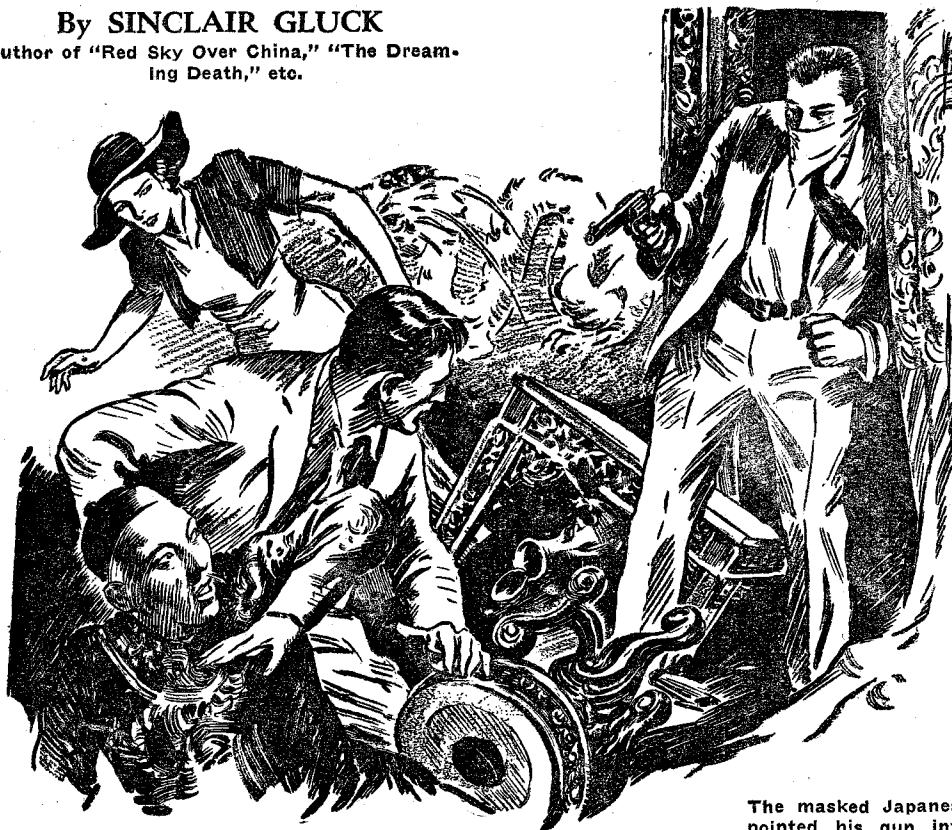


The Purring Cat

By SINCLAIR GLUCK

Author of "Red Sky Over China," "The Dream-
ing Death," etc.



The masked Japanese
pointed his gun into
that turmoil

May the God of Luck ride on your shoulder this day, O Friend of China. For you will need all his heavenly protection to elude the feline claws of Nippon's Colonel Sinister

Complete Novelet

I

IT WAS bitter cold up here in the night sky above Chekiang Province. The out-moded, four-place pursuit job lay open to the stars. Chill eddies from the slip stream whirled over the cowlings and stung like tiny knives.

Benson lounged beside the Chinese pilot, half alert to the pound of the engine, his cold gray eyes brooding. Personal suffering

had left its mark on him. His thin face and hooded eyes had the look of a hawk in repose. Few men and fewer women could meet his gaze steadily.

His thoughts were on the work ahead. However well laid their plans, it looked like a tough job at best. To land a Chinese plane unseen a few miles from Shanghai was only the beginning. There might be one chance in ten of pulling it off—unless the Japs recognized him. If they did, the odds against success ran up into astronomical figures.

As a captain of Marines, he had spent two years at the American Embassy in Tokyo and had known many Japanese officers. He had been in command of an American defense sector at Shanghai when a Japanese bomb had killed his wife and little boy in Nanking Road.

The shock had left him anything but neutral. He had resigned his commission, gone on a bender and made his way up to Anking to join the Chinese Army. Probably the Japanese secret service knew all about that. On the other hand, he knew that he had changed.

Plenty of Jap officers had seen his face on that last mad venture for China. But all these had been killed when the Chinese "treasure chest" was opened in the Japanese headquarters at Kaifeng. Packed with high explosive instead of gold, it had ripped the Japanese general and his staff to shreds.

There were many Chinese spies in Jap pay. The Japs might be waiting for him tonight, but that seemed unlikely. Yes, about one chance in ten. Not bad odds—for poor old China.

The plane flew without lights except the cowled ones over the instrument board. Benson stuck his wrist under these and peered at his watch. Taking off from Chungking before nightfall, they had flown almost two hundred and eighty miles an hour in a bee line ever since. The distance was nine hundred miles. Eleven-thirty now. They must be getting close. Anyhow, the calm, taciturn boy at his side was one of the best of the Chinese pilots; and knew the terrain. A quiet, modest chap, Tung Li, but a nerveless dare-devil according to Chang Tso.

Benson's mind reverted to his friend on the Chinese General Staff, the man who preferred to be called Chang Tso. In their final talk, Chang had recommended the pilot.

He had also wished Benson luck with a final warning: "Do not under-estimate the Nipponese secret police, respected friend. Their leader in Shanghai is clever as a fox—and harmless as a purring cat until

he strikes. Well for China if he joined his dishonorable ancestors. Yet do not risk this venture, to that end. His true name is Colonel Kidote, but he uses many others."

"Colonel Coyote," thought Benson, his lips thinning in a hard smile. "Maybe I'll have a chance to collect me a pelt."

THE steady beat of the engine began to falter occasionally, with a cough like a sick animal. Benson felt the leaden discomfort of too little oxygen. His breathing had quickened and deepened. As the climbing plane leveled off, he glanced at the altimeter. The needle quivered at fifteen thousand feet. They had been flying at twelve thousand until now.

He leaned out and stared downward. The plane seemed to be hanging in empty space, whipped by a gale of wind. Starlight revealed a thin layer of cloud perhaps two miles below. It spread from horizon to horizon, like vast, dimly-white bandages on the tortured earth of China. He quartered it slowly with his eyes, hunting for Jap patrol planes. There were no moving pinpoints of light against the clouds. Eastward and far ahead, the lights of Shanghai pierced their cloud veil like a shimmering pool of milk.

The roar of the engine softened to a purr. The plane nosed downward, tilted into a loose, descending spiral. Tung Li leaned out his side. Benson watched the cloud floor rising, spreading sluggishly to engulf them. Now and then he yawned to equalize the pressure on his ear-drums.

Off to the south a faint, rosy light tinged the clouds from below. The pilot veered and made for it in a smooth glide. Over the light, he began to spiral again, cutting his switch. Without struts or wires to slice the wind, the stream-lined monoplane winged downward like a ghost, its engine silent.

Tung Li turned his goggled face. "They have heard my engine die, friend of China, and are prepared. It is well."

"We have not touched earth yet," said Benson drily. "'It is well!' cried the fledgling when he left the bough."

The blue-lipped young pilot took the hint to watch his flying. They circled down and down into less biting cold. Mist swirled in their faces and the plane bumped heavily. Then they slid clear, perhaps a thousand feet above the earth.

A HEAD and below, the country villa of some wealthy Chinese merchant was burning luridly. As they spiraled lower the roof subsided with an uprush of sparks, and the house became a flaming torch in the night.

Trees huddled on three sides of it. Across the fourth side a long ribbon of meadow separated the villa from one of the many small creeks in this lake region. It was to light the meadow for their landing that the merchant had sacrificed his house. On a field not their own, landing lights would have attracted Jap patrol planes, then little brown troops in armored cars. But a flaming Chinese home would not interest the Nipponese. It was too commonplace.

The plane jounced through an uprush of warm air and dove on, its black wings reflecting no light, its propeller oddly motionless. At length it banked around lazily and nosed for the meadow. Two walls of the house had fallen in. The deodars near it flung long, pointed shadows over the countryside. Black and red ripples shimmered on the creek, fading as the light dimmed. The oil-soaked villa had flared up like cardboard.

Benson leaned farther out. The ground was coming up fast, the near end of the meadow just ahead.

They slewed edgewise to lose altitude and leveled off, expertly close to the ground. The plane settled, jounced and bumped along in a perfect dead-stick landing. The firm, increasing check of the brakes halted it just beyond the trees.

Before it stopped rolling, three black-clad figures had trotted from hiding to converge on it. Benson looked at the pilot sharply. Tung Li had stripped off his goggles and was hanging them on a cowed light over the instrument board.

"It is well, friend of China!" He spoke in Manchu, as a compliment to Benson. "And these, too, are friends—" He released the brakes and smothered a yawn of fatigue.

The twittering coolies ganged up on the plane. They lifted the tail, caught hold of the wings and trundled it under the deodars. Two of these had been stripped of their low branches on one side. The prop nosed unharmed between these two trees until the black wings were almost entirely beneath the dark, upper branches.

Benson and Tung Li climbed out stiffly. Coolies ran up with five-gallon tins of gasoline. The pilot supervised the refueling. In the flickering light, Benson watched the lopped off branches being skillfully arranged to camouflage the tail.

When Tung Li joined him, Benson said gruffly: "We part here. Await me tonight or another night. Only the gods know."

The pilot saluted. "This vigilant person will be ready at all moments for your auspicious return, friend of China. May the god of luck ride on your shoulder tonight."

Benson returned the salute, his bleak smile an admission of liking. He watched the boy move stiffly toward a small, enclosed summer house hidden deeper among the trees. Then he caught the whisper of feet on pine needles and turned swiftly. A stout man in rags was lumbering up to him. The black-garbed coolies had melted into the shadows and vanished like gnomes.

"Ah! Are now-famous Captain Benson, isn't you?" came a buttery whisper. "Again I am proud man, dear sir, but are not time for shaking the hands. Please to step on my heels, Captain. This way, like spitting thunder."

The fat scarecrow set off through the trees. Benson followed. To the right and behind them a last tongue of flame died and left the villa a mound of glowing embers. They stumbled on in sudden darkness, to come out on the edge of a half-submerged field. The clouds reflected some light from distant Shanghai and from Soochow to the northwest. Trotting quietly

for all his bulk, the Chinese skirted part of the field, mounted a low irrigation dyke and turned away from the creek and the burned house.

