearance of the death-cone. But nothing was visible, save a few twinkling stars between the higher clouds.

FROZEN DOOM

E WAITED A MINUTE LONGER, glided down through the clouds. The scene beneath was almost as bright as day from the blaze of the monster plane. It had struck close to the road into Hwaianfu, lighting up the air base to which Li Sin had referred. A lone Shrike, the only one remaining from Hank's flight, was spiraling down to land, and Knight saw that the stolen bomber was already on the ground. He dived steeply, saw the man in the rear of the Shrike firing at something beneath. As he leveled out, he glimpsed a figure zigzagging madly to escape the hail of lead from the Brownings.

With a surge of relief, Knight saw that the Shrike gunner was Doyle. He had feared until then that Doyle and Hank Larson were in the ship which had been caught in the tilting death-cone.

Doyle stopped firing as Hank zoomed to miss a row of buildings. By the time Hank had kicked around for another try, the fleeing man had disappeared. The roly-poly leader slipped down to a fast landing, with Knight close behind. The two ships stopped a hundred feet apart. Knight cut off his engine and jumped down as the Shrike's Conqueror died. Doyle and Hank Larson climbed out of the two-seater, their taut faces mirroring the horror Knight still felt over the other Americans' fate.

"My Lord, Dick!" Doyle said hoarsely. "Did you see what happened to Ben and the rest?"

"I was right there," Knight answered in a grim voice. "It almost got me the same way;"

Hank shook his bald head dazedly.

"I still can't believe it! That second ship—it was

smashed almost to pieces. How could a cone of light do that?"

Doyle swore savagely, wheeled toward the buildings, which were similar to those at the other emergency air field.

"Come on! If we get that butcher Mo-Gwei, we'll beat the truth out of him!"

"Look out!" Hank said in an undertone. "There's somebody crouching down by the left side of that third shack."

Knight took the pistol he had rammed into his shoulder holster, back at the other field, and stole around to the right side, Doyle and Hank stayed in front to cut off the man's retreat. The flames from the blazing plane lighted the area in front of the buildings, leaving the rear in shadow. Knight was half-way to the opposite side when he saw a figure crumpled on the ground. As he bent for a swift glance he heard Doyle's voice from around in front.

"Hey, Dick! This bird's passed out."

Knight knelt by the man he had found. It was a Chinese officer, and it took but one look to show that he was dead. His slanting eyes were wide open, glassy with terror.

"Dick!" Doyle shouted again. In a moment he appeared around the corner of the shack, with Hank at his heels. Both of them halted, stared at Knight and the dead Chinese.

"Holy mackerel—another one!" gasped Doyle. "Is he frozen, too?"

Knight started, touched his hand against that of the Oriental. Even to his chilled fingers, it was icy cold!

"Frozen!" he whispered. "So that's what killed Ben and the others."

"Look over there—by the door of the flight office," Hank said huskily.

Two more Chinese lay just outside the entrance, and the arm of a third could be seen protruding from inside. Knight went over to the doorway, made a quick examination. All three bodies were rigid and cold. They lay in grotesque positions, as though they had frozen as they fell.

"Even the ground is frozen," muttered Doyle.

Knight touched his hand to the earth, withdrew it hastily. As he stood up he could feel the cold through the soles of his shoes. He looked at Hank.

"We'd better get in touch with the nearest Chinese officials and report this."

"They'll think we're crazy," said Hank. He started into the flight office, shivered. "It's cold as a refrigerator in here."

"I don't think there's any danger now," Knight replied. "Whatever did it has gone. After that big ship dropped through the clouds, I noticed a white glow and I climbed up to see where it came from. But there wasn't anything in sight."

"You think it's some kind of death-ray?" Doyle demanded.

"It's got me stumped," said Knight. "But if it's a ray, how is it operated? Why didn't I see a ship when I climbed up there?"

"I'm asking you," Doyle retorted.

THEY both jumped as Hank Larson scratched a match upon the wall. In the yellow light, the body of another Chinese officer was revealed, where he had tumbled over his desk. His extended hand had knocked over the telephone, upsetting a carafe of water. The carafe was broken, and the water had turned to ice. There were tiny bits of thin, shattered glass on the floor, and Knight saw that they came from electric light bulbs, the stubs of which were still in the lamp sockets.

"Those lights are busted the same as the Northrop's landing-lights," exclaimed Doyle, his breath showing white in the cold room.

Knight took his handkerchief, wrapped it around the telephone before he picked it up. Even then, the chill of the instrument stung his hand. The phone was a Continental type. He jiggled the cradle arm, but no one answered.

"The wires have probably been snapped by the cold," he said as he put down the instrument. "We'll have to leg it into Hwaianfu."

Just then something made a crisp sound on the frozen ground at the entrance. Knight spun around, made a grab at the pistol he had laid down on the desk.

"Stand still," a man in the doorway said tensely. He came inside, and the glow from across the field reflected on the gun in his hand.

"Wu Kang!" Hank Larson said in amazement. "How did you get here? What's the idea of—"

"The idea is that he's Mo-Gwei," Knight hazarded harshly. "We should have guessed it before."

The half-caste looked at him with a queer smile.

"If you were really clever, Mr. Knight, you would have guessed a great deal more. But I have no time to waste words. I will make a bargain with you."

"You yellow rat!" stormed Hank. "We'll make no deal with you."

"If you don't listen, it will mean your death," Wu

Kang said fiercely. He shot a look over his shoulder, flicked his dark eyes back before Knight could leap for his gun. The secret agent forced a smile.

"Very well, Wu Kang, you have the drop on us. What's the bargain?"

The Oriental fixed him with suddenly burning eyes. "You would like to know how your men were killed—and what has happened to Lieutenant Pertwell and Mr. Brown?"

"What's the price?" Knight said calmly.

"I desire that you assist me in an undertaking," Wu Kang replied. "I wish to destroy a certain—well, let us say a base. I will fly the Boeing, after you help me load it with bombs, of which there is a supply here. You will escort me to this objective—and drive off any aircraft which may attack me."

"And what if you are killed in this attack?" parried Knight. "How do we learn what we want to know?"

"I shall reveal the secret to you before we take off," replied Wu Kang. "That is, after you pledge your word of honor to accompany me."

"And after we help you wipe out this Chinese base," snapped Knight, "just what happens?"

"You will be free to do as you please—if you live. If you die in this attempt, you will have done a great service for your country."

"You mean for Japan!" rasped Doyle. "What does the United States have to do with this?"

"A very great deal. But there is no time to explain that now."

Knight had caught the furtive glance Hank had thrown him—a signal to play along with the Eurasian until they could trap him.

"Let's get out of this icebox," he said irritably. "We can discuss the details out where it's warmer."

