

Balloons for a Breda

A Coffin Kirk Adventure by Arch Whitehouse

Only one green balloon was supposed to be floating above the U.S.S. Marblehurst. But somehow the plans had gone haywire—for there were two! Which was the right one? “Coffin” Kirk had to choose—and choose fast. Because three lead-hurling Mitsubishis were roaring down the heavens! Still, none of it fazed “Tank.” He was always ready—even when Kirk deliberately put a Jap Intelligence officer on their own sky trail and presented him with—a bouquet of lavender!

THROUGH the heat-wave of cushioned air that danced over the waters of the China Sea slammed the solitary Breda 65. On a chart, the position would have read 9:14,N. by 117:22,E. In other words, about 30 miles west of the jagged coast of Palawan. The Breda was clipping over the sea in this vicinity because a certain man in Washington had relayed a strange message via another certain man in Manila.

That message told about balloons—colored toy balloons.

Oh the water, not far ahead, the U.S.S. Marblehurst, a vessel of the Asiatic squadron, was plowing along. Her skipper—Captain Ravenstoke—almost wished he were back under sail. He could understand a mariner’s glass tide tables, and the pull of a to’g’an’s’l. But this silly business of toy balloons, airplanes flown by civilians, and messages back and forth from a flying boat which someone had the audacity to call a “Clipper”! It all had him walking on eggs.

But there they were on the quarterdeck—his Flag-Officer, a radio man, a warrant officer clerk, and two machinist ratings. They had a three-legged instrument called a theodolite and a lot of silly balloons. Five balloons, as a matter of fact. Four red ones and one green one.

That’s where the trouble began. For when the balloons were released and were well on their way—there were six! Two greens and four reds!

The Flag-Officer gasped. He stared up at the bridge, then raced for the companionway. At the

steps he stopped: “What’s the use?” he muttered. “Can’t shoot one down. Don’t know which one—both greens look alike from here!”

They were alike, too. For each had a small aluminum tube fastened to its knotted nozzle.

COFFIN KIRK sat back and relaxed. He had flown that Breda plenty of miles to make this strange contact. He had prepared for the contact so that no slip-up could take place. He pondered on it all, sensed that while it was all very mysterious, there didn’t seem to be much danger attached to it.

His gunner was huddled in the back seat. He was a strange individual, of ungainly proportions. He wore a soiled seaman’s blouse, which revealed a scraggy neck. Long hairy arms protruded below the cuffs and the hands hung limp in relaxation. More careful examination would have disclosed that this gunner guy had the face of an ape. It was heavy and broad across the frontal bone. The nose was frankly flat and the nostrils broadly defined. And there was a strange unreal pinkish glow across the cheeks which ran into the hairy beard line of the jaw.

His name was “Tank”—no more, no less. And he was just about as strong as a military tank.

Kirk, on the other hand, was striking in his tropical whites. He might have been a fencing master. He might have been the master of any profession demanding grace and muscular skill.

He shuffled in his seat and glanced ahead. His keen piercing eyes now spotted the splinter of gray steel on the water a few miles ahead—the U.S.S. Marblehurst. He glanced at his dash clock, nodded, and called over his shoulder: “Come on, Tank! Get the butterfly net!”

The Breda thundered on at three-quarter throttle now. It had a 1,000-h.p. Fiat radial up front and there was plenty of push-push in the cylinders. She was capable of 254 m.p.h.

The gunner guy behind shuffled twice, then aroused completely. He drew his shapeless canvas

helmet down tighter over his ears and made a somewhat mournful grimace as he stared at Kirk.

“Get busy, Tank! Just as I told you—with the net!”

Coffin Kirk now peered ahead again. And frowned. He sat there tense as a violin string. Sure, there were several colored blobs in the sky ahead, just as he had been told. But something wasn't right.

“Something wrong here, Tank. There's two greens.”

The man behind only peered ahead, then glanced at Kirk and waited dumbly for further instructions.

The balloons were at 1,500 feet now and spreading out on the breeze. There were four reds and two greens.

“Never mind. We'll get both greens and play safe, eh, Tank?”

The man behind allowed his face to go through a curdling motion which indicated that he was ready. He leaned down in his seat, drew out a length of flexible wire and some light fish-netting. This he formed into a loop.

Kirk let down the wing flaps a few notches to slow her up, then pointed the plane toward one of the green balloons. The man behind climbed up on his seat and stood in the blast of the slipstream.

The balloons came on, and meantime there was some sort of Aldis lamp signaling from the wing of the Marblehurst's bridge.

Kirk watched it carefully and caught a Navy warning signal. He glanced about and watched the light again. It read: “Take both greens! Take both greens—quick!”

“We intend to,” Kirk muttered. “Don't want to hazard any chances.” Then he settled to the tedious task of maneuvering the Breda near the balloons, handling the stick with care. “Here goes nothing!” he yelled.

HE SWUNG the Breda around as the wide cluster of balloons passed over them. Then he saw the reason for the warning. Three wide-winged Mitsubishi bombers which had been straddling the sunlight were coming down at them.

“Get that green one first!” cried Kirk, pointing.

The stocky figure behind was fingering his wire and net. The throttle was back and Kirk climbed the ship gently and skillfully to a stall. A

spatter of lead splashed across the tail surfaces of the Breda and the man behind let out an animal growl.

“This one, Tank!” yelled Kirk.

It all happened very fast as the Breda reached the tip of the stall.

There was a lightning swish of the net and a green balloon was caught and quickly drawn down.

“Good! Now that other one—over there.”

They skidded, caught on the quick roar of the Fiat engine, and climbed back into the Mardi Gras of balloons. Streaks of tracer bullets crackled across the sky, jangled into the dural plates of the Breda. Kirk let out an oath, rammed the Breda full at a Mitsubishi, and pumped out a short chugging burst. The bomber-fighter staggered a few jerks, straightened out, then fell away. Obviously, it was doomed.

“Where's that other green balloon?” Kirk yelled looking around anxiously.