They passed another field in which patches of ruffled water lay faintly gleaming. At last Benson saw another, wider creek ahead and the dark camel's hump of a sampan motionless against the near bank. When they reached it, the big Chinese grunted and leaped aboard. As soon as Benson's feet struck the rocking deck half a dozen coolies set about running up the sail, pushing off and working the boat downstream toward Shanghai.

Benson's guide had scrambled under the arched matting aft, and swopped ends clumsily. Now his fat, bald head stuck out like a snapping turtle. "Enter com-modeless retreat, noble Captain," he chuckled. "Are much to be talking of."

II

BENSON eased under shelter feet first, then found and shook a huge, muscular hand. "Tien Wang," he whispered. "Good to see you. They didn't tell me you'd be here."

"Ah, hot cockles," chuckled Tien. "As fat, valuable spy, I not supposing be here. But your presence are seductive temptation—and latest news slightly discomfiture." Tien's knowledge of English seemed as voluminous as it was inaccurate.

"We're used to bad news," said Benson. "Spill it."

"Ha! Meaning elucidate tidings? Thanks for new word edifice! Yes, news are decomposing, Captain. For lately time, Nipponese aware that Ying Loy Wan are leader Shanghai terrorists. But not knowing shy retreat of said Ying."

"Hence I advising rescue of Ying before retreat located and Ying's head perambulate sadly from downcast body. On my saying so, you coming to pull over said rescue, my fearless friend. But two nights past, Nipponese secret police obtaining location of shy retreat. That highly wetting to hopes, Captain."

"You mean they've got Ying? Arrested him?"

"Not so—yet." Tien Wang chuckled fatly. "This sly fellow participate in Ying escaping Chapei retreat, finding nest in American sector. But nip and touch! You see, terrorists are busy climbing in hair of Chinese traitor who kiss Japanese foots. So very strong perfume of Chinese traitor in Nipponese finding retreat. For same reasoning, pretty soon Nipponese smelling out new hiding spot of Ying like proverbish fox."

"We still have a chance then. Where is Ying now?"

"At house of loyal, ancient merchant, Wong Sin Meng. House are entitled 520 North Honan Road. Also Ying still possessing currency treasure subscribed by loyal merchants for Chinese cause. But danger big like elephant. Too many Chinese traitor, sorry to spill it. If possible Ying must go back with you tonight. Even now maybe Nipponese smelling where Ying are."

Benson hid his anger. The International Settlement was infested by Japanese spies. Everyone knew it. There was very little the municipal police could do about it. And Ying was in the American sector, guarded by U. S. Marines. Benson controlled his voice.

"Do the Japs know where Ying is now?" he demanded.

"Not sure, Captain. Quite possibility. Few Chinese know it—and traitors squeaking timidly, like rats in dark of night. But other situation entirely complicated, too."

"You see, inside home of Wong Sin Meng are now residing young girl. Oh, yes, American girl!" Tien Wang chuckled in the darkness. "She are innocent missionary advancing to instruct old China about tenants of religion. So, very nice. When China civilized on wisdom of Confucius, I think her ancestors all time running in naked state of body and worship thunder."

"Never mind that," said Benson patiently. "Get on—"

"Are plenty time in boating transporta-

tion, dear sir. Well, American girl bearing name, Ruth Stimmons. One time ago her father great friend, maybe save life, of Wong Sin Meng. Now maiden are regretting news that her father sick, maybe dying, at Chungking. Miss Stimmons so sorry, so wishing to reach beside bed of expiring parent.

"She having missionary friends in Shanghai, but no bloody use for helping her reach present Chinese base at Chungking. She knowing Wong are great friend of parent, so ask him to help. Wong are unforgetting friend, so very desirable to help poor, sorry daughter.

"Wong saying to her: 'Oh, sit under humble roof a while, my dear miss! Noble American come soon for flying back to Chungking with highest celerity. Maybe dauntless captain taking you back with him!' So—"

"So what?" grumbled Benson. "That's out. And what's all this got to do with Ying and the Japs?"

"**W**AIT, dear sir. I think all Americans in perspiring hurry. Now here are painful point. Before eye-wetting prayer for help orated toward aged Wong, Miss Stimmons are making same prayer to Japanese authorities, saying: 'Oh, please transport me some of long distance toward expiring bed of parent!'

"Nipponese so sorry, but are impossible. *Then* comes hoping American girl to Wong. You see? Nipponese very clever, thorough animal. So, knowing hopeful intention, maybe keeping unwinked eye on Miss Stimmons.

"Then asking own foxish minds: 'Why this American girl visit Wong and remain in happy sitting posture?' Because Wong in touch with Chungking! reflect back quick answer. So maybe Nipponese keep *two* unwinked eye on home of Wong Sin Meng."

"You mean this girl was at Wong's house before Ying got there?" muttered Benson.

"Oh, not so catastrophe, dear Captain. Miss Stimmons arriving later same night.

Unlikely that home of Wong under Nipponese eye when Ying taking cover there. But *now* under eye, perhaps, and Nipponese secret police knocking on door any time, saying: 'Oh, so sorry, but like pleasing converse with American girl!' Then search house and finding Ying. Are very ticklish situation, Captain. Ying must go tonight if possible."

"Why didn't you move Ying when you heard about this girl?" asked Benson in a hard voice.

"Where, dear sir? And why? Dangerous for Ying to stay at Wong's house, but more dangerous to move Ying under Nipponese eye. Better leaving house only once—for Chungking."

Benson stared out over the shadowy deck, half-hearing the creak of the stern scull and the rubbing of poles along the sides. The sail filled or flapped lazily, but the coolies were putting their backs into it. They had entered a wider canal, and the lights of Shanghai had brightened and spread.

"How do you keep in touch with Chungking?" he asked.

Tien Wang hesitated an instant. "Oh, enjoying far-flung radio machinery inside Chungking. So intake radios here apprehending pushful messages at all times."

"How do you get messages back to Chungking?"

"For quick dispatching damn-vital news we manipulating smallish, portable out-go set here. Nipponese unable finding, because all time perambulate same elsewhere. Our news reaching set of similar likeness inside Hankow, and quick trip onward. So return answers penetrating Chungking in small era of time."

"What's to prevent the Japs decoding your messages?" Benson turned his head. "I mean, translating your code?"

"Only slight point of impossibleness prevent," answered Tien Wang coyly. "Code are bottomed on ancient Chinese books in rotating order each week. Nipponese in sea-deep ignorance which books used, if any, so quite impossibility to read messages."

"Unless somebody turns traitor as usual," grumbled Benson. "It won't be easy to get Ying away clear—at the best."

"No traitor in radio, Captain," said Wang, a note of uneasiness under his assurance. "Burning house for you to land—this waiting sampan device for saving of Ying—all arranged by radio, you see it? If Chinese radio traitor waggle tongue, Nipponese waiting tonight for skip up and capture your plane. But Nipponese *not* there, so all huckleberry dory, I think. Yes."

THE sampan had oozed into Soochow Creek, which Benson recognized. He felt angry without knowing why. "Well, go on," he muttered. "There must be Jap sentries around our defense sector. How do we pass them? We're getting close."

"That not uneasy, Captain. Nipponese in Shanghai now sweet friends to Chinese, only collect taxes and customs so that foolish Chinese not wasting same." The smooth irony held venom. "Now all business, even humble sampan, are kindly urged to work top speed for earnings which Nipponese sorry, but must borrow. Affectionate sentries not stopping this sampan, I think."

"Is that how you got Ying into the American sector? The Jap sentries and our sentries just let you pass?"

"Well, no, dear sir. That slightly otherwise. When Ying ready to skip inside American sector, great shootings and yellings take place in nearby street. Nipponese guard trot off for stopping such impudence. Some American sentries go, too. Others get speck in eyeball, dear chaps. Cannot see Ying pass with friends. Too blind, but pretty soon all well again."

Benson smiled in the darkness. "Were you seen by the Japs that night, Tien—at the barricade, or in Chapei?"

"Thinking not. Others extricate Ying from Chapei. I remaining very circum-spective in background. Same at barricade. When Ying and friends skip into happy fields of American sector for picking innocent flowers of safety, it are Tien

Wang who make rude yelling and shooting in next street. But not visible when Nipponese arriving with gleamy bayonets.

"That important, you see, because jolly Tien Wang very loving to Nipponese. Oh, yes. Sweet invaders who kiss China with bombs think Tien Wang devoted to them like wealthy uncle. Are mutual feeling also. Nipponese honor Tien Wang by not spitting in face. So I orate praises in shouting hurly-ballyhoo, then making trouble for said Nipponese in blushing whispers. Oh, having much fun." There was no humor in Tien Wang's smooth, reflective voice.

"Good work—and risky enough," commented Benson. "If you haven't been seen in this business, keep out of it. I think I can handle it alone—better alone. Your other work here is too valuable to have you suspected and shot, to no purpose."

"You have a plan, Captain?" asked the Chinese.

"A rough one, which doesn't include you, my friend." Benson coughed. "It's win or lose tonight, for Ying and me, and a quick out if we lose. I'll see to that. Why drag you with us either way? I'm thinking of China—"

Tien Wang rubbed his thick jowl and was silent.

The sampan had edged into the north bank. The sail was lowered and the mast unstepped. Four of the six ragged boatmen leaped ashore and vanished in the darkness. The other two began working the sampan downstream again. They were in the outskirts of Shanghai now; the British settlement looming and drifting past on the south bank; a dozen bridges ahead of them.

As the boat slid deeper into the city along the winding Soochow Creek the light increased. Both men drew back under shelter. Twice Benson glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. Exactly one o'clock—then one-ten. At this rate it would be one-thirty before he got started, and there was much to be done. It seemed almost impossible to get Ying and his funds out of Shanghai before dawn.

But it had to be done somehow. Everything he had accomplished for China had seemed impossible at first.

If the Japs bagged him alive as a fighting neutral—he shrugged that aside. Neither he nor Ying could afford to be taken alive. If things got too hot there'd be some very dead Japs, and two bullets left for Ying and himself. His frost-ravaged lips tightened. One chance in ten. Nothing unusual. He'd be getting morbid in a minute.

He turned his head. "Have them drop me at Honan Road, north bank, if they can manage it unseen. I'll take a rickshaw from there to the Astor House—Wong's home later."

"So? Then where abiding this sampan for transporting back to plane? Also humble self, dear sir?"

"The sampan wouldn't get us back much before dawn. I'm hoping for something faster. But have it tie up close to the Honan Road bridge, north bank, just in case. I'll whistle if we need it.