"Very well, but I warn you—" Wu Kang stopped short, a frightened look on his olive-skinned face. "They are here! Quick, we must hide before—"

A SHRILL whistle sounded from somewhere close by, and this was instantly followed by a babble of Chinese voices. Wu Kang sprang to the doorway, but a squad of Chinese gendarmes dashed between the two buildings opposite and quickly cut him off. An officer with a sword rattling at his side ran up panting as two of the gendarmes sprang at Wu Kang with fixed bayonets.

"Lih ding! Seize him—do not kill!" he barked.

Wu Kang, who made no attempt to resist, was speedily disarmed. The officer drew his sword, pointed it at Knight and the others.

"Arrest them!" he shouted, whereupon the remainder of the squad closed about the three men.

"One moment, *kuan*," Knight interposed. "You don't understand. We are Americans—friends of China."

The officer's yellow face darkened.

"That is a lie! I listened at the other door—I heard you plotting with this traitor!"

"And I tell you we were trying to catch him," insisted Knight. "You must not have heard the first part."

The Oriental bared his teeth.

"Not only did I hear you ask the price for information of some kind, but you said you would help destroy a Chinese base. You were planning to bring about the same devilish thing which has happened here."

The soldiers had heard, for the conversation was in Chinese, and they cast frightened glances at the frozen corpses. The officer lifted his sword menacingly.

"How did you kill these men?"

"We had nothing to do with it," Knight answered. "I don't know how it was done."

"You will tell!" snarled the officer. He brought the point of his sword close to Knight's throat. But there was a sudden interruption—the phone in the office was jangling. With a harsh command for his men to guard the prisoners, the officer went to the desk. After a brief conversation, he put down the phone.

"An officer of our Intelligence is on his way to question you," he said sullenly to Knight. "If I had my way, I would slit your throat."

"Why don't you grill the right one?" Hank Larson burst out angrily. He jerked his bald head toward Wu Kang. "This man is Mo-Gwei!"

The officer started, then laughed contemptuously.

"Mo-Gwei is a foreigner—our Intelligence has explained that many times." He stopped, looked from Hank to Knight and Doyle. "A foreigner," he muttered. "Perhaps one of you——"

THE exhaust of a speeding motorcycle broke in, and in a few seconds the machine appeared. There was a sidecar attached, but it was empty. As the helmeted driver swung from the cycle, Knight saw it was Li Sin.

"Thank the Lord!" ejaculated Hank. "Li Sin, put this *kuan* to rights, will you?"

No answering friendliness came into Li Sin's black eyes. Instead, they passed frigidly from Hank to Knight.

"You tricked me once, but it will not happen twice. *Kuan*, have these men's arms tied behind them. Be careful—they are dangerous."

The officer grinned wolfishly, snapped the order.

"Wait a minute," protested Hank. "Li Sin, you've gone off your nut! We weren't in on this business. Wu Kang's the man you want."

Hastily, while one of the soldiers went to find enough rope to tie the three of them, the plump little flight leader described what had happened at Field 32.

"Don't you see?" he concluded. "Wu Kang is really Mo-Gwei. He waited till you took off, then sneaked back and pulled that trick at the mess window. He tried to cover up the whole thing by bombing the place. But we followed him here and were about to force him down when that cone of light saved him."

A cold smile touched Li Sin's lips.

"You are wasting your breath, Mr. Larson. The code message we found on the Japanese colonel was deciphered thirty minutes ago. An order for the arrest of you three men was sent to Suchow—but you have saved us the trouble."

"Order for arrest—but why?" sputtered Hank.

"For espionage," Li Sin replied. "That message proves you and possibly your entire volunteer group have been acting with the Japanese—through this clever friend of yours, Mo-Gwei." He bowed ironically to Knight.

Knight looked at him in amazement.

"If the message said that, it was a frame-up! I tell you Wu Kang is Mo-Gwei! He tried to change his voice by speaking French, but I could tell it was a Chinese talking. Search him and you'll find the money and the original of the message."

Li Sin nodded to the officer, and Wu Kang's pockets were quickly emptied. But there was no sign of the money or the message. The *kuan* looked at Li Sin.

"I find nothing, captain. But this miserable halfbreed was bargaining with the Americans about destroying one of our bases."

"Have him tied, also," ordered Li Sin. "He has undoubtedly been working with them and Japan."

"Then why not shoot them now?" demanded the officer.

"Because they know the secret of this frozen death," Li Sin said impatiently. "At least a hundred men have been killed here, and more along the road and by the gate."

"I have seen," replied the other man, with a shudder. "But if you give me authority, I will soon force these white devils to tell how it was done."

"No, there is a danger of a rescue attempt, if the Japanese learn they have been captured," said Li Sin. "March them out to the converted bombing plane and have your men tie them in the space at the rear of the cabin. I will fly them to Nanking, where there will be no such danger."

Still protesting, Hank was hustled outside, and Knight and the others were tied and marched after him.

"You had better come, also," Li Sin told the gendarme as they reached the big Boeing. "It would be unfortunate if one of the prisoners freed himself while I was busy with the controls."

THE officer looked uneasily at the plane, gave a reluctant nod. Then the three Americans were bundled into the cabin and forced to lie face down just aft the bomb-bay which had been installed in place of seats. The gendarmes trussed them tightly together—so efficiently, in fact, that Knight knew they would not be able to get loose. Two of the soldiers pushed Wu Kang forward to the space between the bomb-bay and the compartment door.

In a few seconds the engines were started, and all the gendarmes but the officer scurried from the ship. Li Sin came back for a brief examination of the prisoners' bonds while the engines warmed up again, then he returned to the pilot's cockpit. A moment later the big ship thundered across the frozen ground and into the air.

The prisoners had been tied so that Knight and Doyle faced each other across Hank's boots, the little heavy-set man having been flung down in the opposite direction. As the bomber climbed up into the darker sky, Hank squirmed to see if he could free himself.

"Keep those big gunboats of yours still," Doyle growled. "It's bad enough being hog-tied without having your feet half-way in my mouth."

"How'd you like to have two pairs sticking in your face?" Hank retorted.

Doyle grunted, peered through the gloom at Knight. "Well, master mind, what happens next?"

"Don't worry," said Knight. "We can clear this up at Nanking, and we ought to be there in about half an hour."

But at the end of thirty minutes the big ship was still droning along.

"Must be a head-wind," Hank's mumble came from the opposite side of the cabin. "Wish I could get a little slack on these ropes. I think my stomach's about cut in two."

"Well, you'd still have enough," Doyle said unsympathetically.

He had barely finished speaking when a sharp report sounded, and the flash of a pistol briefly illuminated the cabin. A voice screamed, was drowned by the crash of another shot.