Tank was staring coldly through the wailing slipstream at one of the Japanese bombers. Kirk followed his gaze—and sensed what had happened. “So that guy got it, eh? Well, I hope we got the right one.”

Coffin Kirk twisted hard, looked down at the green balloon that was dancing around in the space behind him. He pinched it quickly, breaking it with a dull plop, whereupon Tank almost jumped out of the cockpit. He now gave Kirk a haunted, puzzled look.

“It's all right, Tank. I just busted the balloon. Just went ‘bang.’ It's all right”

The ape resumed his seat gingerly, peered about cautiously. Then, apparently satisfied, he suddenly swung into action. There was a Breda-Safat gun in a space behind him, and he yanked it out with a grunt.

Peering along the sights with both eyes open, he dragged back the trigger and hung on while the gleaming weapon danced under the recoil and thud of streaking mechanism. A stream of piercing death slammed out and caught the lead Mitsubishi. There was an ominous rattle of steel against dural. A gash opened up across the rear half of the Jap's port motor nacelle. It yawned wider across the wing root, then split wide the fuselage between the control pit and the rear gunner's turret.

That was all there was to it. The big bomber broke itself in half as though some invisible blade had hacked her apart. A smudge of smoke trailed back and formed a mourning band. A tiara of flame fanged up from the wing root and a dark stub-legged figure hurtled itself through it all and went tumbling away.

“Don’t stand there admiring the view,” Kirk blurted out. “Get another!”

Tank responded. Without taking his finger from the trigger, he hosed a torrent of steel-jacketed lead at the turret gunner of another Nipponese plane, who was in turn hammering lead back at them. Tank let the guy have it—with a hosing that hacked the turret off.

It fell off, twisting and turning end over end. It plummeted straight at the Breda, and Tank grabbed at Kirk’s shoulder and let out a jungle squeal. Kirk instinctively yanked the controls back so that the Breda stood on its tail wheel, and they just avoided the tumbling turret.

“Wow!” gasped Kirk. “Here comes some more of the same!”

There had been another wrenching screech and the tail of the Mitsubishi tore itself away and fluttered clear only when Kirk whipped the Breda around.

They now looked about for the third Mitsubishi. But it was nowhere to be seen. They steadied their mad flight, then saw a high-speed cutter racing out from the Marblehurst to give assistance to the fallen flyers. “Well, that other bird must have cleared off into the stuff upstairs with the other balloon,” observed Coffin. “Wonder what he got?”

They circled and watched the efforts of the Marblehurst’s cutter crew attempting to save lives. But it was no business of theirs now. So Kirk flew off.

The rest of his instructions were clear: He was to carry on from there to Sandakan, in British North Borneo. That was another 250 miles, but he knew he could stop and refuel at Sinajar.

“Where’s that balloon, Tank?” he asked over his shoulder.

The gunner guy behind stared about hopelessly and looked worried. But finally, he came up with a jagged piece of green rubber, to which was attached a small aluminum tube with a screw cap.

“Thanks! Now let’s have a look at it.”

Kirk locked the stick between his knees and unscrewed the cap.” He fingered inside gently, brought out a loose tube of paper. It was ordinary paper such as might have been torn out of a stenographer’s notebook. Along the straight pink lines was written:

Secret defense plans of Anglo-American forces to maintain present status of Dutch East Indies are on way to Singapore via “Pacific Clipper,” possibly in possession of Shaw-Herndon newspaperman named Woodward Drake. Plans may be on wax dictaphone record secreted in luggage. Drake will travel from Manila to Singapore by boat.

The message was not signed, but it carried a strange little design, down in the lower left hand corner, which resembled a flat, paddle-shaped device that might mean anything from a frying pan to a railroad semaphore.

Kirk frowned, tucked the message back into the tube, and pondered.

“We got goofed up, Tank,” he said over his shoulder. “This doesn’t seem to be the message for me. This must have been meant for someone else.”

TANK SAID nothing. He was still looking about the floor for the green balloon which had gone “bang.” Tank, of course, couldn’t say anything. And it was quite understandable that he should be puzzled. For after all, Tank was simply an ape.

Tank had been with Coffin Kirk since a memorable day in 1918 when Kirk was just a youngster stranded in Berlin. Tank was a baby ape then. Kirk’s father, a secret agent for the American Intelligence, had been trapped and assassinated in the Berlin Zoo. There followed a general upheaval in which young Kirk, a badly frightened schoolboy, had escaped the fate of his father by coming under the protection of this strange animal, who had escaped from his cage. Together they had moved overland into the security of neutrality. And eventually they made their way back to the United States.

From that day on, “Coffin” Kirk, as he was now known, was inseparable from “Tank,” as he had named the ape. Kirk, having masqueraded

Tank as a man, had learned ventriloquism, which he used to startling effect when he wished to give the illusion that Tank was talking. The ape, meanwhile, had learned to play his part well.

KIRK STRAIGHTENED the Breda out and gave the Marblehurst a final glance. "Someone aboard that ship put one over. There was only supposed to be one green balloon."

The Breda raced on southward along the crooked-fingered tip of Palawan and across the Balabar Strait. Yes, it was clear that two green balloons had been sent up. One had carried a message intended for Kirk. The other had carried still another message—intended for someone aboard one of those Mitsubishi bombers.

"I'm sure I got the one intended for that Jappo," said Kirk after fifty or sixty miles of contemplation. "That means he has the one intended for me. We're both mixed up!"

There was little he could do about it now. So he accepted the bad break and continued toward Sandakan. Somehow he sensed that whoever had been aboard that Mitsubishi—and who had gone to such lengths to gather in that balloon—would turn up later to try to get the message he had missed.

"That's the angle," said Kirk. "I have one ace in the hole, at any rate. They may try to waylay me somewhere along the rest of the trip. But we'll see soon enough."

Across the Balabar Strait he cruised the Breda to conserve what gas they had left in the tanks, then they sat down at Sinajar where they were warmly greeted and quickly refueled. There, he learned something very interesting from Ronnie Blaisdell, the resident manager of the Sinajar field.