"You keep clear of this now. Stay away from the sampan, and don't come with me either. Not this time. Thanks, Tien. If I get Ying away, maybe we can tackle the next job together. But meanwhile, keep that useful head on your shoulders."

"To helping you are essence of pleasure," muttered the Chinese slowly, "but perhaps you have rectitude, Captain. Shall submitting obedience this time—" His huge hand closed on Benson's arm suddenly. "Extreme silence now," he whispered.

A hail in clipped Chinese from a Jap sentry floated over the water. The boatman at the scull answered in a good-natured sing-song that they had come from Lake Tai, seeking work as porters. Was such to be had? The sentry disdained to answer.

The sampan lap-lapped on quietly. More bridges arched their hollow darkness overhead. From the north shore a carrying, Texan drawl challenged the boat in something resembling Chinese. The tone was perfunctory. The boatmen ignored it.

Benson twitched and lay still as they

drifted on. The sight and smell of Shanghai—that challenge from one of his own Marines—had roused a host of memories better left asleep.

Another bridge loomed ahead. Tien Wang eyed it, then called softly to the nearest boatman. The boat swung in toward the north bank, straightened again. Benson clapped Tien Wang on the shoulder and hunched out on deck. As the sampan rubbed the stone landing in the shadow of the bridge, he jumped quietly ashore. The gently rocking boat slid on, out of sight.

III

STEPS led up beside the bridge to the roadway above. Benson mounted until his eyes were on a level with the pavement. There were no cars nor pedestrians about at this hour, but he saw two vacant rickshaws at the old stand on the south bank. He climbed to the road and whistled. A boy sprang to his vehicle and came trotting across the bridge.

Benson wore dirty civilian clothes, an old hat, and a ragged trench coat. These and his slouch made him look like a bum. The coat was long enough to conceal the holstered gun in front of his left hip. He carried the forty-five there, butt foremost, to allow a quicker right-hand draw from under his coat. The boy eyed his clothes, saw his hard mouth and lowered the rickshaw handles.

Benson got in with a snarl: "Astor House, chop chop!"

The coolie insulted him experimentally in smiling Chinese, bent to the handles and trotted forward. Benson grinned to himself. The boy had not recognized him, although he had used this rickshaw a dozen times in the past. It seemed a good omen.

At the Astor House he gave the boy an American quarter and told him to wait. Then he slouched into the vestibule and surveyed the sunken lobby, his battered hat shading his eyes. Before the Jap invasion, half the deep easy chairs would

have been filled at this hour. Now, with so many foreigners gone, the lobby was deserted. Modifying his slouch a little, he went straight on to the desk. The night clerk eyed him unfavorably, with no sign of recognition.

"Lieutenant Rolph in?" asked Benson gruffly.

"*Captain* Rolph is in. I believe he has retired—"

"Where's his room? I got a private message for him."

"You may leave it with me. I cannot disturb—"

"What's his room number?" Benson's voice had a rasp in it now. "This message won't keep. These're funny times."

"Well, it's 329. You may call him on the house phone, I suppose, but he—"

"I said *private* message!" Benson made for the elevator, knowing the clerk would phone upstairs ahead of him.

The door of 329 was jerked wide open to his knock. The overhead lights revealed a burly man in undershirt, britches and field boots. He held a service revolver half-concealed against his thigh. Benson smiled to himself, guessing the clerk's description of him as a hard-looking bum. Eight months ago, the night clerk had "sir'd" him to death.

ROLPH had kind, St. Bernard eyes, a craggy nose and a fighting jaw. Though older, he had been Benson's lieutenant. He was inclined to be lax on discipline, but the men loved him.

Benson eased into the room and closed the door. Rolph had stepped back, lifting the gun. "Who are you?" he demanded belligerently. "And what's all this about a message, my lad?"

Benson tilted his hat back. "Same old rhinoceros, eh, *Captain*? Congratulations. Time you had your step—"

"Neal! Well, fry me—" Rolph tossed his gun on the bed and stuck out a short, knotty hand. His blue eyes searched Benson's ravaged face—swerved—returned. "You've changed a bit, or I'd have known— Hell, it's good to see you, Neal!"

"Same here." Benson straightened his crushed fingers absently, his face harder than his eyes. Tommy had not changed.

"I've picked up news of you, what there was," growled Rolph. He glanced at the door and lowered his voice. "Shanghai's no place for you, fella! Settlement's riddled with Jap spies. Fry me, *you* know it is. What brought you here?"

"Active service." Benson glanced around the room and frowned. "Damn' active. I'm pressed for time."

"What do you want of me then? You'll get it."

"I was thinking of a launch, Tommy. There's a little matter of getting a good Chink out of here tonight before he's a dead Chink—yes, our sector."

"Huh. I've got a launch at the foot of Szechuan Road, upstream, north shore. Twenty-foot cabin job. Fast. But you can't have it. I'm neutral, I am!" Captain Rolph grinned like a pleased bulldog. "The keys are on my bureau there. Help yourself. Fry me, I'll get into mufti and come along with you." He turned and reached for a shirt.

"No you won't, you damn fool. But get into uniform." Benson smiled unwillingly. "Tomorrow you'll report your room entered. Somebody stole your keys. You got a message to report for special duty, but it was a fake. Must have been to get you away from your room."

"You didn't have much of a look at the man who brought it. Took him for an orderly. But he must have hung around to steal your launch keys. You may have left your door unlocked. Have you got all that? It's for your C.O. when the launch is found and the Japs protest—if they do."

"Aye, aye, sir. But why not come with you in mufti? Who's going to run the launch?"

"I'll manage. You've got to report for duty, haven't you? You're not throwing away your commission either. Follow my plan, or all bets are off, Tommy. And don't forget tomorrow to report your launch as stolen. There's one thing you can do tonight, though, when you report."

"Let's have it." Rolph was getting into his uniform.

"Well, if a squad of your leathernecks happened along North Honan Road, say in twenty minutes, they might run across some of these Jap plainclothes gentlemen where they have no business to be.

"That's just a guess. But since we're guessing, I'd try the neighborhood of 520 North Honan Road. The idea would be to get there quick and have the boys out of sight. They may not see anyone except my Chinese friend and me. In that case, have 'em stay out of sight. If we don't come out, or they hear a shot inside the house, they might investigate."

"Right! I'll 'gestapo' the little beggars if they're in our sector. We've run 'em out before and we'll do it again." Rolph buckled on his Sam Browne and service revolver and adjusted his cap. They shook hands. At the door, Rolph turned with sudden gravity and saluted. "Be seeing you, Neal. Count on it."

"Thanks, Tommy. Don't grab my rickshaw. It's little Tom Sim from the Honan Bridge. Hurry those men of yours along."

Rolph stuck his key in the outside keyhole and left it there, as though he had forgotten to lock his room. Without a backward glance he shut the door and stumped down the hall.

BENSON thrust the launch keys in his pocket, switched off the lights and entered the hall warily. There was no one in sight. He shut and locked the door, left the key in it, and cat-footed down the service stairs, for he knew the Astor House well. At the bottom he crossed a hall unseen, walked quietly out the side door and slouched toward the front entrance.

Tom Sim had waited. Benson climbed into the rickshaw, sat down heavily and growled: "510, North Honan Road. Chop chop, monkey face!"

Convinced that his passenger would not understand, the boy replied in smiling Chinese with an outline of Benson's habits and ancestry that would have made a dog blush. Then he picked up the handles and

trotted into the maze of little shop-lined, Chinese streets behind the Astor House. These were deserted.

As they neared Honan Road, Benson glanced back at intervals until he was certain they were not being followed. At length the panting rickshaw boy slowed and stopped in front of 510, and lowered the handles. "There, son of all filth," he bobbed, grinning.

Benson climbed out. He did not want to involve little Tom Sim with the Japs, for all his cheek, so he handed the boy another two bits and snapped: "Now get the hell out! Beat it!"

Tone and gesture were enough for Tom Sim. He trotted away toward the bridge and disappeared. Benson turned up hill and slouched along in search of 520. As far as he could tell, North Honan Road was deserted also.

He followed a four-foot brick wall to a lower wooden gate with the numerals: 520. The curving eaved home of Wong Sin Meng was set well back from the street and half hidden by trees. The intervening formal garden was a landscape in miniature, with paths, connecting pools, stone lanterns and camel's hump bridges.

There were lights in the lower windows of the house. Benson glanced around and swore under his breath. All the neighboring houses were dark. Wong might as well advertise that he expected a visitor so late at night.

Something moved in the shadows across the street. Benson turned his head and caught another hint of movement at the end of the wall. He tried the gate. It was unlatched. Pushing it open, he walked swiftly up the central path to the house. He took care not to look behind him.

Reaching the front door, he knocked and pushed a button which rang a mellow gong somewhere inside. Out of the tail of his eye he saw agile little figures dart in at the gate and melt into shadow. Though he heard nothing, he sensed that they were approaching, taking cover were they could find it.

Again he swore under his breath. The

Japs meant to close in sooner than he expected. That squad of Marines would be too late. . . .

THE door was opened by the number one boy, a big man from the north. An aged, placid Chinese stood waiting farther back, hands in his sleeves. As he bowed and opened his lips, Benson checked him with a slight, quick gesture.

Benson spoke in English, distinctly: "Mr. Wong? Is Miss Stimmons here? I just heard that she is in difficulties."

Wong's mouth opened again—and stayed open, wordless. Something hard nosed Benson's spine with a jarring impact. Having expected it, his start was slight and purely physical. From behind him a hissed sentence in Japanese ordered him to walk forward. At the same moment another Jap in plainclothes darted into the room past Benson, his revolver threatening both Wong and the houseboy.

Benson started to turn. Another sibilant order in Japanese warned him to proceed. He ignored it and wheeled slowly, hands lifted, blank amazement on his face. There were no other Japs in the doorway, but his captor rammed a gun into Benson's stomach and his black eyes were threatening.

"Retreat, Yankee dog!" he ordered in Japanese. "Quiet!"

"No spik Chinese," said Benson. "Say, what is this?" He backed up then, in obedience to the prodding revolver. This was no time to start anything. The Japs were too alert.

His captor reached with his free hand and closed the front door. He repeated his order for silence in Chinese, adding a venomous command that Wong translate it into English. At the same time he stepped back out of reach, his gun leveled.