"Judas priest!" yelped Doyle. "Wu Kang's got loose!" Some one ran back in the dark cabin, and Knight went rigid, expecting the roar of a gun. But after a moment the figure turned and hurried forward again. Knight tried to raise his head, but he could not tell who it was.

Then for another half hour the Boeing cruised on at high speed, while Knight and his two companions waited, tense and helpless, to know their fate. Finally the engines slackened, and the bomber nosed downward. Light shone from below, shifted away as the man at the controls revved out a hasty signal. Knight felt the ship level off, touch smoothly, and roll to a quick-braked stop. The engines died, and light shone through the cabin windows as men approached the bomber.

The door was jerked open, and through the aperture Knight saw a group of staring, brown-faced bluejackets—and beyond them a long expanse of deck.

They were prisoners on a Japanese airplane carrier!

CHAPTER Y THE SECRET OF THE LIGHT

SMARTLY UNIFORMED COMMANDER pushed his way through the crowd of Japanese sailors. As he saw the three captives,

his white teeth flashed in a smile of mockery.

"*Ka-shi!*" he said brusquely to a petty officer. "Have these clipped birds brought out on deck."

Grinning Nipponese sailors cut the ropes, and the Americans were hauled to their feet. Knight looked swiftly forward. To his astonishment, Li Sin was standing there, watching with sardonic amusement showing in his oblique black eyes.

"You!" Knight said stupidly. "Then it was you—"
Li Sin inclined his head with ironic politeness.
"Qui, Monsieur Q-Agent," he said in French. "I am
Mo-Gwei. I regret that it was necessary to deceive you."

Knight's gaze traveled past him to a figure doubled up on the floor. It was the gendarme officer—shot

through the head. Standing at Li Sin's elbow, free of his bonds, was Wu Kang. An expression of hate came into the half-caste's face as Knight glanced toward him.

"So you two were working together," muttered the secret agent. But the bluejackets shoved him out of the cabin before either man could reply, and in a moment he was ranged up beside Hank and Doyle and under the sharp scrutiny of the Japanese commander. Li Sin emerged from the bomber, and Knight was amazed to see the naval officer stiffen and salute the spy.

"Good evening, *taisa!*" he said with obvious respect.
"If that means what it ought to," grated Doyle, "it means 'skunk.'"

The Nipponese whirled, struck him a backhand blow in the face.

"Let that teach you respect for a colonel of the Japanese Army!"

Doyle lunged at him, but four sailors threw themselves upon him and pulled him back. A squad of brown-faced marines trotted up with rifles at trail position and ominously surrounded the prisoners.

"Commander Kaisho!" Li Sin said sharply. "Instruct your men that there are to be no 'accidents' in dealing with these Americans. I have a special use for them later."

Kaisho rattled off a warning to the marines, looked back at the three Americans.

"I suppose from your description," he said to Li Sin, "that the tall one is Knight,"

Li Sin nodded.

"And the one with the crooked nose is the former Marine Corps lieutenant, Doyle, who caused us so much trouble at Chapei in 1932. And of course you know Mr. Larson?"

Kaisho's brown face lost its ironic smile.

"Too well," he said in an ugly tone. "I have long waited for this opportunity. But about your mission, *taisa*, was it successful?"

"In the main," Li Sin said, looking at Knight. "I have covered up all clues which might lead to the secret. Knight and Doyle, you understand, came from Paris on code orders from the chief of American Army Intelligence—General Brett. They had no chance to talk with Pertwell, as you know. They thought that Larson knew about the affair, but I discovered that he, too, was ignorant of the facts."

"But how did you capture them?" inquired Kaisho.

"I missed Knight at Shanghai, and so I flew to the field east of Suchow and obtained a car there. Larson's pilots were drawn from the field by a report from Tamingfu; the sound-rangers heard the big plane in spite of everything."

The Nipponese commander scowled.

"I know. The apparatus has not worked correctly. I think Brown deceived me about the blue-prints, even after our last session with him."

"That is obvious now," Li Sin said curtly. "At Field 32, the light-cone brought about silence, but it did not freeze. Apparently your men discovered it at once, for two Kawasakis dived to attack Knight's plane."

He described the fight and everything which had followed up to the finding of the dead Japanese officer.

"I signaled Wu Kang to be ready, then maneuvered it so he was at the radio building when I taxied the fighter down to the end of the field. We exchanged places, so that if there were any slip I would not be suspected by the survivors. I managed to recover the money and the original of the message which Lieutenant Colonel Hiroto was bringing me. I escaped in this bomber, but three of their two-seaters followed me."

"Yes, I know of that also," interposed Kaisho. "We caught your message to the G-38 and ordered the chief pilot to turn back and help you at Hwaianfu. But the plane has not returned."

Li Sin looked at him, surprised.

"Then you did not know it was destroyed? I supposed there had been a radio report from the Hwaianfu station after I took off."

KAISHO swore, and the surrounding bluejackets set up an excited chatter. The commander silenced them, looked anxiously at Li Sin.

"How did it happen? Can the Chinese learn the workings of the apparatus from the wreckage?"

"Not unless they are miracle workers," Li Sin said with a mirthless smile. "The plane was in flames before it crashed. I think they must have turned on the power with full force, trying to kill Knight. The cone flared up brightly, then failed. A moment later the ship dived through the clouds, burning."

"That leaves us only the original device," muttered Kaisho, and Knight saw him look toward a huge fourmotored Junkers some distance down the flight deck. "But what happened after the crash?"

"I landed the Boeing and escaped, though this broken-nosed *Amerika-jin* nearly killed me. Wu Kang was waiting on the road with a motorcycle—he had seen the light-cone and fled just before it swept over the field. I sent him back to play a part—knowing

he would be at once suspected of being Mo-Gwei. Gendarmes arrived to investigate the crashes, and I phoned from one of the shops, pretending to call from Hwaianfu. Thus I prepared the stage for my entrance.

"The rest was quite simple. I brought along the gendarme officer to prevent his repeating the Americans' story. He began to suspect when I headed East, and I shot him. When I reappear, I can say that the Americans broke loose and killed him. I can say they escaped in the plane after I landed and attempted to overcome them."

"An excellent scheme," said Kaisho. "But what is this plan you mentioned for using the Americans?"

"I'll explain that to you privately," replied Li Sin. "I can tell you while I read the latest dispatches from Tokyo."

"My cabin awaits you," bowed Kaisho. He wheeled to the non-com in charge of the marines. "Take the prisoners to the brig."