"Is there a plane following you?" asked young Ronnie, covertly making a sign which brought Kirk to the realization that the young Englishman was a member of the British Intelligence Service. "We've got a queer bloke," he went on, "coming through aboard a Japan Airways Co. plane—a charter job of some sort."

"What is he flying?" asked Kirk.

"A Mitsubishi—one of those new Soyokaze freight carriers. Soyokaze means 'breeze' in Japanese, you know."

"What does it look like?" asked Kirk.

"Well, it has two radials. It's a low-wing machine. As a matter of fact, militarized versions of it are used as bombers by the Jappo Army."

"I get it," nodded Kirk. "Three Mitsubishi's tackled me an hour or so ago. One got away," he added with a grin. "And that must have been it. But what's the name of the bird?"

"He's Koji Yasui—Intelligence, I'll bet, too. He'll bob in here all Leica cameras, maps, teeth, and buzz-fuzz."

"Good! Let him go along to Sandakan. I'll be at the Imperial Hotel there. Drop that info to him, like that. Koji Yasui, eh?"

"Yes—and this looks like them now," said young Blaisdell. "You'd better shove off."

Kirk was back in the cockpit in no time and the Breda was roaring down the oiled streak that went for a runway. He was in the air and thundering away southeast toward Lubuk Bay before the Japanese plane was in position for its landing.

But once he was out of sight, Kirk changed his course again and hurtled on inland. He stalled for time for about thirty minutes, then turned back for Sandakan which sweltered in the heat of the North Borneo shore.

OFFICIALLY, there is no true airport at Sandakan, but an emergency field has been developed about three miles outside the city. It is typical of all such fields in the Far East, with a few nipa-thatched bungalows, two elephant-iron hangars, and a lot of flower beds. A flag droops at a mast, and the wind sock flaps dismally. There is a tennis court hacked out of the scrub where the Englishmen do a nice job of sweating as a change from the monotony of their duties.

"There's our guy, Tank," said Kirk as they circled the field and spotted the Mitsubishi freighter drawn up on the tarmac. "Now don't get rough—unless I give you the office. He might be a nice guy, for all we know."

Again Kirk circled to get the full feeling of the layout. The Mitsubishi, below, carried the markings of the Japan Airways outfit. Nearby, a small man was walking up and down the tarmac looking up at the Breda as Kirk brought it around.

The Breda, it should be explained, was one Kirk had swiped during an interesting adventure some weeks before. At any rate, Kirk set her

down across the parched turf and ran it up behind the big freighter plane.

The little Japanese was still walking up and down with mincing steps when Kirk and Tank crawled out. He did have a Leica camera about his neck, plus too many teeth and super-plus personal flutter. His finger tips were together in a pious manner. He might have been a Shinto priest parading the altar of a temple, so self-satisfied and suave he appeared. He watched the Breda come up, pursed his lips, then peered pleasantly over the rims of his thick-lensed glasses. He also flipped down the lens cover of his camera.

"After the evidence?" grinned Kirk as the little Jap aimed his camera at two patches of perforated fuselage just aft of the Breda's cockpit.

A little Eurasian mechanic came out, unceremoniously hoisted the tail of the Breda to his shoulder, and dragged it into a hangar by brute force. Tank followed him.

"Hailstones cause those holes, Mister Kirk?" the little Jap inquired. "You have found some strange meteorological conditions in North Borneo?"

"Sure! Hailstones, Mr. Moto. I got those when I inadvertently flew into one of your Japanese restricted areas. Maybe some Kawanishi 93's," said Kirk with a sly grin.

"Kawanishi 93's?" the little Jap's eyebrows went up. He was off guard and frankly puzzled. "Surely you don't mean Mitsubishi bombers, do you?"

"You guess, Mr. Fujiyama," laughed Kirk, while the Jap snapped another picture.

"The name is Yasui—Koji Yasui," the Jap countered.

"I know it—you and Frank Luke!"

"Frank Luke?"

"Sure! The balloon buster. Get it?"

"I think I shall see the Resident Commissioner and have you arrested, Mister Kirk. You are flying an unmarked plane. It carries weapons. You have proved a menace to aviation. There are international laws on the subject."

"Do that, will you? Have me grounded for a few days, eh, Yasui? I'm going to take a few days off and see the sights anyway."

"You are staying in Sandakan?"

"At the Imperial. Drop around some afternoon and I'll get the bar-keep to dish you up a Mickey Finn."

The little Jap was uncertain of himself now. But he hung on and stood around. "I'm afraid I can't leave for some time, either," he added. "We have developed, let us say, a little engine trouble."

"Breda-Safat slugs, Yasui?" asked Kirk, loosening his chute pack.

"Quite possibly."

Kirk grinned back at him and now lowered his coveralls and started to step out of them. Abruptly, Yasui moved like a striking cobra. In one hand he now had a Mauser machine pistol which covered the coverall-tangled Kirk. With the other hand he snatched up the aluminum tube that had unfortunately rolled clear of Kirk's coverall pocket.

"That is all, Mister Kirk," Yasui said with a toothy smile, still holding the machine pistol on him. "Now we fully understand each other. You are now free to visit all the sights you wish. A few temples, perhaps?"

He held the tube in his gun hand and twisted the cap with the other. He flipped out the paper, read it quickly, tucked it back, and tossed the paper and tube at Kirk's feet."

"It was so kind of you to get this for me, Mister Kirk," Yasui hissed. Then he pocketed his gun strode through the hangar, and left by a rear door. Kirk stood there stunned and listened to a motor car start up and crunch away.

"I wish I could find a very large pile-driver," said Coffin Kirk. "I'd go and stick my head under it!"

Tank came out of the hangar, stared at Kirk with a puzzled frown, and watched him complete the business of stepping out of his coverall. He also watched him pick up the tube, screw the cap on tighter, and shove it with a growl into his breeches pocket.

The Yank then made a discreet inquiry as to the damage done to the Mitsubishi, and he learned that it might be ready to fly within a few hours. He would have to work fast if he hoped to stop Yasui and recover the other message.