Benson turned his head with convincing bewilderment. An order in Chinese from the second Jap had made the big number one boy turn about sullenly and face the wall. Wong's wrinkled old face was like parchment, but he had lost none of his serene, motionless dignity. Even a splin-

tering crash from the rear of the house behind him left him apparently unmoved, his old hands still in his sleeves.

"Our—guests," he translated in slow English, "say it are greatly important that we not speaking, please."

"Who are they? What's the idea?" Benson paused.

A fat Chinese houseboy shuffled in behind Wong, jowls quivering, little eyes fawning secretively. He was being prodded into the room by a third Jap. Keeping out of the line of fire, his captor pushed him around Wong and made him face the wall near the other houseboy. Now the second Jap prodded Wong into a similar position, his back to the room.

Benson stared at his own captor in puzzled anger. The Jap was watching him with beady eyes, tense vigilance unreleased. Benson's stare gave no hint of his own swift thoughts. He might leap sideways and go for his gun. He might kill two of the Japs before they got him—but that wouldn't help Ying.

He lowered his hands slowly and grasped the lapels of his coat. The revolver rose a little, menacingly, but the Jap said nothing. In lowering his arms, Benson had glimpsed the hands of his watch. Eleven minutes had passed since he left the hotel. Delay was better than action. Somehow he had to stall the Japs for another ten minutes.

IV

A SHUFFLE of feet drew his attention. Through another entrance stumbled a tall, richly-clad Chinese merchant of middle age. Though he was being prodded from behind by a fourth Jap, prodded with agonizing force, he remained impassive.

An eager hissing of breath from the Japs confirmed Benson's guess that the newcomer was Ying Loy Wan, leader of the Shanghai terrorists, the man he had come to rescue.

Unlike Wong, Ying was not driven to face the wall. A violent push sent him into a chair. Nor was Benson himself ordered

to move again. For an instant he wondered what had become of the American girl. Probably she was hiding. More Japs might be searching the house, might find her and bring her here, poor kid—but it all meant delay.

The Japs were conferring in tense whispers, their black eyes sharp and quick as rats'. Benson looked blank, but caught enough of their speech to understand the drift of it. The question was what to do with the prisoners until "he" came. One had gone for him. He would be here very soon. Meanwhile the house must be thoroughly searched for what "he" wanted.

The man covering Benson seemed to be acting as leader, although his eyes never strayed from his prisoner. At length he rapped out a slang phrase which meant nothing to the American.

Two of the Japs wheeled swiftly toward the wall. One of them lifted his revolver and brought the muzzle down on Wong's head. The old man collapsed silently, a trickle of crimson worming down his bald pate.

The big houseboy wheeled with a snarl and sprang at the Jap, his bare hands like claws. The other Jap darted in from the side. The barrel of his revolver struck the houseboy neatly at the base of the skull, and breath went out of him with a stunned *whoo* as he crashed on his face.

The fat houseboy cringed and turned, squealing in Chinese: "No, no! It was understood—" Then a muzzle struck his head and he sprawled unconscious against the wall, black eyes rolling up piously.

It was over in an instant. During that instant, Benson met his captor's eyes. The little brown man hissed a warning and jumped back, revolver lifted to protect himself. Benson guessed that only cool prudence had kept the Jap from firing. The shot might be heard outside the house and reported to the Marines. These Japs were efficient and quick-witted as well as ruthless. If "he" meant Colonel Kidote, the colonel chose his men well.

It was too late to protect Wong, even if Benson were willing to risk his mission

on the old man's behalf. He veiled his rage in a stare of disgust, tried to look as though none of this affected him personally. He growled: "Dirty little—" and let his hands slip lower on his coat lapels.

The Jap understood the tone, at least. His black eyes flared dangerously for an instant, then grew veiled.

Benson looked down and caught a glimpse of his watch. Fourteen minutes now since he left the hotel, seven or eight minutes longer to wait, to make certain of the Marines. It was only half a mile to their barracks.

HIS captor spat a command in Japanese. The others began dragging Wong and the houseboys into the next room, from which Ying had appeared. When this was done, a second order made two of the Japs converge on the motionless Ying. One of them commanded him in Chinese to follow Wong and the houseboys.

Ying stood up with dignity. Benson got ready to shoot, taking care not to stiffen. If they tried to kill Ying or knock him unconscious, there would be slaughter.

Covered by the two Japs, Ying moved calmly through the arch. They followed, disappeared in his wake. The other two covered Benson, their eyes expressionless.

Listening intently he heard a gasp, but no thud of a blow or a fall. Rage darkened his face. They had tricked Ying away from him neatly enough. He could not even tell whether the terrorist leader was dead, unconscious or unharmed.

"What's all this anyway?" he blustered in English. "I came to see an American girl—Miss Stimmons. Unless you produce her there'll be trouble, understand?"

The Japs watched him steadily, ignoring his question. Their intent vigilance warned him not to take chances.

Because every moment of delay would help, he tried once more to make them talk. "American girl here—savvee? Me—American. Me look for girl—savvee?"

From the next room came the one word "Now," in Japanese.

Benson's captor jerked his head toward the sound. "You marcha thar shortta time," he ordered. "You doa so—notta shooting you, yess? You doa so chop chop, yess?"

He must fight now, or risk a trap. He had an outside chance of killing them both—a very slim chance. Yet even this would not save Ying from the other Japs. It was too soon to act.

With an angry stare he wheeled slowly toward the curtains, eyes intent on the wall for the shadow of a lifted revolver. The converging shadows of the Japs told him they were following, but there was no swift movement.

The arch was curtained for warmth, the curtains partly drawn. Before he reached it he saw the limp bodies of Wong and his servants on the floor, but neither Ying nor his captors.

Between the curtains he checked, sensing the trap. A muzzle in his spine jarred him forward a little. Before he could draw, the other two Japs were on him from either side. He knew enough jiu jitsu to shake one of them off. Then he stumbled and went down, all four of them swarming on top of him.

Skillfully tripped from behind, he had no chance at all to fight. He tried to roll them off, keeping his elbows at his sides. Vicious thumbs found a nerve in his neck. His lightning jerk made the grip less effective, but agony almost paralyzed him for a moment.

His arms were wrenched from under his body. Two pairs of hands clamped on his wrists, twisted and locked them up his back. He relaxed, knowing better than to resist now. Instinctively he panted and swore at them, trying to maintain his role as an outraged neutral.

"Let me up! You can't get away with this! What in hell's the big idea?" Desperately cool, he was trying to figure why they had not simply knocked him out.

It could point either way. They preferred not to injure a neutral; or they wanted him conscious for questioning when "he" arrived. The latter seemed the more

likely. Injuring or killing neutrals was an old story to the Japs. They thrived on notes of protest.

He set his teeth. It looked as if they knew who he was.

WHILE two of them kept him down with painful arm locks, the others tore the remains of a beautiful tapestry into strips. Ying lay half in a chair, arms behind him, ankles bound with the same tapestry. He was conscious and seemed unhurt, but his indifferent eyes held only calm resignation as they met Benson's.

Wong and his servants, being unconscious, had been left unbound. Evidently the Japs had planned to pounce and escape in haste with their captive or captives. Benson fought down helpless fury. It was too late to go out fighting now.

In silence his wrists were jerked together and tightly bound. A warning grip on his neck kept him relaxed while they lashed his ankles. The Japs rolled him on his back and stood up. One of them kicked his hip-bone with casual accuracy.

Their leader squatted beside Benson, opened his coat and drew his gun from its holster. After a brief inspection he replaced it, to Benson's amazement. The Jap searched him, but found nothing important, stood up and spat in his face.

"Now the money of the Chinese traitor dogs," he hissed in Japanese. "Search quickly, beginning with this room."

Benson rolled on his side and wiped his cheek on the deep-piled rug. The Japs had begun a swift, vandal search, and paid no attention to him. They smashed open a carved desk, tore off the doors of an ancient cabinet as delicate as black foam. A large, golden Buddha was handled and dropped. Gun butts shattered exquisite vases. Knives and fingers ripped and disembowelled the upholstered furniture.

Ying was tumbled out of his chair to let them wreck it. When tapping the walls yielded no hiding place, they kicked the rugs this way and that in search of a trap door, booting and rolling the five helpless or unconscious men out of their way.

Finally the leader rapped a command. The others trotted after him into the front room and began wrecking that.

Watching his chance through the half-parted curtains, Benson hunched and rolled unseen toward the back of the room where Ying lay motionless. As soon as they were back to back, he shouldered the Chinese over on his side and managed to reach his bound wrists. The position was awkward, the woven strips tough, slippery and tightly knotted. Working furiously, he had loosened a knot when nearby movement made him turn his head.

Drawn curtains here at the back of the room shielded another doorway. The Japs had searched behind these, but had not yet entered the rear room. Now the curtains had trembled, parted warily to frame a young girl.

IN THAT split second she was photographed forever on Benson's memory. Her long-skirted, high-necked dress was primly voluminous. She had clear, straight-lidded gray eyes, rather a sharp nose, an obstinate chin and a small, determined mouth. Her soft brown hair was dragged back in a knot, but even this could not disguise the youthful prettiness of her heart-shaped face and smooth, delicate skin. Arriving when she did, she seemed beautiful to Benson. Her black straw hat was jammed crazily on her head, and one hand clutched a large, worn handbag.

She was so near that he heard her quick, stifled gasp as she looked down at him. Her eyes darted around the room with the stare of a hunted animal, widened on the archway, returned to Benson's face. She looked almost hysterical with terror.

"Where can I hide?" she whispered.

"Turn me loose," he answered, "and you won't need to hide. Knife in my left trouser pocket. Quick!"

Galvanized by hope, she knelt and fumbled, got out the penknife and dropped it. She picked it up and broke her nail trying to open it, glared wildly around and reached for a shard of broken vase near Ying's head.

Desperately cool, Benson whispered: "No! Put the knife in my hands. I'll open it. Calm down, youngster."

She fumbled it into his hands and waited, staring at the arch. Benson managed to get the big blade half open.

"Here!" he muttered. "Straighten it first, then cut."

The girl was all thumbs in her haste, but she managed to get the point of the blade on the floor and snap it open instead of shut. Benson rolled to let her cut his bonds and free his arms. The knife wavered in her shaking fingers, twice jabbing his wrists, but the strips of tapestry loosened.

He tore and wrenched free of them, grabbed the knife and sliced through the binding on his ankles, watching the archway. The Japs were still moving about the front room, though making less noise than before. Luckily, he could not see any of them from this angle, and therefore could not be seen.