Knight and the others were herded between two files of marines and marched forward. They passed a row of Nakajima 90 shipboard fighters and 90-llb two-seaters. Beyond them stood the huge Junkers monoplane. Its four engines were larger than the Junkers type customarily used; and though Knight could not identify the type, he knew the monster craft must have a speed of at least 200 miles an hour. Its hull had been altered, with oval glass ports in the sides and extending downward, so that wide vision could be had from within. Just visible below the bottom of the hull was the tip of an enormous searchlight unit which had been retracted into the belly of the ship, and through the oval-shaped ports Knight dimly saw a maze of condensers, fluorescent tubes, switchboards and other electrical apparatus. He turned his head, trying to see more of the device, but a marine struck him, savagely told him to keep his eyes ahead.

They went past another group of planes, obviously stolen or captured from the Chinese. He saw two Shrikes, a Curtiss P-6, and two British interceptors—all with Chinese insignia and numbers. The P-6 and one of the Shrikes showed marks of recent battle.

The marines marched the three captives to a hatch well forward of the bridge, and down three decks to a narrow passage which led into the carrier's bow. The brig was on the starboard side, almost in the "eyes" of the ship. A marine corporal with a Mitsubishi pistol at his hip unlocked the door, and the Americans were shoved into the dimly-lighted compartment.

AS THE door clanged shut, two disheveled figures jumped up from iron cots secured to the bulkhead. The first was a sandy-haired, wiry man about thirty years old. Knight recognized, from pictures he had been shown, that this was Pertwell. The other man was big, gray-haired, with massive shoulders and a pugnacious jaw which showed a fighting spirit that years had not diminished. His face was bruised, and there was a bloody bandage across his forehead. Knight started, as recognition began to dawn, but Pertwell cut off his exclamation.

"Hank Larson!" groaned Pertwell. "If they've grabbed you, too, I guess we're sunk."

The little man sighed lugubriously. "Looks like it. If you'd only given me an idea what was going on, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

"How'd they get you?" demanded Pertwell. "Are these your pilots?"

"No—this is Dick Knight, and that's Larry Doyle; they're the ones you said would have all the dope."

Pertwell made a helpless gesture.

"I intended to meet you fellows at Shanghai, but I had an urgent call from Li Sin, at Nanking. It was a trick—that devil has been fooling everyone."

"We just learned that," Knight said dryly. "I suppose you know he's Mo-Gwei?"

Pertwell nodded glumly. The elder man now seized the chance to speak.

"How much do you know about this deal? Has Kaisho used my invention yet?"

"They probably don't know about that," began Pertwell. But Knight interrupted.

"We know plenty! And I'm just beginning to understand more. You're Alexander X. Brown, aren't you—the one who invented that system the Navy used for transmitting sound signals down a searchlight beam?"

"That's right," said the big man. "They used it on the Akron and the Macon. That's what led me into this hell-spot! But tell me what those fiends have done."

Knight sat down wearily on one of the bunks. Without wasting words, he narrated the events of the past few hours. Brown turned a sick color as he heard how the deadly light had killed the American pilots and gunners. When Knight had finished, he lifted his haggard face.

"Before heaven, I would have died rather than let this happen. But they worked it so cleverly"

"What is the invention—a variation of the other idea?" Knight asked as Brown's voice trailed off.

"Yes, though I stumbled on it by accident. It was

comparatively easy to work out a means to signal down an ordinary light beam, confining the vibrations to the beam, but the disadvantage was that it would spot the men receiving the message, or at least indicate their general position to an enemy. So I tried to work it with an invisible beam of infra-red light or ultraviolet—something in the non-visible part of the spectrum. I tried a number of spectrum positions, and suddenly I found that at one point I could create complete silence with an invisible light beam. It was absolutely silent inside the beam—even for a short space outside of it."

"I think I know the principle," said Knight. "The higher vibrations counteract the ones in our hearing range."

"It's something like that," said Brown dully. "Same idea as two loud sounds causing a hush at a point where their vibrations overlap. Anyway, I became interested in studying vibrations to create a silent death-beam. I figured that if I could bring about silence by vibrations I could probably find one to cause a terrific heat, for heat has various vibration rates, just like anything else. I told Navy officials and they laughed at me.

"Then when I stumbled onto the rate of vibration for absolute zero of cold, I took the idea to the Army. They were skeptical, and I wasn't able to convince them until I finished a full-size model. We tried it secretly and found it would reach absolute zero—459 degrees below Fahrenheit zero—after going through the point where sound was blotted out. The slightest miscalculation made the beam as bright as a searchlight, and then it burned out the tubes or exploded them.

"Anyhow, the Army experts were enthusiastic about the possibilities, and they agreed to remodel one of the new four-motored Boeing bombers to install the apparatus for testing. Meantime I was to rebuild the device so that the beam could be widened into a cone to cover more area, and at the same time I was to adjust it so that there would be no risk of tubes exploding. The beam, moreover, would be invisible."

"G-2 should have had the invention guarded day and night—and you, too," interjected Pertwell.

"Well, they didn't," Brown said sourly. He looked back at Knight and the others. "You probably can guess what happened. Japanese agents learned about it somehow. They were clever enough not to approach me. They got hold of a white man to impersonate an Army officer, and he had some forged credentials that deceived me completely, so I let him help me crate up

the apparatus for a rush shipment to the West Coast for installing at the Boeing factory.

"But when the crate was gone, my 'Army officer' must have put some knock-out drops in my coffee, for the next thing I remember was waking up in a private plane. They had my blueprints, too. I was drugged again and then onboard a Japanese liner at San Francisco. And ever since then it's been plain Hades."

"WHEN we reached Tokyo, they started to build a duplicate of my model. They used the blueprints, but couldn't make out some of the fine points, and after they'd 'worked on me' for two days I told them I'd explain everything. They'd found meantime that something had happened to the model on the way over. The cone was visible all the time, though the tubes didn't burn. I swore I didn't'know what caused it, so they hurried the building of the duplicate, intending to use it against China. I figured I was finished, anyway, so I wired it so that the first time they turned it on full power the tubes would explode."

"Thank heaven you did," Knight said fervently, "or I wouldn't be here."

"Maybe you'd be better off if you'd been killed," Pertwell said moodily. "At least it was quick for those poor fellows."

"It was that," Doyle put in, with a grimace. "They froze stiff the second they hit the edge of the cone."

"Now I know what made that Shrike go to pieces," said Hank Larson. "The cold froze the Prestone in that Conqueror engine and made it burst."

"It could have burst even an air-cooled motor," Brown said heavily. "That sudden change in temperature would break anything brittle—a steel propeller, glass windows, anything which couldn't stand the abrupt contraction. But there's one consolation—that duplicate model is destroyed, and they were afraid to use my original model even after they installed it in one of their ships. They were afraid the cone would be so bright that the Chinese would have a good target for their anti-aircraft guns."