KIRK WAS sipping a cooling drink in the Imperial Bar, and Tank was again asleep in the corner, when a girl walked in. She had maple

colored hair, violet eyes, and was as lovely as a bouquet of goldenrod in a black vase. Her lips were curled in a slight smile.

“Well, I’ll be!” gasped Kirk. “It must be the notorious Miss Velox! I haven’t heard of you since that little affair with Hardwick and Beansie!”

“Don’t stall,” she whispered, sitting down on a tubular chair. “What happened?”

“What do you mean, what happened?”

“Something slipped, didn’t it? I just saw Koji Yasui grinning like a lad with a double-dip of ice cream. He was sending telegrams by the mile. What happened?”

“Sit down before someone mistakes you for a model out of Milgrims and sticks a price tag on you,” argued Kirk. “Who are you, anyway? Yes, I know this ‘Miss Velox’ gag—but who are you for sure?”

The girl smiled. “I suppose that creature over there is the famous Tank, eh?”

Kirk only kept pondering on the girl. “Russian background,” he said quietly taking in her eyes. “Some education in Switzerland. A little in Paris and London. I get it—White Russian. Right?”

“Right! Countess Astrid Khitrovo—Miss Velox, to you,” she smiled.

“Miss Velox. The ‘Glossy One’!” beamed Kirk. “And what are you doing here?”

“Getting you straightened out.”

“The balloons you mean? Well, there were two greens—and I picked the wrong one! But that’s not all. That guy Yasui put one over on me at the dump they call an air field. The tube rolled out of my pocket—and he had a Mauser. You don’t argue with Mausers. I got the message back—but he already had read it.”

“Let me see it,” she said, dabbing at her nose with a square of dainty cambric. Then she took the tube, flattened out the message, and read it. “This is a nice mess,” she said.

“What’s it really all about?” Kirk asked. “Do you know?”

“Don’t you see? Yasui has the code key to the defense plans. The key was in your message attached to the other green balloon. A certain element in Japan favors snatching the Dutch East Indies. The real details of the plans are on a dictaphone record, but they are in code. The record is no good without the code key.”

“And Yasui has the code key and knows that the record is being taken out to Singapore, since he’s seen this message!”

“Correct! He will now try to intercept the record and check the effort to save the Dutch East Indies’ neutrality. We’ve got to think and think fast. I happen to know that this plan can work both ways. If the Japanese use it, the combined forces of the U.S. and what is available of the British Navy will have a hard time curbing it.”

“But I can’t understand how you know all about this business.”

“They sent me in here—just in case. I ran into Yasui at the cable office. That is, I managed to be nearby. And I picked up a few more items.”

THEY HALTED the conversation while the girl gave an order for a light lunch. When the waiter left, Kirk said:

“Well, Yasui has the information on this fellow Drake. All he has to do is send some sort of a screwy cable to the boat this newspaperman is taking—and they’ll probably kid him into handing it over. Or some spy will slit his gizzard and take it away.”

“Then they’ll have the code key and the record, too!”

Kirk nodded.

“Well, don’t worry about Drake. I ‘fixed’ Yasui’s cable to the Baikal Maru—that’s the boat Drake is aboard. I know one of the boys in the cable office, and I changed the name of the vessel to Maibashi Man on the message. He knows it, but he’s willing to make the mistake.”

“Baby, you’re dangerous!”

The waiter brought the lunch and the girl began to eat slowly. Kirk looked like a guy trying to figure out the printing on a grapefruit after a particularly boisterous evening.

The girl went on talking: “Yasui has the code key, but his plane is down for an hour or so. Drake has the record and as long as he has it, he is in danger. How can we get it off that boat he’s on?”

“We can’t take a chance on cabling him. Yasui will have someone aboard to block it. You know how those lads work.”

“Let’s look at that message again,” the girl said. And Kirk brought it out and spread it on the table. The message, word by word, was gone over

and taken apart—but there seemed to be nothing more than the actual meaning in it.

“Don’t forget that this is meant for Yasui, or his gang, only. It simply tells then about the plans and who has it. But wait a minute! What’s this design in the corner?”

“That’s what has me. What does it look like to you?”

“A tennis racket.”

“I’ll settle for a frying pan or a bed warmer,” smiled Kirk.

“Tennis racket...tennis...tennis balls—that’s it!” the girl beamed.

“What’s what?”

“Don’t you see? Tennis racket brings up the thought of tennis balls, and tennis balls can be carried in a long, round can. The can is the right diameter for a dictaphone record. That’s where the plan is—in a three-ball can!”

“You have a lovely way of proving things, don’t you?” Kirk said. But he had to admit there was soundness to the idea.

“Now we’ve got to get that key from Yasui. Sure, we could get another—but that would take too much time and we have to work fast. This thing may blow up in our faces any minute. No, we’ve got to get that key.”

“How?” asked Kirk. “You seem to be full of bright ideas. I suppose you’d send him a nice bouquet and pit your feminine wiles on him.”

“Wait a minute!” the girl said. “How did you think of that? Yasui loves flowers. He was buying some to put on his table at lunch. And he was buying lavender—nice smelly lavender!”

“Lavender? Wow! Now there is an idea. You’re sure he likes lavender?” asked Kirk, showing real enthusiasm. “I can at last see the dawn. Finish your lunch, get on the phone, and call the airport—while I dash out and get the business.”

“Call the airport?”

“Yes! Find out how soon Yasui is leaving. Give some phoney Countess’ name. But don’t talk to him personally.”

“Don’t worry. He’s still here in the hotel.”

“Fine! Leave Tank here. I’ll get the business.”

FROM THAT MINUTE on, the Velox-Kirk combine went into high gear. First, Kirk hurried down the busy Sandakan street and purchased a

gaudy lacquered box of pseudo Japanese design. Then he went farther, found a small flower stall, and purchased several large sprigs of pungent lavender. A small, slant-eyed Eurasian girl provided some suitable ribbon and a sprig or two of Oriental fern. This bouquet he carefully placed in the lacquer box.