He got to his knees, shuffled warily to Ying Loy Wan, rolled him over and freed his wrists. Ying sat up silently, a spark of vengeful hope in his eyes.

The girl was fumbling in her bag. "They're at the rear, too," she whispered. "Oh, here, take this—" She thrust a tiny, pearl-butted revolver under his face. "It's loaded!"

Swerving to cut Ying's ankles loose, Benson grabbed the .22 in his left hand rather than waste time refusing it. He had freed Ying when a quick-drawn breath from the Chinese made his nerves tingle and jerked his head around to face the archway.

A man had stepped between the curtains. Benson found himself looking straight into the muzzle of a Japanese service revolver.

V

THE Jap behind the gun wore occidental civilian clothes and a yellow silk mask, but his skin betrayed him as an Oriental. He held the gun like a rock, his finger curled suggestively around the trig-

ger. Benson registered these details in split second. Then Ruth Stimmons gave a stifled shriek and turned to run.

"Wait! Do not leave us, girl," murmured the Jap pleasantly. He spoke in English with almost no accent.

For an instant his eyes had swerved to Ruth. During that instant Benson palmed the little .22 she had given him. The Jap had not raised his voice. It was almost soothing. But its quality made the girl check and stand frozen in her tracks.

Benson got up slowly from his knees and folded his arms.

"It's about time!" he growled. "I came here to see this American girl. I'm an American. Those birds in the front room tied me up. I think they're Japs. If you're Japanese, you better tell 'em to get out of here—or leave us alone. I mean to report this. And we're getting out of here now!"

The masked man's eyes smiled. He was short and stocky, with yellow, muscular hands.

"Oh, well done, sir," he bowed. "You almost convince me! But please, now that you are free, do not leave so soon."

Benson stared an instant, and looked down as though at a loss. His hard eyes flicked to his watch. Twenty-five minutes had passed since he left the hotel. It should be time enough.

He looked up again with a swaggering uncertainty that was only nine-tenths assumed. In this stout, pleasant Japanese he sensed an enemy far more subtle and clever than himself.

"Why shouldn't we leave?" he blustered. "Who are you?"

"Oh, come, sir," pleaded the masked man. "Your second question is immaterial. As to the first, I will answer it just to oblige you. I hope you will not leave because you appear to be involved in matters which should not concern an American and a neutral. Does that soothe your indignation, old chap?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," growled Benson. "Just because I happened to show up here . . . Anyhow,

you've got no business wrecking a Chinese home in the American sector, if you're in with those birds." He nodded toward the front room. "Are you going to put up that gun and let us out of here?"

"If I must, I must," the Jap said, ruefully, "but you will listen? Is it not curious that Miss Stimmons wishes very much to depart for Chungking—and that Mr. Ying Loy Wan, whom you have freed, also wishes so much to leave for Chungking with his collected funds, and sweet life in his body?"

Benson scowled. "I still don't get it. What's all that got to do with me?" He wanted to learn how much the masked man knew about him.

"I was coming to that. Do you not think it curious that an American ex-captain of Marines, now with the so-called Chinese Army, should arrive at this house just at this time—presumably from Chungking? My *dear* Captain, is that not pulling the long arm of coincidence practically out of its socket?"

Benson knew that the Jap was playing with him as a cat plays with a dying bird. His name had not been mentioned, but the Jap knew all about him. The fat houseboy had turned traitor to some effect. He thought fast. If the masked man had a weak spot, ridicule might find it.

He laughed easily. "That's all bunk, Mr. Jap Gestapo! You're afraid I'll report your raid and have you kicked out with your tail between your legs. Are you planning to murder us?"

The masked Jap was unmoved. "Neither of you, my dear chap. We do not fight women and terrified neutrals."

"Except from high and safe in the air," Benson laughed. "You little tin soldiers drop bombs without fear, but let the Long Swords get to grips and how you run! Women and civilians are all you *can* fight, by the look of it."

"You are mistaken, Captain. Enough of jokes. Ying must stay—and the funds, of course. But help us find the money, and you and the girl may go unhurt. Otherwise—so sorry!"

"Damn you!" Arms still folded, Benson stiffened with assumed rage. As though by contracted muscles, the tiny revolver in his left hand cracked sharply and broke the front window. He jumped and dropped the .22, looking startled.

The Jap's trigger finger paled and the hammer lifted. For a second, Death was close enough to Benson to breathe on his neck. As the tinkle of glass subsided, the masked Jap relaxed.

"If you are careless again," he said with a little laugh, "I shall have you both liquidated, Captain—you and this girl."

"I was annoyed," Benson grumbled. "The damn toy went off by accident." He looked down and kicked the gun aside.

"Your apology is accepted, Captain. What is your answer? Ying must expire in any case. You cannot help him. But you can save your own life and that of this terror-frozen girl by showing us where to find—" The masked Jap broke off, his head turning swiftly to listen.

THE front door crashed open. There was a quick pound of feet and a sharp command in Rolph's voice. Benson leaped aside, his revolver flashing out and up. Covering each other, both men hesitated an instant. Neither dared face the consequences of killing the other. Then, with amazing quickness, the Jap raced to the window, curled himself into a ball and crashed backward through the glass, taking the window bars with him.

Benson jumped to the light switch and plunged the room in darkness, then made for the broken window. After the light, he could see nothing of the dim garden at first. There was an uproar of chattering Japanese protests in the front room, but he ignored it, staring intently outdoors.

Something broke the horizontal line of the wall. The hump of a man's body appeared, widened, narrowed and vanished. Above the top of the four-foot wall a head bobbed along toward Chapei—away from Soochow Creek.

Whether or not the masked Jap was the notorious Colonel Kidote, he had taken

the wrong direction if he still hoped to prevent their escape. Or was it craft rather than chance that took him away from the Creek? He was not through with them. Benson's respect for the masked man's wits assured him of that. The Marines had let Benson take one trick, but Ying's escape was still a question of speed and vigilance.

He turned back and switched on the lights. Ruth was on her knees, feeling over the floor. With the light she caught up her .22, stuffed it into her bag and stood erect.

Ying had got stiffly to his feet and picked up Benson's penknife. With a tigerish pounce he bent over the fat houseboy and ripped his throat open almost from ear to ear.

Ruth Stimmons gagged at the spouting blood and turned away, shuddering. Ying wiped the knife on the houseboy's clothing, snapped the blade shut, presented the knife to Benson.

"That thing betrayed its own treachery," he explained in Chinese. "So may all traitors find shameful death."

Benson nodded drily, and whispered: "Out the window at once! They might hold and question us. Be swift, Ying Loy Wan."

Ying strode to the golden Buddha which the Japs had dropped. He touched the head in three places. The belly swung open. From the cavity he took a huge roll of English notes and stuffed them into his sleeve, then lowered himself out the window, neatly avoiding the jagged glass.

The girl turned and ran up to Benson. "If you're going to Chungking, take me with you! Take me with you! It's my only chance to see my father alive!"

Benson shook his head impatiently. "This is war—"

Rolph's voice boomed out from just beyond the curtains: "You, Jones, phone for a truck. There's the phone, in the hall. You others watch these dicky birds—and no nonsense."

He stepped between the curtains, saw Benson and Ruth, and jerked his thumb toward the window. Then he looked

through them. "Three Chinks in here, at least one of 'em dead," he announced in a loud, ominous voice. "Fry me, this is serious!"

He wheeled and went out again. Benson started for the window, but the girl clutched his arm.

"You *must* take me!" she demanded. "I saved your life!"

Benson hesitated. "Come on, then. Out with you!"

He raised the broken window quietly, bundled her over the sill and followed. Taking her arm, he helped her to stumble diagonally across the garden to Ying at the gate. There, pushing them both into shadow, he looked up and down the street.

The masked man had disappeared. There was no one in sight. When he turned his head and beckoned, they followed him quickly out the gate and down toward Soochow Creek.

THE broken rhythm of their footsteps rang loud in the empty street. Benson ignored it. If he had left the house warily, it was to avoid being challenged and delayed by the Marines. He was sure the Japs would not have time to organize another attack on them in the American sector.

On the other hand, he was equally sure that the man in the yellow mask would not let them escape Shanghai as easily as he had entered it. The immediate future was dark enough without being handicapped by a girl.

The bare, Honan Road bridge was in sight when he turned west into a narrow street that ran parallel to Soochow Creek. At the corner he peered at his watch, and his lips tightened. It was three o'clock in the morning. With a gruff word to Ying he set a pace that made Ruth half run to keep up with them. At length he took her arm to help her along.

"You're risking your life with us," he warned bluntly.

She clutched her bag tighter and nodded, panting with unaccustomed exertion. "My life isn't very important—"

They came out into Szechuan Road just above the bridge. After one quick glance, Benson led them swiftly down toward the deserted bridge over Soochow Creek. As they drew nearer his lips tightened again. There was only one launch upstream on this side. It was not moored off-shore, but made fast to the low stone wharf next to the bridge. Its engine was running, throttled low, and a man sat hunched in the cockpit. This might be a trap.

Benson eased down the steps, right hand inside his coat, Ying and Ruth behind him. The man in the launch heard the click of her heels and looked around. Benson relaxed at sight of that craggy, hard-bitten face. It was Mullins, his former top-kick. Evidently Rolph had spare keys to the launch. He had sent the top-sergeant to start the engine and save Benson time.

Mullins shouldered out on the wharf like a bear, and made for the painter, his hand going up in a half salute. He cast off and held the painter, staring out over the Creek. Benson guessed that Rolph had told Mullins not to look at them, so that he could swear he had not seen them. Tommy never forgot to look after his men.

Benson stepped aboard, helped Ruth to follow, and sat behind the wheel as Ying joined them. With the first muffled drumming of the opened throttle, Mullins cast the painter inboard. Then he stepped into shadow, came to attention and saluted. Benson returned it stiffly, a wry twist to his lips. Staring ahead, he put the launch in gear, eased her quietly away from the wharf and nosed upstream.

Ruth had settled herself in the cockpit, out of his way, an almost exalted look on her face as she gazed steadily ahead. She was shivering a little, but did not seem aware of it.

As they gained speed, Benson said gruffly: "Go down in the cabin, Miss Stimmons, crawl up in the bows and hide. I mean, belowdeck. You'll find a way for'd, from the cabin."