"That's one thing I wanted to ask you," said Knight. "The vibrations of the cone must break up any clouds that get in the way,"

"They do, but these devils can't always find clouds to hide above beforehand," returned Brown.

"They'll know now that you did something to that model of theirs," Pertwell predicted. "And this time they'll torture you until you tell them what they want."

Brown's jaw set fiercely.

"I'd let them kill me first!"

"You don't know the Oriental," Pertwell muttered. "They may not kill you—but you'll wish a thousand times that they would."

"How did they get you here?" Knight asked, to get Pertwell's mind off his gloomy prophecy.

"Wu Kang intercepted me on the way from Shanghai to Nanking. He said Li Sin had discovered a clue indicating that Mo-Gwei was an American, and that Li Sin wanted me to meet him at a certain place. So I got off the train and went with Wu Kang. A car was waiting. I hopped in—and Li Sin, poked a gun in my ribs. They drove me to an isolated clearing, bundled me into a plane, and brought me here. The idea, of course, was to get everybody in China who knew about Brown's invention safely out of the way. I was acting under instructions from General Brett, and Li Sin thought I might be 'in on the know'—which I wasn't."

"A cold-blooded rascal, that Chinese," Brown said savagely.

"He's only half Chinese," replied Pertwell. "To be exact, he's half Manchurian and half Japanese. He's one of those freaks of nature who looks almost completely like one race instead of a mixture of both."

"So he's a half-caste, the same as Wu Kang," grunted Doyle.

"Right," said Pertwell. "But Wu seems to be merely a paid traitor, while Li Sin is actually a Japanese officer—a colonel on their secret register. He told me that when I called him a traitor—seemed to be proud of his Japanese blood and the fact that he'd been able to fool the Chinese all these years."

"He certainly made a fool out of me," said Hank sadly.

"I've often wondered what did it," grinned Doyle. The plump little pilot bristled. "Anyway, I never was fool enough to be a Leatherneck."

"You mean you couldn't pass the physical, fatty!" "Shut up, you two," said Knight. "We're in a spot,

and we've got to figure a way out."

"There isn't any way," Pertwell said gloomily.

"Who else in China knows about this invention?" Knight asked him.

"Nobody, as far as I know," replied the attache. "I received the word by special code from General Brett. He said to round up a group of dependable American pilots and have them ready to take your orders. He said he had shipped your special Northrop because it was the fastest ship available and because we couldn't risk using a Service job. He gave me the barest details on

Brown and the invention, and told me to tell nobody but you. That's that."

"There's slim chance that somebody will get on our trail," said Hank. He paused, scratched his bald head. "Say, Mr. Brown, are you sure they didn't build *two* duplicates of your model, instead of one?"

"Positive," said the inventor.

"Well, Dick saw a glow on the clouds, *after* that big ship dropped through, on fire."

"Must have been a light flashed from an escort plane," hazarded Brown. "I heard their plans, and they intended to have two or three Kawasakis go out with the Junkers for the first few trips. They could keep close, in the silent 'zone' created by the device, until the moment for action. I imagine there was a third plane there at your Field 32 fight, keeping above the Junkers in case of an attack from above. After the big ship caught fire, above Hwaianfu, the Kawasaki pilot probably ran for it."

"He didn't return to the carrier, or Kaisho would have known, all about it," observed Knight. "He might have been forced down somewhere and the Chinese may have made him talk."

"More likely he headed north within his own lines," said Pertwell. "Might as well make up our minds to it—we're finished."

The last word had hardly left his lips when a muffled voice sounded from outside the brig. The sentry's curt reply was drowned by a sudden thudding against the steel door. Knight heard a gasp through the narrow grill above the door. He jumped from the cot, sprang to one side as a key grated in the lock. Slowly, the door swung open—then without a sound the Japanese corporal pitched headlong into the compartment. Behind him, a dripping dagger in one hand, a helmeted figure appeared.

It was Wu Kang.



OR A SECOND, Knight stood paralyzed with astonishment at sight of the dead sentry and the grim-faced Eurasian. Wu Kang swiftly raised one finger to his lips, gazed back into the passage, then hurriedly entered the brig and closed the door.

"Ask no questions!" he said tensely. "One of you must wear this dead man's uniform and—"

"Another damned trick!" snarled Doyle. He leaped at the half-caste, but Knight dragged him back.

"Wait! Kaisho wouldn't stand for killing one of his men just to trick us."

Wu Kang looked feverishly from Knight to the rest of the prisoners. "Mr. Larson—you are nearest the sentry's size. Put on his uniform. I will try to explain what is necessary as you dress."

Hank stared dumbly from him to the dead Japanese, from whose left side blood was beginning to ooze.

"Quickly, please!" moaned the Eurasian. "If it is too bloody some one will see when we go above."

Brown knelt and began to undress the dead man, and Hank hurriedly started to disrobe. Knight gripped Wu Kang by the shoulder as the man laid his dagger on a cot.

"If this is a trick, you'll die with us!" he said harshly. Wu Kang's eyes blazed at him.

"I am as good as dead, if they find me here! Does not this prove that I hate the accursed Japanese?"

"No," snapped Knight. "You still have too much else to explain. You were working with Li Sin."

"Because there was no other way," Wu Kang flung back. "That human devil had my wife spirited into Manchukuo one year ago, and since that day has forced me to help him, promising each time to have her returned to me unharmed. He has not fulfilled that promise, and meanwhile he has threatened to betray me to the Chinese Government as a traitor if I refuse to aid him."

The fury in the half-caste's eyes almost made Knight step back.

"Tonight," continued Wu Kang, "I learned that my wife is dead! She killed herself the night they seized her—and all this time he has promised to give her back to me!"

The spasmodic working of the man's throat, the agony in his ashen face almost convinced Knight that he was not acting. But he had to make doubly sure.

"How did you learn this?" he insisted.

A mist came into Wu Kang's eyes.

"I was listening outside Kaisho's cabin—hoping to hear something which I could use later—when I heard him mention my name. Li Sin laughed—"

The half-caste's fists clenched.

"—and then he told Kaisho of how my beloved one had killed herself, how he had tricked me all this time. I would have gone in and stabbed him then—but the cabin door was locked." "So you want us to help you kill Li Sin?" Knight said grimly.

Wu Kang's lips drew back in a snarl. "No! Li Sin is mine! But he loves Japan—as I too love a country that is only half my own—and to know that he has helped defeat her will be more agony than the moment when I kill him!"

THE dead marine corporal had been partly undressed, and Hank had put on the man's trousers. He looked up sharply at Wu Kang.

"If you love China so much, why didn't you tip off some one in Nanking about Li Sin? They would have worked it to get your wife back—if you had proved he was Mo-Gwei."