“Now for the rest of the trick!” grinned Kirk. Yes, he particularly wanted to show this Miss Velox that he could pull a trick or two himself.

Off another small side street, he discovered a dingy chemist’s shop run by Yang Cho, a tall, gaunt Chinese. The shop had the odors and reeks of a small drug factory. At any rate, a quick glance around the dull bottles and boxes on the dusty shelves made Kirk certain he could get what he wanted.

The Oriental looked like a magazine-cover Mandarin. He wore a small skull cap, and stringy mustaches dangled over the corners of his mouth. His jacket was carefully embroidered, and when he spoke his eyes closed to slits with each sentence.

“Good afternoon,” said Kirk frankly. “I want some oil of quetrol.”

“But you appear to be a man of upright character,” protested Yang Cho after a long pause.

“I am—but I just want it for a certain Japanese,” smiled Kirk.

“In that case, then, you are still a man of upright character. And I shall see that you get it of the best quality.”

The Chinese shuffled away behind a beaded screen and was gone for some minutes. Then he returned with a small vial of colorless liquid. He carefully wrapped it in a square of newspaper and handed it over.

“My honorable friend is the first to demand such a distillation in many years. Where did you learn of its potency?”

“It was many years ago, Yang Cho,” explained Kirk. “My old friend, C.J.S. Thompson, curator of the Historical Section of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, first told me of it.”

“Ah, yes! I recall the case. Some years ago a London flower hawker attempted to strengthen the perfume of some lavender he was selling by the application of the oil of quetrol. Hejvas pushing a handcart along the streets of Stockwell

when he suddenly collapsed and was taken to the Lambeth Infirmary where he died of the effects of the vapor inhaled from the lavender on the truck. Am I not right?"

"You are correct, Yang Cho. And now, the price?"

"There is no price—if it is to be used on one of our Japanese friends. I wish you good day and many moons of luck."

"Thanks! Wish me special luck today, Yang Cho. I'll sure need it!"

The Chinese bowed, smiled, and tucked his hands away inside his sleeves with an air of warm satisfaction.

BACK at the Imperial, Miss Velox was all of a flutter. Tank was still asleep in the cocktail bar. Kirk now hurried in and got what news was available.

"They are taking off in half an hour," Miss Velox said anxiously. "Yasui plans to go through to Singapore. They have a Resident Commissioner's permission to land there."

"Wow! Let's get busy."

Kirk opened the lacquer box, drew back the sheet of tissue paper, then carefully sprinkled a few drops of the oil of quetrol into the mauve colored sprays. He quickly lowered the tissue back into position.

"Don't sniff this. You'll go flat on your face," he warned.

He closed the box, tied it tight, and then taking a sheet of hotel note paper he ordered the girl to write the following:

Dear Colonel Yasui:

I am a great admirer of yours. I have seen you at the hotel, and I am forwarding you this telegram, which was dropped from the pocket of Mr. Kirk. I wonder if it is of any use to you. I am also sending you a small token of my personal affection and regard. Best of luck,

—Countess Mara von Karlstadt

"Who's that?" the girl asked as she finished.

"I don't know. I just made that countess up. Here's an old telegram. It doesn't mean anything, but maybe it will make the gag look authentic. All I want Yasui to do is take a sniff of the lavender. We do the rest."

THEY slipped the letter under the cord that fastened the box. Then Miss Velox went out, selected the brightest looking taxi driver she could find, gave him the packet, and told him to run it out to the airport and personally deliver it to Colonel Yasui before he left Sandakan.

They gave this first taxi a five-minute start, then they took another and followed. Tank, now aroused, was with them.

The ancient conveyance was strong on noise but backward on speed, and their five minute leeway had stretched to nearly twelve by the time the three clambered out at the field.

The other cab was nowhere in sight.

Still, they went into their act, walking carelessly with a map held out in front of them as they went around the corner of the main hangar. Miss Velox was indicating, playact style, some fantastic route down from Sandakan to Sarawak.

They came out in front of the hangar just in time to see a number of wild-eyed Jap aviation men running around in circles. The men were letting off loud exclamations. A few yards away from the group stood the Mitsubishi freight carrier. Nearby, in a heap on the tarmac, lay two inert figures. Obviously they had just fallen.

Tank, Kirk, and Miss Velox hurried forward, saw that one of the figures was Koji Yasui. The other was a Japan Airways Company pilot. Beside them lay the opened lacquer box and the lavender bouquet.

"The darned thing worked!" whispered Kirk.

The girl shushed him and told him to keep the others occupied. Then she hurried into the circle of clacking mechanics and airmen and dropped to her knees beside the Jap Secret Service man.

"He show the Captain-Pilot the flowers," said a Jap radio man, who was apparently not in confidence with Yasui. "And they read a letter. Mister Yasui hold the flowers—then they both fall down very hard. It is strange."

"I'm a nurse," the girl cried. "Let me look them over."

She took Yasui's hand and fingered for his pulse. She also took the bouquet and held it close to Yasui's face while she glanced up and asked further questions.

"Has he had anything to drink?"

“We do not know. He just arrived here to be flown to Singapore.”

“He ate nothing while he was here?” Miss Velox went on, waving the lavender bouquet back and forth, aimlessly it seemed.

“We do not know, Missie.”

“Were they standing anywhere near the line of the exhaust from the engines?” she went on, finally throwing the bouquet down.

“They were only standing right there, Missie.”

“Well, they appear to have been taken with a sudden stroke. I must have them moved inside out of the sun.” She glanced up at Kirk. “You, mister, and that hairy pal of yours carry this man in first.”

Tank picked up the pilot, tucked his limp body under one arm. Kirk was able to carry the little Jap Secret Service man with very little trouble.

Miss Velox went on: “We must loosen most of their clothing, especially about their necks. If they do not recover quickly we must have them removed to the infirmary in Sandakan.”

“But that cannot be, Missie,” remonstrated the radio man. “Mr. Yasui must be in Singapore before morning. He said it was most important!”

“All right. We’ll do what we can. Get them inside,” said the girl.