The girl stood up obediently and went below.

With a sidelong glance Benson spoke in

Chinese: "Now, Ying Loy Wan, be pleased to enter the cabin for a time. It will be safer with only one person visible on deck. Please see that the maiden is well concealed, and do not turn on any lights."

With a slight, courteous bow, Ying entered the cabin.

Even half-throttled, the launch was fast. Since she was not only audible but visible from the shore, Benson switched on her running lights. Then he opened her wide.

She passed the American sentries unchallenged. Benson gripped the wheel easily and peered ahead. If the masked Jap had reached a phone in time to warn all posts, they were sunk. There was a chance that he had not. Such general orders would take time, and Mullins had saved them delay. He sniffed the dirty water curling from the stern and grinned faintly. Perhaps the god of luck *was* sitting on his shoulder tonight.

VI

THE speed of the launch, the dwindling creak of sampans rocking in its wash, gave him an idea. He glanced about and found a flashlight. Mullins had bent an American flag to the stern halyards. Because the launch had been "stolen," his idea could do Tommy Rolph no harm.

He jockeyed the skidding craft around a bend. The Jap sentries were close. He could see no Japanese patrol vessel waiting for him athwart the channel.

The sentry's challenge echoed over the water above his muttering exhaust. After a moment he stood up, turned a wavering light on the flag, staggered and yelled an incoherent greeting. He almost fell overboard, then plumped down behind the wheel, the light of his flash waving drunkenly about. He steadied the veering launch and yelled with laughter.

There had been nothing peremptory about that challenge. It did not come again. He was past now, speeding upstream.

From the Japanese post just astern came a sudden hail. A small searchlight sput-

tered into life, the beam lashing down to the water, sweeping after him. He stared ahead. White light enveloped the launch in stark relief. He ducked, expecting the hammer of a machine gun.

Instead, there was a dull boom from the Japanese post. A yellow spark climbed skyward, rotating lazily. It burst with a hollow *Tonk!* Houses, trees and water sprang out of darkness in the ghostly pallor of a star shell.

Benson took a deep breath. The masked Jap had phoned just too late to stop them. Pursuit by water might be shaken off in the maze of canals ahead. These were small and shallow. Luckily, this type of launch had a shallow draft.

There would be planes going up in a minute. The launch made a tiny target from above, but the Chinese plane would be an easier quarry, if they reached it. No use trying to hide and wait. Daylight would betray them. Tonight or never.

He switched off the running lights, ears alert for the drone of plane engines. Automatically he had noted by landmarks the route followed by the sampan. He recalled it now in reverse order. The turn out of Soochow Creek lay around the next bend.

Another star shell, now farther astern, cast a running black shadow ahead of the launch. Benson saw the narrower waterway and swung the wheel. As the arrowing little craft veered and rolled in a quarter circle, he reduced speed a notch.

Ying steadied himself in the cabin doorway, lurched into the cockpit and sat down. "They saw us," he observed.

"Yes. Is the maiden well hidden, Ying Loy Wan?"

Ying watched the star shell wink out. "She is, skillful rescuer." Calmly, he added: "The Nipponese will pursue?"

As though in answer, a wavering beam of light struck the launch for an instant. Benson snatched a lightning glance astern. A low searchlight had foud them across the flats. By the way it winked between the distant trees, it was traveling up Soochow Creek—traveling fast.

"They come in pursuit now," muttered Benson, intent on his steering. "Yet we may shake them off in these waterways, if the gods are kind." He said nothing about Japanese planes.

"If we are caught, let swift death take us under his protection," murmured Ying. "They will not harm the maiden."

Benson nodded. "This person will see to it."

AIDED by the star shell, the Japanese patrol boat had marked their turn out of Soochow Creek and followed. As the quivering launch began to reel in the miles, that finger of light from astern touched them again and again across the marshy flats, growing slowly but steadily brighter.

A few Chinese homes intervened, some ruined, some intact, but the searchlight always found them again. They must be within range, Benson thought, yet the Japs did not fire. And still there came no throb of plane engines from the sky. Just possibly none were available at once.

The Japs were a third of a mile astern when Benson recognized the next landmarks and slowed for them. Just ahead lay the entrance to the narrow creek where he and Tien Wang had gone aboard the sampan. The wavering glare of the searchlight helped him make the turn, for it showed the low creek banks distinctly.

Swerving into the narrower waterway, the launch slowed almost at once. Benson throttled down, thereby making more speed. Between these close banks under full power, the launch piled up a bow wave that kept her climbing hill all the time.

It was tricky steering now and demanded all his attention, for the little creek wound like a Chinese dragon. Half a mile ahead of its general direction his eyes found the dark hump of deodars that concealed the plane. If he could signal and wake the pilot . . . but even that wouldn't allow time enough, with the plane nosed in, unless he could shake off these Japs.

The searchlight was less brilliant as it

played on the launch. The following boat must be larger, much more difficult to handle in the winding little creek. Benson wanted to glance astern, but knew better than to face that glare with the steering to do. So the launch raced on, and he missed the spurt of yellow flame that winked from the Japanese boat.

The bang, and the eager whine of a shell came almost together. The shell burst ahead of the launch with a startling white flash. Benson grinned tensely. The detonations ought to wake up his pilot—get him at least started on the plane.

The launch slowed abruptly, swung and picked up speed, his instant jerk on the wheel heading it back in midstream. He swore in sudden, fierce hope. She had touched bottom. The Japs' deeper draft should run them hard and fast aground there. Luck when he needed it. Of course, they might sink him before he got out of range, but it would require first-class gunnery to hit the twisting little launch.

"Ying," he ordered, "summon the maiden quickly."

The Chinese vanished into the cabin. The launch tore on, nearing that low irrigation ditch where they must land. To Benson's grim astonishment, the Japs did not fire again.

The beam of the searchlight flicked off the launch and swooped crazily away to starboard. The Japs had run aground!

Presently the light wheeled back and found him. Also, it showed up the landing place ahead. Still the Japs did not fire. Perhaps their gun had jammed. They must be demoralized to jam a quick-firer. It was almost impossible—

Benson slowed for the low-banked irrigation ditch as Ying and Ruth hurried on deck. "Down, and find a blanket!" he snapped in Chinese. Ying wheeled, disappeared below.

Swerving out of gear, then in reverse, Benson ran the boat aground on the lip of the ditch. Ruth was flung to her knees, but jumped up again. Ying stumbled out of the cabin.

Benson sprang ashore. "Come on."

In a moment he was leading them along the irrigation dyke at a steady trot. The searchlight clung to the launch for a moment, then swept to find them. It cast their enormous black shadows across the fields and lit their path confusingly.

THEY were skirting the second field when the beam swung ahead and played on the deodars. Out of the direct glare, Benson shaded his eyes to look back at the Jap craft. It was stationary, but he glimpsed little black figures bobbing toward them at the double. The Japs had taken to the soggy fields in pursuit. He might kill a few of them from the trees, but it looked hopeless. With a word of encouragement to Ruth, he trotted on.

As they reached the trees they began to hear yells and the crack of rifles. The Japs were still some distance behind. Benson plunged straight ahead instead of skirting part of the grove. Then suddenly, he knew that his luck had not failed him.

From somewhere beyond the trees had come the shattering roar of a plane engine. It grew irregular with popping backfires, softened and steadied, rose again to a blasting pound.

Benson traced the source by ear. The plane was moving now. The pilot would take off the same way he landed—into the wind, which meant away from the Japs. He shouted to Ruth above the noise: "This way! Run! We're going to make it!"

He found the girl and ran her through the trees, helped by the lancing white beams of the searchlight. Ying had taken her other arm, and helped to shield her from the low branches.

They burst into the open. The plane had taxied to the near end of the meadow and was bumping around for the take-off. The searchlight found it starkly because there were no intervening trees. The goggled pilot stood up and waved his arm. The plane stopped and waited, engine throttled to a steady beat.

Ying dropped the blanket, wheeled to recover it and had to search an instant in the dense shadows. Benson ran the girl

across the open, swung her legs high and dumped her feet first into the rear compartment—then climbed in beside her.

The pilot bent forward and opened his throttle. Ying was only halfway to the plane. Benson saw him and shouted, "Wait!" above the racket of the engine. The pilot turned a blank, goggled face, his mouth screwed up with tension. Evidently he thought the girl was Ying. The plane began to move faster. Ying shouted in hoarse dismay, swerving to intercept it.

Benson snatched out his gun and rammed it into the confused pilot's neck. "Wait, I said! Throttle down!"

The plane slowed. Ying came panting up, richly embroidered house coat lifted high. Benson leaned out, grabbed the blanket and helped Ying into the front compartment beside the pilot. Again the engine roared. The plane jounced forward. It was quite within range of the quick-firer, but no shells came from the Japanese vessel.

Benson twisted around to the stern machine gun. Half a field away the Japs were kneeling to fire. As he sighted hurriedly, their rifles spat pinpoints of light. Perhaps they were winded, for none of their bullets struck the plane. Benson got in one burst of fire before the lifting tail raised the gun.

Loaded to capacity and refueled, it was a perilous takeoff over rough ground, especially with a cold engine. The plane bumped and yawed down the meadow, throttle wide open. She was not thirty feet from a ditch when she took the air sluggishly. Luckily, there was nothing but open field beyond the ditch.

The searchlight clung to her and seemed to make Tung Li nervous. He tried to climb too fast and narrowly missed stalling. Benson forgave his nervousness in view of their narrow escape. Having the plane ready had saved them all—for the moment.

They climbed straight west on a long slant. At length mist dampened their faces and the plane bumped jarringly. A few seconds later they rose above the clouds.

The white pool of the searchlight wavered below them for a moment and disappeared.

VII

BENSON stood up to look for Jap planes. He could see no lights anywhere except the stars. As their own plane was black and flying without lights, they were fairly safe now, until dawn.

Relieved and puzzled, he made Ruth stand and wrap herself in the blanket. When he had fastened both their safety belts, he leaned forward to speak to the pilot.

"Keep her at ten thousand feet," he shouted in English, "and fly well south of the Yangtze. Too many Jap planes over the river cities. Better turn south a bit now."

The plane banked smoothly and headed southwest. Benson yelled in Chinese, "There is less wind where you sit, Ying Loy Wan. Yet if you are cold, speak. You can change with me back here and share the maiden's blanket. My coat is warm."

"So be it!" Ying replied loudly. "This person is not cold, but warmly grateful."