The agony came back into Wu Kang's eyes.

"He would never tell me the exact place where she was taken. If he died, she would be lost forever to me. That is why I have protected him—why I made it seem you were conspiring against China; Li Sin saw the gendarmes coming and told me to do as I did. But all the time—all these months—I have waited and prayed for the chance to strike back, when—when she was safe again."

His voice broke, and he flung out one hand in a desperate plea. "Believe me, it is the truth! I swear it!"

"I believe him," Brown said huskily.

"So do I," muttered Pertwell. "It all sounds like something Li Sin would concoct."

"Even so," said Doyle, "what does it get us? We might make the flight deck, but before we'd get a ship started they'd be on us."

"No, that is what I was going to tell you," interrupted Wu Kang. "I overheard something important, just after that fiend told about—her. They were talking of torturing Mr. Brown into revealing the full secret of his invention so that they could make it invisible when they turn it against the Chinese in the North and at Shanghai. But now they are going to use it at once—tonight!"

"What?" said Knight.

"Yes, it is an emergency, and they will be starting up the big German plane at any moment. Word came from their forces in Shanghai that your General Brett and an important official of your State Department have arrived by the Clipper plane from San Francisco. A spy in the pay of the Japanese installed a dictaphone at their hotel, and he reported that they have come on this matter of the invention. They are afraid it will become known that Japan is using an American invention which was developed by the United States

Army. They are afraid that Britain and other nations will not understand. And they are going to tell the truth to the whole world—that Japanese agents stole the device and abducted the inventor."

"Good Lord!" breathed Knight. "It'll blow everything sky-high."

"Kaisho and Li Sin are afraid it will turn more nations against Japan," Wu Kang said swiftly, "and also that it may lead to war with your country—for which they are not prepared now. But most of all they are afraid that it will ruin their plans to use the invention, for searchlights would show up the special planes, even if they were silent."

"That's right!" exclaimed Brown. "And they've got to fly fairly low, or it won't be effective."

"This flight you mentioned," Knight said hastily. "What are they going to do?"

"Strike at your consulate-general building," said Wu Kang. "Arrangements have been made by your Intelligence general to broadcast through a Chinese station at four o'clock this morning. Your general has sent word to your Intelligence at Washington to have the message re-broadcast by standard and shortwave so that it will be heard practically all over the world. They have chosen this hour because it will then be daylight in America and early evening in Europe. The Chinese station will make it heard in Asia."

Knight's face had whitened.

"Brett must have decided we had been captured or killed when he didn't hear from you," he told Pert-well. "He must be acting on White House orders to clear the United States of any blame because of Brown's invention getting into Japanese hands."

"Where are they broadcasting from?" Pertwell demanded of Wu Kang.

"From the consulate-general—where I told you Li Sin intends to strike. They plan to fly to Shanghai at once and turn the death-cone on that entire area. It is misty, and they will be able to come down low enough without much danger."

"Lord!" whispered Pertwell. "The heart of the International Settlement! They'll kill hundreds—perhaps thousands!"

"Then what are we waiting for?" raged Doyle. "Let's get going!"

"No!" Wu Kang said hoarsely. "Wait until you hear the engines start. Every second out of here means a second more in which we may fail. Besides." he added fiercely, turning to Brown, "you must promise to aid China—to let her use your invention." "Nothing doing!" Brown cut him short. "I've no love for Japan after this deal—but the U. S. Army decides who uses that invention if I ever get it back."

"Then this may change your mind," said the half-caste. "They intend to kill you after forcing you to give up all the information they need. And tonight they plan to kill these others to hide the truth about the attack at Shanghai."

"How?" rapped Knight.

"The Boeing plane—the converted one—is being sent also. All of you but Mr. Brown are to be put inside—and shot down before the plane takes off. A Japanese pilot will be selected to fly it, and after the Junkers has struck, the Boeing will be brought down in full sight of Shanghai, so that its Chinese insignia can be seen in the searchlights that are sure to be turned on it. Its racks are to be filled with incendiary bombs, and the pilot will drop them as near the consulategeneral building as possible, hoping to destroy many of the frozen bodies. He is then to make a forced landing somewhere just outside the Japanese lines, so he can escape and leave the four of you to be blamed for the 'mistake' in bombing. To make sure there is no failure, Japanese pilots are going to fly the planes you saw on deck which were stolen with Li Sin's help from the Chinese air service. They will guard the Junkers during the short flight to Shanghai, then they'll dive down so that they can be seen along with the bomber."

"They'll never get away with it!" fumed Doyle. "Anybody could see it's a frame-up!"

"I heard them say that a paper would be found on Mr. Knight's body," Wu Kang retorted. "What it would be, I do not know—but the word 'Q-Agent' was mentioned."

KNIGHT groaned. "Li Sin could cook up a dozen fake orders, linking G-2 with this thing, through me. Japan could hold it as a club over the United States, and they might get away with it long enough for them to use Brown's invention unhindered. After that, not even the White House would dare give out the true story."

"Well, what's the set-up?" demanded Doyle. "Do we try to grab those fighters?"

Knight shot a look at Wu Kang. "Which ship is to go off first?"

"I don't know—probably the Junkers."

"Then that's the ship to try for," Knight said tersely. "What was your idea about Hank's taking that uniform?"

"This," said Wu Kang. "He will pretend to be marching one of you up to the flight deck, and the rest will stay a little way behind. If he encounters anyone, he will have the marine's gun and—"

"I get it," said Knight. "Hank, I'll be your prisoner. Pull that cap down over your face; you're tanned almost dark enough to get by for a Japanese, except for your eyes."

Pertwell wet his lips.

"I'd give a thousand dollars for a gun," he said shakily.

The muffled roar of an engine was suddenly audible, and Wu Kang's black eyes dilated.

"Now!" he said, and swung open the brig door.

CHAPTER VII DEATH OVER SHANGHAI

NIGHT STEPPED into the passage, his hands elevated, with Hank thrusting the gun into his back. There was no one in sight. He paused at the turn which led to the hatchway ladder to be sure that no one was coming down.

"Step on it," Hank said tensely. "They're warming that ship in a hurry!"

More engines were revving, and Knight surmised that the Boeing and the other stolen Chinese ships had been started as well as the Junkers. He climbed swiftly, shot a look about him as he reached the next deck. A faint blue battle-light glowed on an empty compartment; deserted hammocks showed where Nipponese bluejackets had been turned out for the emergency. He was at the top of the next ladder when he saw some one coming down from the flight deck. He called a hasty warning down to Doyle and the others, and sprang into the gloom of the gun-deck with Hank at his heels.