The two unconscious figures were stretched out on the hangar floor. Kirk began cutting off Yasui’s coat and making a general fuss. They rolled the torn garments under the Secret Service man’s head. But not before Miss Velox had skillfully removed Yasui’s wallet, a map, a wad of telegrams, and other papers. They openly handed what seemed to be all of this material over to the radio man who was working on the Pilot-Captain. Miss Velox, however, had first carefully retrieved the letter accompanying the bouquet. And she had also held out certain items which seemed important. They all went into the top of her stocking.

She stood off now and gave the Japs instructions for reviving the two. Then there was a great display of slapping and water splashing. And finally the pilot made the first effort to come out of it. Yasui, having had a larger dose, obviously would be “out” longer.

“I’ll look into our first aid kit,” said Kirk, moving over toward their Breda. “Perhaps we have some smelling salts.”

“Yes, make sure of what we have,” said Miss Velox with a knowing glance.

Kirk nodded and left the group, while Tank still stood pondering on the strange goings-on and Miss Velox kept up her Florence Nightingale role.

Kirk carefully slipped inside the cockpit of the Breda and inspected their loot. The code sheet was quickly sorted from the other material. It had the official U.S. Government mark in one corner, making Kirk certain this was the item they were after. He then returned to the group with a first-aid kit.

The Japanese pilot was now sitting up, but Yasui was still snuffling and moaning. The pilot was trying to brace himself in an upright position. He was staring down groggily at the buttons on his tunic.

“He’s coming around, all right,” said Miss Velox.

“That’s fine!” said Kirk. “Maybe they want to get away now.”

Miss Velox now knew that half of their quest had been successful. She stood up, took the smelling salts from Kirk, and handed them over to the Jap skipper. He sniffed, shook his head, and glanced about. His original military training now came to the fore. He instinctively glanced at his wrist watch and began muttering orders in a choked voice.

“We must get Colonel Yasui aboard the plane,” the radio man explained. “The pilot says we must be away—at once! We will carry Colonel Yasui aboard!”

“All right. And give him our compliments when he comes to,” said Kirk, helping gather up Yasui’s clothing.

THROUGH all this, Tank had remained a patient character. His eyes now wandered slowly from Kirk to the girl and from the men on the hangar floor to the clacking mechanics. He finally allowed them to go back to Kirk again, as if trying to figure out what this Borneo clambake was all about. He watched them carry Yasui back to the plane, and he stood near Kirk when the Mitsubishi rumbled away with its load.

“Well, what now?” Kirk was asking Miss Velox.

“Once they are well on their way, we better go back to town and see if we can check on the

Baikal Maru. We've got to contact her somehow and get the plan out of Drake's hands. As long as they know he has it, his life won't be worth much. I don't believe they'll let him get into Singapore with it—even if they have to torpedo the boat."

"You're right. But how the deuce are we to kid him into turning it over? We've got to devise a gag of some sort that will assure him that we are okay."

"We'd better think plenty about that on the way back. But on second thought," she said suddenly. "I have an idea that Yasui may come out of that quicker than we figure. If he does, they'll return here and try to get rough."

Kirk watched the Mitsubishi disappearing into the heat and haze of North Borneo. It was taking a south-westerly course, and he was fairly confident that it was on its way to Singapore. "You call Sandakan," he said, "and get Lloyd's office there. See if they can give you the approximate position of that boat. I'll make sure our plane is ready in case we have to make a dash for it."

The girl then threaded her way through the hangar and went into another building where she found the office of one of the British-American oil syndicates. There telephone and telegraph facilities were available.

"Come on, Tank," said Kirk. "Let's get our bus out and make ready for a long hop. No knowing what might happen if that guy Yasui comes back."

Tank fully understood. He quickly went to work dragging the Breda into a position near the door where they might get away fast. Kirk checked the fuel, then carefully loaded the guns again from a secret store of ammunition which was carried in hidden panels within the cockpit.

They warmed the engine of the Breda and let her die down again. Then suddenly they heard the roar of twin engines overhead. Kirk went stiff, glanced up. The Mitsubishi freighter was circling overhead for a landing!

"They're coming back, Tank! Break them up, if they get gay. Understand?"

Kirk made explanatory gestures with his hands and watched the long sinewy fingers of the ape flex and unflex in anticipation.

The Mitsubishi circled hurriedly, then glided down. Both Kirk and Tank watched tensely. They were both ready to fight it out if they had to. Kirk

had a large gun tucked away in his hip pocket, and his strong hands were fisted.

The Mitsubishi made a thuddy landing. She wrenched hard at her oleos, then came thundering up before the hangar. It was left where it would block off the entrance, or exit of any other plane.

The crew swarmed out armed with Mauser machine pistols. They were led by the disheveled Yasui who still managed his oily smile. Carrying no weapon, he advanced before the young army that followed him.

"Unfortunate, Mister Kirk. But I must ask you to give back that which you have stolen from me. You know what I mean, of course."

"Whatever it was you think was stolen from you, Yasui," countered Kirk, "is now in safe hands. You may have been able to put one play over on me, but there was a certain other party who simply would not be fooled."

"All that sort of talk will not do. I know your plans. You hoped to escape with your machine and get to Singapore. But I can assure you that the gentleman you hope to meet there will arrive empty handed. Why not be sensible and give up this particular quest?"

"Baloney!" cracked Kirk. "We just outsmarted you. And the quicker you decide to break all this up, the quicker—"

But Kirk got no further. Tank had taken matters into his own hands. He had moved like lightning and had Yasui about the waist before the Jap trigger-men could move. Kirk now had his gun out, too. And a hasty shot from the hip brought a menacing Jap to the ground, his machine pistol shot clear out of his hands.

Tank rushed at the rest swinging Yasui like a ball bat. The Secret Service man screamed as Tank hammered him full into the jam of men and weapons. The ape bowled them over lustily with wild swipes of his human bludgeon.

Kirk took a pot shot at the pilot, who was now trying to get a burst of Mauser into Tank. The Yank's shot spun the Jap around hard and he went down on his face covering his own gun. Somehow his finger yanked back the Mauser trigger and the machine pistol began to yammer underneath him while his body jerked with the surge of metal discharge.