"What of the treasure, Ying Loy Wan? It is safe?"

"It is safe, thanks to you, valuable friend of China!"

Benson leaned back and relaxed in body rather than in mind. On such a venture as this, unflagging vigilance was part of the price of success. They were not yet safe at Chungking.

He was dissatisfied, uneasy. Instinct told him that something was wrong. Instead of disregarding that instinct, he tried to reason out the cause of it.

At once he thought of the masked man. That friendly, warm, dangerous Jap had all the earmarks of Colonel Kidote; Kidote, the clever "Purring Cat" who seemed harmless until he struck. Clever or not, his blow had missed tonight.

The most difficult part of Benson's task was accomplished—getting Ying and the money out of Shanghai. It had been touch and go in spots, but that was to be ex-

pected. In each tight spot something had happened to make escape possible.

Benson stiffened. That was it. Their escape had been so easy. With his plan betrayed, and Kidote forewarned, too many things had gone wrong for the Japs.

Frowning, he recalled these. Two, at least, could be discarded as above suspicion—the lucky appearance of Ruth to cut them free, and the arrival of the Marines when he fired at the window. Kidote had offered to let him go free with Ruth in return for the hidden funds. Might as well discard that, too. Kidote had no intention of keeping his word.

But other things were not above suspicion. That sentry post had been warned as they passed. The shout and the star shell proved it. Why hadn't they machine-gunned the launch? He remembered expecting it, under that first searchlight.

Next the Jap patrol boat. Another searchlight on them, but no rifle fire. One shell over their bows, and only one. He had never heard of a jammed quick-firer. They might have failed to lock the breech block and blown it off, blown some of them to Hell with it, but Jap gunners were too efficient for that.

Running aground was dumb enough, but possibly accidental. Still no shells. That was the time to shell the launch.

Then those riflemen, half a field away. The Japs were good marksmen. At least two or three bullets should have struck the plane at that distance.

And why no pursuing planes? There had been plenty of time. Easy to spot the launch under that searchlight. Easy to bomb the Chinese plane before it took off.

Was it all luck? That seemed unlikely. Had the Purring Cat struck tonight and missed entirely? The head of the Jap secret service would have a long paw. Was it waiting to strike again, at the last moment?

On the other hand, why let them escape? It didn't make sense. It didn't make sense the other way either. The Japs were too efficient to make so many blunders. Especially Kidote.

Another recollection deepened Benson's frown. Why had Tung Li tried to start without Ying? Nerves? He had flown badly just after the take-off. But leaving Ying was different. The whole object of their mission was to rescue Ying. Bribery? But suspecting Tung Li was nonsense. The boy's forethought in having the plane ready, or his quickness in wheeling it out, had saved all their lives. Was he getting the jitters himself?

Benson grunted with a sort of angry patience. None of his speculations made sense. Anyhow, they were out of Shanghai. He swore at his own persistent uneasiness. Well, nothing to do but keep his tired, smarting eyes open and his wits about him a few hours longer. At least, they were safe until dawn.

H E GLANCED at Ruth. She had lost her hat and was huddled in her blanket, the shadowy whiteness of her forehead just perceptible. He laid an encouraging arm around her shoulders and drew her against him to speak in her ear. "Cold, young lady?"

Ruth shrank a little and looked up, her eyes solemn in the starlight. "It doesn't matter. I'm not cold."

With a nod he took away his arm. He was hungry. There were slabs of meat and rice and a thermos bottle of hot tea at his feet, but he needed rest more. He settled back for a cat-nap, his eyes half closed. Tung Li had brought his own food and, presumably, had eaten while he waited for them.

Lulled by the steady roar of their flight, Benson at last noticed that Ying's head and shoulders had grown more distinct in front of him. He twisted around. The first chill fingers of dawn were stealing into the sky behind them.

Steadily, imperceptibly, the light grew and put out the stars. The plane tilted a little and began to climb. Benson stood up in the bitter cold slip stream. Same blanket of cloud far below. Not a plane in sight. He sat down again, yawning.

Ruth stirred, then moaned faintly. She

lurched to the side and was air-sick over the cowling. Benson leaned forward to jog the pilot. "Down, Tung Li! Keep her at ten thousand feet."

They nosed downward. He got out the thermos and gave Ruth some hot tea. She drank it under protest, her lips blue. When she leaned back, a trace of color in her cheeks, he divided the food into three shares and passed one to Ying. He had to insist that Ruth eat and drink hers.

Sunrise found them well to the south of Kinkiang. The clouds were dispersing. Benson caught a glimpse of the city and parts of the looping, silver Yangtze away to the north. He kept on looking north. Twice he saw the tiny, distant flash of sunlight on the wings of a wheeling plane. The Chinese plane flew level and passed unseen. Its wings were painted black, partly to make it invisible at night, partly to identify it to other Chinese planes—for it carried the Japanese wing symbols.

There was small risk of encountering Jap planes over this vast territory south of the river. The danger would grow as they neared Chungking, because of Japanese bombing raids. When Kinkiang lay far behind, Benson had the pilot descend to six thousand feet. It was equally safe, and the denser air helped Ruth fight off her air-sickness.

Warmed by the sun as it rose higher, the girl settled herself in her corner and fell asleep. Presently her bag slid out of her lap and spilled open. Benson gathered up her things and found them just about what he expected: a brush and comb, a toothbrush and soap, the little .22 she had lent him, her passport, a small Bible, two cheap handkerchiefs and nailfile, a box of talcum powder, but neither rouge nor lipstick.

At length he replaced her things and tucked the bag at her side without waking her. After a look around for Jap planes, he studied her sleeping face curiously. It was young but not adolescent; repressed, bitter and subtly pathetic—her youth flung away, he guessed, with uncomprehending sacrifice.

He searched the empty skies again, then leaned forward and requested Ying in Chinese to fasten his safety belt. Ying woke quietly, fastened his belt and dozed off to sleep.

THEY were flying over Yochow, not ten miles from the long, southerly bend of the Yangtze, when Benson saw the plane. It was flying southwest to their west, evidently scouting along south of the river.

Perhaps a mile away and several thousand feet higher, it was no more than a drifting speck in the sky. It might be Chinese. There was no way of telling at that distance. It was about abreast of them. Because their courses converged, he touched the pilot and showed him the other plane.

"Fly as you are," he directed. "They may not see us."

His order came too late. The pilot banked southwest and began to climb for altitude. Then, in belated understanding, he slanted west and continued to climb.

Benson swore under his breath. Their last bank might have given the other plane a flash of their wings. When he looked, the other plane had vanished. That meant it was coming for them on a long glide, the edges of its wings invisible.

"Get away if you can," he said hoarsely, "but check your gun. If he's faster than we are, give me a chance at him. Level off and get more speed." He shook Ying and the girl awake, pointed to the oncoming plane. "Keep down, and hang on."

Ying understood the situation if not the words. Benson turned to swing the after machine gun, getting used to the feel of it. The forward gun was fixed, synchronized with the old-fashioned, wooden propeller. In the hands of an expert pilot it could be deadly for attack, but it was no use at all for defense from a fleeing plane.

Ruth caught his arm. He shook her off; pushed her down as far as her safety belt allowed. The pilot was busy with his forward gun.

Benson crouched at the after gun, his tired eyes intently hard. After a moment he saw the plane as it leveled off, glimpsed the Jap symbols on its under wings. It was almost astern and a little above them, overtaking them slowly. He knew it for a light, fast bomber, mostly used for strafing troops or civilians. It was out of range, so he did not move the gun.

It tilted and began to draw abreast, higher and still out of range. There were two men in it, bombs visible against the under body. Benson guessed that the Japs were trying to speak to his pilot by radio, having seen their own symbols on the black wings. The Chinese plane had no radio set.

Presently the Jap plane banked away, wheeled on flashing wings and came for them. Warning tracer bullets streaked in front of the Chinese plane, leaving thin strings of smoke. Tung Li sheered off. Instead of flying level and giving Benson a chance to fight, he dove to escape. It was a natural but stupid move. The Japs dove in pursuit, dove more steeply to come up under his tail. The Chinese plane would be riddled—

"Level off!" roared Benson over his shoulder. Their only chance now was a point blank duel. No use maneuvering with a slow-thinking pilot against a faster plane. He believed they were done for anyway, but it was not in him to give up.

TUNG LI understood and nosed up swiftly. The rest happened in deadly split seconds. Bullets began to whip so close that he could hear them as well as see the tracers. They missed the sinking tail and went over Tung Li's head.

Benson had his gun fully depressed. He started firing as the Jap's nose lifted into his sights. He saw his own tracers streak just too high, then find the target. The Jap pilot yanked his stick back and zoomed to save his life, his observer firing at the sky. Benson's hammering machine gun raked along his under body.

A blinding white flash hid the Japanese plane. A direct hit or a ricochet had found

the contact detonator on one of the bombs. As the flash vanished, the pursuing plane seemed to leap apart in the air. Benson saw the limp bodies of the two Japs hurtle clear in falling arcs, the engine plunge downward trailing strips of the plane, the severed wings go swooping and flashing toward the earth in crazy zig-zags.

With the shriek of bomb fragments, a blast of air hit the tail of the Chinese plane, swerving it downward. The plane whipped up sideways like a leaf in a gale, then plunged nose down again as the blast struck its wings. The next instant it went into a shuddering spiral nose dive.

Hanging on grimly and staring straight down, Benson saw the unexploded bombs shoot up plumes of mud and water from the shore of Lake Tung-ting far below. That all the bombs had not exploded was no more of a miracle than hitting that half-inch wide detonator with a machine-gun bullet.

He was about to yell disgusted orders, when Tung Li cross-ruddered out of the dive and brought them on a flat keel again. Discovering the sun in his eyes, he wheeled around not too steadily, headed west and began to climb.

Ruth was white and speechless, apparently too frightened even to scream. Ying glanced back with a smile of calm approval, although his eyes were dilated. The pilot did not even turn his head, for which reserve Benson could hardly blame him.

There were no other planes in sight.

VIII

DURING the rest of their long, swift flight, Benson alternately dozed and watched for enemy planes. He saw none. Even when they neared Chungking, the skies were empty.

The pilot circled once over the field just outside the city, then made a smooth landing. Before the wheels had touched, Ruth spoke urgently to Benson, her small mouth twisted.

"Please have him wait," she said, nod-

ding toward the pilot. "Don't let him put the plane away yet."