The same squad of marines which had taken them below was filing down the ladder. Knight held his breath as the eight Japanese passed down into the semi-darkness below. But there was no outcry, and in a few seconds Wu Kang appeared leading the rest of the prisoners.

"Hurry!" he exclaimed. "Those men will give the alarm in a minute!"

Knight dashed up the last ladder. He had reached

the top step when a petty officer and two seamen came running toward the hatch. There was no time to retreat. He stepped out, silently blessing the fact that the floodlights had not been turned on. As the petty officer saw him he opened his lips as though to shout, then grinned at sight of Hank with the pistol held at Knight's back. He and the two seamen stood aside. Knight took three steps, leaped around just as Wu Kang and Doyle came up the ladder into view. The petty officer jumped back as he saw the rest of the group running up the steps, but his frantic cry was lost in the thunder of a dozen airplane engines.

Hank's pistol thudded on his head, and he collapsed in a heap. One of the seamen whirled to escape, but Knight knocked him to the deck with a swift left hook. Wu Kang and Doyle threw themselves on the other bluejacket, and the half-caste's hand closed tightly on the man's throat.

The bluejacket's struggles ended quickly, and Doyle let the unconscious man slump back to the deck. Knight cast a hasty glance aft. The monster Junkers was in take-off position, and he could see the exhaust flashes of several smaller planes. The Boeing was beyond and at the side, waiting to be run out into position. At least a hundred bluejackets and officers were scurrying around the ships.

"Try to reach the ship before that gun-crew sees us!" Wu Kang hissed into Knight's ear. He pointed to three Nipponese by a tripod-mount Lewis across the deck as they hurriedly stole toward the Junkers. Suddenly a blue-clad figure shot from the hatch they had just left. It was the marine sergeant.

Flame spurted from his pistol, and a bullet ricochetted from the armored side of the bridge. Hank wheeled, fired, and the sergeant toppled headlong. Pertwell flung himself down at the gun the man had dropped, pumped three shots at the marines who had followed the sergeant up the ladder.

Knight instantly abandoned the attempt to reach the Junkers. With a shout to Hank, he raced toward the Lewis gun. One of the Japanese was frantically swinging the weapon. Knight sprang to the other side, and a bullet from Hank's pistol dropped the gunner in his tracks.

A floodlight went on with a white glare, revealing the startled faces of the two remaining gunners. Knight hurdled the dead man, drove a sledge-hammer fist into the first gunner's face. The blow lifted the Japanese from his feet, hurled him back against his companion. The other man fell, but was up in a flash, jerking his bayonet from its scabbard. Knight had seized the spade-grip of the Lewis. He whirled the gun, but the other man dived under the muzzle, his bayonet twisted for a murderous sidewise blow.

BUT a splotch of red flame showed in the dazzling glow, and Hank's plump face appeared through pistol smoke. The Japanese sprawled with a slug through his heart, and Hank leaped to Knight's side.

"Make for the ship! I'll cover you!" Knight rasped. From farther aft, and near the door to the "ready room," another machine-gun suddenly clattered. Tracers and solids smoked and gouged the deck as the deadly stream whipped around toward Knight and Hank. Knight's finger closed hard on his trigger, and the Lewis hurled an answering fusillade across the carrier.

The Japanese gunner fell, riddled. A dozen bluejackets sprang to take his place. Knight mowed them down, whirled the spouting Lewis as pistols began to blaze from amidships. In three seconds nearly a score of Japanese lay dead or dying, and the rest were scattering in panic for the nearest shelter. Knight let up on the trigger, looked around swiftly.

Doyle and Wu Kang were within sixty feet of the Junkers. Behind them came Brown, carrying Pertwell slung over his shoulder.

"Get going!" Knight flung at Hank Larson. "I'll hold them back until you're clear!"

"Don't be a fool!" howled the little man. "Come on, we can all make it!"

The Junkers' four engines thundered, and the giant ship began to move. Knight saw Doyle fire wildly at the pilot's compartment before the plane cut off his view. The Junkers gathered speed, roared the length of the flight deck, and took off. A rifle cracked from up on the wing of the bridge, and a bullet plowed wood at Knight's feet. Hank blasted a shot at the sniper, and a dark figure plummeted headfirst.

"You've got to take one of those Shrikes!" Knight rapped out. "Pertwell's hurt—you'll have to pilot for him. Doyle can take Brcwn."

"What about you?" cried Hank.

"Cover me after you take off—I'll grab the P-6 or one of the Vickers."

FROM two directions, rifle fire crashed as Hank darted across the deck. He stumbled, jumped up, zigzagged toward Doyle and the others. Knight loosed a burst toward the red flashes near the edge of the superstructure, and three bluejackets wilted.

Then when he swung the Lewis back toward the other riflemen, he saw Kaisho and Li Sin crouching behind the landing-gear of the coverted Boeing. But Brown and Wu Kang were blocking his aim.

Li Sin fired, and one of Brown's legs buckled under him. Pertwell rolled limply out of his arms, and Knight knew that the attache was dead. Doyle sprang to help the inventor. Brown pulled himself to his feet, clawed at the side of the Shrike to which Doyle dragged him. Li Sin raised his gun, but held his fire as the inventor's bulky form came between him and Doyle. Knight knew that the Japanese would kill Brown only as a last resort. He swiveled the Lewis and poured a quick burst into the second group of riflemen.

He had lost only a second, but another rifle flamed just as he fired, and Brown sagged in a lifeless heap. Doyle took one look, sprang toward Hank. The little man shoved him toward the Shrike, tottered against the wing. Doyle heaved him up and into the rear cockpit, vaulted into the front seat, Wu Kang had disappeared, but as the Shrike lunged forward he saw the half-caste leap toward Li Sin.

A look of terror came into Li Sin's face, and he whirled his pistol. Wu Kang's dagger flashed like a streak of light. The gun fell from Li Sin's hand as the knife gashed his arm. He threw himself back, raced madly under the Boeing. Wu Kang snatched up the fallen gun, sped after him amid a crackle of shots from aft of the superstructure. Knight emptied the Lewis into the group of advancing Japanese, sprang up and dashed toward the idling planes.

An engine bellowed with a louder note, and one of the Vickers interceptors shot out into take-off position. The carrier was still headed into the wind, and with a roar of its Bristol engine the fast little ship plunged past Knight and into the air. He saw Li Sin crouched over the controls, then hard after the Vickers came the P-6 with Wu Kang furiously bent on vengeance.

Kaisho had fled before Wu Kang's fierce onslaught, but now he screamed out a command, and a dozen bluejackets ran toward Knight. With a sinking heart, Knight saw he would be cut off before he could reach the other Vickers. But a sudden pound of guns cut through the uproar, and with a gasp of relief he saw the Shrike pitch down at the Japanese. He threw himself flat as Doyle unleashed all four of the Shrike's forward guns. The charging bluejackets went down like grain before a scythe, and the ones farther back fled madly from those grinding guns of doom.