Tank, who had been fired by the words "break all this up" which Kirk had inadvertently used in

warning Yasui, was in his glory now. He plunged back and forth from one Jap to another, crashing them over as fast as they tried to get up and offer further resistance. Heads cracked like cocoanuts. They yelled as the leaden body of the Secret Service man hammered them.

At last, there was nothing left to knock down. And so Tank went to work on the Mitsubishi which was blocking the doorway of the hangar.

“Get it out of there. Get it out quick,” cried Kirk, staring about for a sign of Miss Velox. “Break it up, Tank!”

The ape man was in fine fettle now. First he ripped away a length of lowered flap surface and began beating at the port motor which was still ticking over at idling speed. The steel blades of the prop went splintering in all directions. Tank then hammered the cover plate in, and oil and metal came spurting out of the radial. He clambered up on the wing, tore the main section of the cockpit hatchway apart, and hurled it with an animal scream through the other revolving prop. More prop blades went to pieces with a metallic clangor.

Now the ape man leaped inside the ship, and spare parts and chunks of instrument board came flying out in a crazy storm. Slabs of dural, seat cushions, and folding chairs came next. Tank ripped and tore until there was nothing movable to hurl.

Finally, he leaped out, and with another sudden bright idea hurried with his waddling gait to the tail. There, with a display of insane strength, he hoisted the tail to his shoulder and began to drag the wrecked Mitsubishi away.

He horsed it into the clear, lowered the tail section, and began systematically to rip the movable controls away with the ease with which a child destroys her big brother’s model airplane. In another few minutes the Mitsubishi looked like an enormous plucked bird.

“That’s enough!” yelled Kirk. “Get back here and keep these guys quiet. I’ve got to find Miss Velox.”

BUT MISS VELOX required no finding. She came out, excited and anxious, from somewhere. Her eyes were now more beautiful than ever. As she folded a sheet of paper, she stared amazed at

the carnage Kirk and Tank had spread across the apron.

“You’ve got to get going—somehow,” she called. “Fly fast and contact the Baikal Maru at once. She’s at 7:15, N. by 112:07, E. right now. That’s approximately 130 miles northwest of Brunei.”

“Brunei? That’s in Sarawak!”

“Exactly! You can contact the Baikal Maru in a little over two hours, if you make any time at all.”

“We can make the time. But how can we kid this guy Drake to hand over?”

“If he’s alive when you get there, this note will do the trick I am sure. If you get the record bearing the plan, cut back inland to Bintulu or Kabong and refuel. From there you should be able to make Singapore in one hop. There’s an American warship in the harbor there. Find Bear-Admiral Jessop. That’s all! Now get moving before your Jap friends regain use of their trigger fingers. See you later, Mr. Kirk!”

“Okey-doke, sister. They have some good hotels in Singapore. I hope you can make it there, too,” grinned Coffin Kirk.

“Maybe so, but don’t bet on it. This is a silly business at times. But best of luck!”

Sensing she was being businesslike now, Kirk smilingly saluted her. Then he pocketed the note without reading it, called to Tank, and together they climbed into their flying togs and parachutes. Kirk started the engine while Tank went over and gave a few stirring Japs a careful added boot or two under the chin to keep them, immobile. Then he returned and clambered aboard the Breda as Kirk eased her past the wreckage of the Mitsubishi.

They were off! But how far they would get without opposition they could not know. Still, they would give it a whirl. The Breda was carrying them from Sandakan across the widest portion of North Borneo and into the Sarawak district. They checked weather and position over Brunei, the capital city of the Sarawak district which looked out across the heat of the China Sea.

With another glance over his instruments and fuel gauges, Kirk now boldly turned the nose of the Breda into the northwest in search of the Baikal Maru. Then he suddenly remembered the note Miss Velox had given him. He drew it out of his pocket, read it. It was somewhat startling, to

say the least. In the first place, it was addressed to Woodward Drake, a passenger aboard the Baikal Maru. It read:

Ambassador's tennis party requires new American tennis balls at once. Can you provide at least three? Will pick up can, if dropped overboard. Urgent!

—*Reversed Newspaper*

At first, Kirk couldn't make any sense out of the signature. But then he smiled.

"I've got to hand it to Miss Velox," he grinned, recalling that the man who directed the Intelligence work from the dusty office in Washington, D. C., always talked to them over a newspaper he appeared to be reading upside down. That signature alone would assure confirmation of the rest of the message. If Drake did have the message in a tennis ball can, he most certainly would understand what was required.

Kirk pondered on it all as he guided the speeding Breda to its strange rendezvous with a man aboard the Baikal Maru. Then it dawned on him that if Drake did sense the true meaning of the message and tossed out the can, they still had to recover it from the water. How were they to accomplish that—with a land-plane?

"First, they want us to snatch toy balloons with a plane that does umpteen miles an hour. And now we're expected to pick up a floating tin can from the ocean. How do we do that trick?!"

He finally realized that this would have to be something of a reverse-English gag. Snagging the balloon had been a matter of picking an object from the air. Well, couldn't the same trick be tried in reverse? Kirk figured some more—then decided that Tank again would have to play a dangerous part. And only Tank could play it.

He set the controls and let the Breda head her own way out across the China Sea under robot control. He leaned back, picked up the flat wire and net, and went about untangling it. Tank now sat up and watched with his beady eyes while Kirk prepared the netting for action again. The ape man then peered about the sky and made strange chattering noises. He saw no balloons.

"No, Tank! No balloons," explained Kirk. "This time, you go out on one wheel and pick up a can—a colored can.

Kirk pointed down at the water. And the ape got up and peered over and then back at his master, puzzled. Kirk kept at it, repeating over and over what he wanted done until Tank began to get the idea.

"Understand, Tank? A can—and you catch it in the net. You slide down the wheel leg and grab the can from the water."

The ape nodded several times dubiously. He kept peering over the side as if he expected to see the can somewhere below immediately. It was pathetic in a way, this blind, unswerving loyalty.

"Not right now, Tank, but later on when I tell you," said Kirk, holding the ape back from climbing out with the fish-net.

The ape nodded, glanced over the side again, then sat down, his warm, deep-brown eyes steadfastly fixed on the man in the front seat.

"Only when I tell you," repeated Kirk, taking over the controls again.

They both settled down now for the long flight out to the point where their course would cross that of the Baikal Maru. The miles seemed endless, but when both had nearly reached the limit of their patience, the vessel suddenly loomed into view.

"In a minute, Tank. Take it easy, boy!" cried Kirk.

They soon caught up with the trailing plume of funnel smoke and circled the liner. Kirk looked around and selected a message streamer from a small pigeonhole set into the cockpit. It was a weighted strip of colored linen carrying a small pocket. He slipped the message Miss Velox had written into the pocket, rolled the strip up around the flat leaden weight, and drew back the hatch-cover.

TANK WAS FIDGETY in the back seat, but Kirk settled him down again with a word or two. He lowered the wing flaps a few notches and circled the Baikal Maru twice more until there was quite a gathering of seamen and passengers in tropical whites on the forward deck.

Kirk now drew away, lowered his wheels, then glided gently toward the stern of the ship until it appeared that the Breda would skewer itself on the mast aft. And at the right moment he tossed out the weighted streamer. It fluttered clear, unrolled into a long ribbon, and plummeted to the

deck. It was pounced upon by a group of passengers.

"Any minute now, Tank," warned Kirk. They could see the group on the deck standing about the man who had retrieved the streamer.

"Tighten your helmet, Tank. You go to work pretty soon now—I hope!"

The ape man prepared himself and gathered up the fish-net. Below, on the long covered deck of the Baikal Maru, the crowd of passengers moved along to the open portion of the deck again. And now a tall slim figure sifted itself from the group.

"Watch that guy, Tank. And keep an eye out for the can!"

The Breda was dipped down low close to the deck of the liner and they roared past just as the man ran to the rail and threw a bright red cylinder far out into the water.

"That's it! That's it, Tank! Keep your eye on it!"

Kirk drew the Breda around slowly and glided back to where the can had struck the water. Tank was pulling the hatchway back and moving out.

"Take your shoes off!" called Kirk. "You can hang on better, then!"

Tank kicked his loose sneakers away. He then went over the side, dropping on the wing root on feet and paws while holding the net in his teeth. Next, he stuck his head down, crawled forward to the leading edge, and grabbed one of the Breda-Safat gun barrels that protruded. Then he rolled his legs over the wing and his feet clutched at the Vee-casting that housed the right landing wheel.

Kirk brought the flaps all the way down. Then he circled the Breda slowly over the area upon which bobbed the red container. He gave Tank a chance to get his net ready and dropped lower and lower. He could not see that Tank was straddling the wheel housing of the landing gear, waiting patiently until he was in a position to snatch at the can with his net.

Kirk held his breath as he brought the Breda down still lower. He never took his eyes from the bright can bobbing and dancing on the easy swells of the sea. And now he made a careful move toward it. The sea, luckily, was glassy.

He made his initial pass—and hoped. But when he looked back, the can was still bobbing on the water. He swung around gently, keeping his eye on the container, and tried again. He then

came dangerously near a stall, but the ape man didn't fail this time. He made a lightning swish at the can as it rode up—and caught it in the folds of the net.

His arm must have been almost torn off by the effort, but he hung on and was soon clambering back to the leading edge of the wing. He came over the side, serious and slow—but satisfied. Kirk let out a wild cheer and held the plane in a slow easy climb to give the ape a chance to climb back into the cockpit.

"Great stuff, boy!" he yelled, reaching for the can and net. "Give it to me. I'll take care of it."

Kirk took the tangle, then saw a sudden glint of rage in Tank's eyes as the ape regained his seat. And before he knew just what had happened the rear gun was chattering madly.

Tank had got back in just in time to block off an attack by three Japanese Kawasaki Naval fighters. They were slamming down, their guns throwing slugs at the Breda from all angles.

KIRK RIPPED the Breda over, sensing that these planes had probably been discharged from one of the Japanese aircraft carriers somewhere in the vicinity. Koji Yasui had evidently recovered enough to send out a warning. It was well that Tank had got back in fast.

Kirk went to work now, feeling that so far Miss Velox and Tank had more than had their innings at this game. He drew his belt tighter, set out his fighter counter, and stiffened his jaw.

He allowed the Breda to fall off on one wing-tip for an instant or so while Tank's bursts harassed the Jap formation. Then with a scream of power from the 1,000-h.p. Fiat, the Breda suddenly horsed its nose up and went full tilt at a twisting Kawasaki.

The Jap saw it all coming, but he was unable to clear. He was just pulling out of his dive when the four Breda-Safat guns began to cough. The N-struts on one side of the Kawasaki went out first, then the wings slapped together with a loud clank. A piece of the fin and rudder went away, and she began a queer corkscrewing climb that ended in a stall. Then it plunged into the water.

Kirk swished away, shot at another. Tank was still screeching and letting off endless bursts from behind. His fire broke up the Jap attempt to reform—and the rest was easy for Kirk. He sent a

clean shot through the vitals of the pilot of the second fighter. And another stream of lead crippled the third's empennage, whereupon it limped away.

In five minutes they were in the clear again and racing past the sun deck of the Baikal Maru. Kirk flashed down a signal that the contact had been completed. And a tall figure on the steamer waved back and then became—just another newspaper man.

Then as Kirk sped the Breda toward Kabong to refuel for the flight to Singapore, a radio message came through from the Marblehurst. It translated into—

Coffin Kirk . . . Wish to inform you "extra balloonist" aboard this ship apprehended . . . Also have Okay from Drake . . . Rear-Admiral Jessop looks forward to seeing you in Singapore.

"We'll be pleased to see the Rear-Admiral, too!" spoke Coffin Kirk into his radio mike. Then he turned around.

"Hey, there, Tank!" he barked. "You better put your shoes back on. We're headin' for a society call!"