As the Shrike zoomed, Knight jumped up and ran

across to the Vickers. The deck was a shambles, and he slipped on its bloody surface. In the split-second it took to regain his footing, Kaisho had popped from the door to the "ready room" with a leveled automatic. The gun blazed as Knight flung himself into the cockpit, and hot lead creased his side like a brandingiron. He struck at the throttle, managed to claw the stick into his hand as the scene swirled before his eyes.

With a desperate effort, he drove off the sudden faintness and held the Vickers to a straight path down the bloody deck. The ship bounced over a dead man's legs, swerved and narrowly missed the superstructure. A hail of bullets filled the air as he hoiked the interceptor into the night. He sucked deep breaths of the cool air into his lungs, felt his reeling senses steady.

As he climbed, he saw the other Shrike race across the lighted deck and zoom in swift pursuit. Behind it came the Boeing. He closed the Plexiglas enclosure, anxiously inspected the sky. By the glow from the carrier's deck, he spotted the Junkers circling two thousand feet above. Evidently the pilot was waiting to determine the outcome of the fight before heading on his mission.

Now a powerful blinker light began to flash from the vessel's bridge, and the Junkers swiftly banked onto a southwest course. The blinker faded, but a searchlight stabbed up quickly and caught the Shrike which Doyle and Hank had taken. It was climbing steeply after the monster ship.

Knight retracted the Vickers' wheels, changed the pitch of the propeller. The searchlight probed at him, slid away. Anti-aircraft guns were pounding at the Shrike, and he realized that the gunners must have mistaken his ship for one flown by Li Sin, or he, too, would have been a target. Tracers off in the gloom abruptly marked the position of the spy's ship, as Wu Kang opened fire on the man he hated. Knight looked at his compass. Wu had said the carrier was in the mouth of the Yangtze River, between Tsung Ming Island and Woosung. At this speed, that meant it was less than a twenty-minute flight to Shanghai.

HE LOCKED the stick between his knees, found his handkerchief, and made a first-aid pad to put under his shirt. He took off his belt, fastened it higher so that it pressed the pad tightly against his wound. The pain had subsided to a dull ache, but he knew he was losing blood.

The carrier's lights faded away astern, and light mist began to cover the Plexiglas enclosure. Sporadic bursts of machine-gun fire still marked the positions of the ships ahead, but he could see nothing else. There was an interval of five tense minutes, then from out of the darkness he could see a dull red glare ahead. They were approaching stricken Shanghai. In five minutes more the fate of kindly old General Brett and hundreds of Americans would be decided!

Then something flashed diagonally across the sky before him, and as he recognized the outlines of the other Vickers, he clamped the stick triggers. Cherry-red lines shot across the ether ship's tail, and Li Sin kicked away in a furious turn.

Knight's hasty burst had missed the spy, but it brought action from the ground forces ahead. Searchlights sprang up hazily through the increasing drizzle, from vessels in the harbor and from both Japanese and Chinese positions in Shanghai itself. Knight gritted his teeth as he saw the big Junkers going in on a long power glide, straight for the center of the Bund. The big ship was three hundreds yards away, but he tripped his guns into action.

A Shrike zoomed up on his left and he eased off to give Doyle a chance to join in the attack. To his dismay, the tracers of the Shrike's nose guns smoked after him. It was Kaisho's ship! He back-sticked, whipped out of range. An explosive blast of fire lit up the sky behind him. He stared around, saw the Boeing twisting down, a mass of flame. Doyle was zooming across the falling inferno, and Knight knew that he had done the job. The other Shrike was plunging in at the Vickers, cowl guns pounding. Knight snapped into a vertical bank, raked the tail, and dived under it at the Junkers.

With a prayer that Doyle would take care of Kaisho, he raced after the monster. A blob of fire appeared near the tail as the rear gunner saw the interceptor. Two torrents of slugs from high-speed guns crashed into the speeding Vickers. Knight shoved the stick forward a fraction of an inch, tensed as the gunner's bullets tore off the glassine top and ripped through the fuselage. Back came the stick, trips down, and with a grim triumph he saw his tracers tear into the Japanese. The Junkers' rear gun went dark, but before he could change his aim to bring down the huge ship Li Sin dived at him out of the misty night.

Knight rolled out of the spy's vicious barrage, came back with a fury which drove Li Sin into a wild skid. As the other Vickers lost speed, Knight whirled back after the Junkers. The monster had banked into the wind for a dead-on approach to its target.

And in consternation he saw that the deadly lightcone projector was now being lowered from its belly! FRANTICALLY, he cut loose with his guns. The tracers were burning the air within a foot of the projector—when his belts abruptly ran out! He threw a desperate glance over his shoulder. Doyle and Hank had downed the other Shrike, but they could never catch up in time to stop the Junkers. He whirled back to the controls—and went rigid. The projector was beginning to glow with blue-white light, and it was swinging back at his ship!

In a panic he hauled the stick back, shot above the Junkers. The beam slowly angled downward, sweeping across the water toward the Bund. A groan was wrenched from his lips as he thought of the frightful doom about to strike. An image of gray-haired John Brett seemed to smile at him through the mist

With a moan, he shoved the stick forward. His guns were empty—but there was one way left. Wings shrieking, he dived at the tail of the Junkers. The flashing prop was within fifty feet of the big ship's tail when Li Sin's plane pitched in again with guns blasting.

For a fraction of a second, Knight thought it was all over. But suddenly a look of horror shot into the spy's yellow face. Plunging head-on toward him came Wu

Kang's ship!

Knight had a flashing glimpse of the terrible smile on the face of Wu Kang, then the two ships collided with a crash that shook the sky.

Blinding flame geysered from the hurtling mass of wreckage, and the searing heat scorched Knight's face. He threw his hand before his face.

When, seconds later, he uncovered his eyes the Junkers was spinning madly out of control, half of one wing torn off where the falling ships had struck it.

The Shrike which held Doyle and Hank Larson was the only other ship remaining beside his own. General Brett would never have to make his announcement now. That sinister threat of frozen doom was ended. Brown was dead, his blueprints useless, both models of his invention destroyed. Knight saw Doyle signal across the misty sky, saw the Shrike speed away toward Lungwha airport and safety. He banked to follow.

For an instant he gazed down the tilted wing and saw a mass of flaming wreckage plunge into the water. Wu Kang had paid his debt to China. Slowly, Knight raised his hand in a reverent salute to a half-caste who had been a great man. Then the Vickers raced westward into the night.