"Why not?"

"Because my father isn't here at Chungking. He's near here, at Li-min. It's just across the river. I'm going to ask Chiang Kai-shek to have the plane take me there. He may be dying. You must! I've waited so long. And minutes may count."

Chinese mechanics had trotted out toward the slowing plane. A group of officers were advancing from general headquarters a hundred yards from the field. Although it was likely to be bombed, Chiang Kai-shek had moved his headquarters here in the faint hope of sparing the city.

Benson asked the pilot to wait, possibly for another short flight. Then he and Ying got out, and helped the girl out. Benson explained to the mechanics in Chinese and they drifted back to the hangars. The plane taxied around, waddled down the field, and bumped around again for a take-off into the wind.

The man who called himself Chang Tso led the reception committee of officers. He greeted Ying with ceremony, bowed to Ruth and gave Benson his hand with grave, approving warmth.

"You have succeeded, Captain," he bowed, "as I knew you would. The Leader awaits us." He glanced at Ruth.

Benson explained, "This maiden wishes to speak to the Leader at once. For her, it is most urgent."

Chang Tso nodded and led the way. Benson paused for a quick, low-voiced word with one of the Chinese pilot officers. This man agreed in surprise, and turned back to the field.

Chiang Kai-shek stood up behind his huge desk as they entered. Still vitally impressive, he looked worn and tired, but his attractive smile was firm, with no hint of defeat. He shook hands with himself in greeting to Ying, smiled at Benson, then bowed to Ruth, his impassive eyes lingering on her face.

She hurried up to his desk. "Mr. Chiang," she said in a strained voice, "I came to find my father, Ralph Stimmons.

I heard that he was dying at Li-min. Can I be flown there?"

Chiang eyed her with compassion. "Your father is dead, Miss Stimmons. He died at Li-min a month ago—of cholera."

Ruth made a strangled sound and dropped weakly. Her breathing caught, and she fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief.

Then her body stiffened and her hand came out—not with a handkerchief, but with her small revolver. She pointed the gun at Chiang Kai-shek. Before anyone could move, she had pulled the trigger again and again.

The vicious little clicks of the hammer were loud in the frozen silence. Then two officers sprang for the girl and her weapon. Benson intervened swiftly, waving them back.

Ruth flung away the gun with a desperate gesture. "I've failed! I've failed!" she moaned hysterically. She clenched her fists and her head went up. "Kill me! Don't you think I'm ready? Kill me now!"

Chiang looked at Benson gravely. "How did this happen?"

"Kidote, General. I wasn't sure. I wanted to be sure what his game was." Benson's hand came out of his pocket and opened. On his palm lay six .22 cartridges and one empty shell.

"I took these," he added, "while she slept."

The Chinese leader studied Ruth. "Why did you try to kill me?" he asked. "I did not kill your father."

THE girl shook her head, her lifted eyes fixed and unseeing. "It wasn't that," she said stonily. "I knew he was dead. It was you—Chiang Kai-shek." Her frozen voice rose a little. "You are anti-Christ! Atheist and murderer. Communist."

"You are leading the communists against the Japanese—costing your own country hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. The Japanese want only to help China, educate her, give her Christianity, and you fight them with your atheists. Beelzebub!"

Chiang Kai-shek eyed her with unmoved pity. "But it is the well-intentioned, religious Japanese who invade us, and bomb our women and children, Miss Stimmons. I am trying to defend my own people, you know. We have not bombed the Japanese cities. How does Colonel Kidote explain that?"

"You dare not," she recited promptly. "Heaven guards their work. They will free China of atheists. And I shall die a martyr to the cause. I am ready."

"War breeds this sort of madness," said Benson acidly. "It's no use shooting her, General. Kidote has filled her up with his specious propaganda until she's beyond all reason."

"Shoot her?" frowned Chiang Kai-shek. "We do not kill women and children, or child-women, Captain." His tired glance swept the officers, and he added in Chinese: "Let nothing be told of this, lest the maiden be injured by our men. She is free to go unpunished. It is my order that she be conducted under protective guard to the American mission at Li-min."

As though dismissing the girl, he turned to Ling. "You brought us the funds, Ying Loy Wan? They are sorely needed."

"Yes, General!" Ying strode forward and thrust a hand into his sleeve. The officers crowded around him to see what he had brought. For a moment Ruth was forgotten.

Ying stiffened. Then his hand came out, clutching a roll of oily rags instead of English bank notes.

"That damn pilot," Benson said slowly, "robbed you while you slept." He looked for Ruth suddenly. She had vanished.

He made for the door and raced down the hall, leaving the startled Chinese behind. As he sprang into the open he saw Ruth pelting for the flying field. She gained it long before he could overtake her. Though he shouted, he did not see her again until his long legs carried him swiftly between two of the hangars. She was running toward the black plane, had almost reached it. The idling engine roared, softened a little.

Benson's quick eyes found the pilot officer whom he had warned at the gate. This man was talking to a sentry at the edge of the field. Both had started walking toward the plane.

Not walking fast enough, though. They must have missed the significance of that girl, running, with Benson in pursuit.

"Stop him!" yelled Benson in Chinese, for they were nearer. They began running toward the plane, the officer drawing his revolver, but they were at least a hundred yards from it.

At least Benson might intercept it. He raced on.

Ruth reached the black plane and darted around the wing to gain the rear compartment. As she drew close the pilot raised a Luger automatic and shot her three times at point blank range. The heavy bullets checked her, then knocked her down. She twisted into a quivering ball, kicked aimlessly and relaxed.

The pilot officer and the sentry kept running. They were shouting now.

Benson was still a hundred feet away. The engine roared. The black plane came on to pass him, gathering speed. Benson drew his revolver, halted and took cool aim at the blurring wooden propeller. When it was almost abreast of him, he began firing. One—two bullets failed. At his third shot something whizzed skyward and the engine rose to a scream.

Benson swore with grim satisfaction and kept moving, his gun ready.

Automatically cutting his switch, the pilot flung himself into the after compartment and got his hands on the rear machine-gun. He had swung it awkwardly when the running sentry and Chinese officer opened fire on him.

They were excited but quite close. The goggled pilot jerked, flung up one arm in a queer, spasmodic gesture of farewell, and slid down out of sight. The slowing, unguided plane bumped around in a half circle and came to a stop, just missing Ruth's body.

And that was that. It had all happened much too quickly for thought.

Benson ran and leaned over the huddled girl. She had died instantly, shot through the head. He climbed to the after compartment, his revolver poised. The pilot was dead also. He flung the body out, jumped down and tore off the goggles. The man who had flown him from Shanghai was a Japanese, older than Tung Li, but the same wiry build.

So that was it. The substitute pilot explained many things that had been at the bottom of Benson's unease during that flight into the dawn.

By this time Chiang Kai-shek himself was approaching with his staff. He stared down at Ruth, looked up and spoke in a chill, formidable voice: "Who killed this maiden?"

Saluting, the pilot officer indicated the dead Jap.

"Why?" asked Chiang Tso, his onyx eyes on Benson.

"Because she would have talked," said Benson harshly. "Also, perhaps, because she must have seen Kidote's face. He was masked when he came for Ying Loy Wan. I knew something was rotten, but I could not guess all of it. Certainly not murdering this girl—his own deluded tool."

Swearing tonelessly, he knelt and straightened Ruth's skirt. Then he searched the dead Jap, found the big roll of English bills, handed them to Ying. The merchant presented them to Chiang Kai-shek with a low bow and a murmured salutation in Chinese. The General replied formally, gave the notes to Chang Tso and turned his commanding eyes on Benson.

"Tell us, Captain," he said in English. "Everything."

Benson described the night's work in terse detail.

"It's clearer now," he finished. "Kidote's plan. Wong Sin Meng's houseboy learned and betrayed our plans to the colonel. Kidote sent this Jap to meet our plane, murder Tung Li and take his place. The girl was put there to cut our bonds, so that we would take her with us."

How could she have escaped the Japs in that house otherwise?

"Kidote planned to keep Ying Loy Wan and the money. That was why he had us pursued. But they dared not fire because Kidote wanted Miss Stimmons and me to escape. When they failed to catch Ying, they still let us escape—for the more important business of assassination.

"Miss Stimmons was to be killed in any case, whether she failed or succeeded. So this Jap waited. She thought he was waiting to save her." Benson's voice grew hoarse. "Stealing the money from Ying must have been his own idea."

"Thank you, Captain," said Chiang Kai-shek. "You have done well. Come and talk with me, please, later. I shall leave the burial of Miss Stimmons to the mission at Li-min. Her death was accidental. She got into the path of war."

He turned away, followed by his officers. Chang Tso lingered, watching as Benson looked down at the dead girl.

"Of what are you thinking, my friend?" he asked.

"Of the Purring Cat, and his little, American cat's-paw," said Benson. "I haven't finished with Kidote. I'm going back there, to Shanghai, do you understand?"

"I understand, friend of China," said Chang Tso quietly. "But the girl is dead. I am thinking of one who helped you reach Shanghai last night, and who still lives—I hope."

Benson's head came up. "Tien Wang! You mean—?"

"That he must be warned. That Kidote knows—perhaps. That Tien Wang may need help. He is one of our best men."

"You think of everything," said Benson in a cold rage.

He thought of something else.

He knelt and gathered Ruth's limp body into his arms.

Who is this lovely creature?

Her dazzling beauty surpasses that of any earthly woman . . . Where is she from? . . . Another planet? . . . Then where was the projectile launched that brought her to Earth? . . . Of what unknown metal is it made? . . . How did her startling perfection of face and figure disrupt the life of a brilliant young scientist? Get all the answers in

THE SKY WOMAN

an unusual classic of fantasy by

Charles B. Stilson

It is only one of the strange, weird, amazingly "different" stories in the February issue of

Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

A Red Star *quality* magazine. . . . now at dealers

15c per copy



Loot Lies Deep



Hislop's breath hissed
as the gold spilled
out on deck

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

GET the setup as we sailed out of Miami on Grace Taver's yacht, the *Condor*. Captain Hoke Scanlon, a hard, cold customer who (I knew) had served time for second-degree murder: he claimed to have the key to four million in gold off the coast of Venezuela.

A crew of gorillas.

A passenger list that read like Winchell's column: Grace Taver, society racketeer, who was trying to replenish her fortune; Buck Bosworth, wealthy and perpetually drunk playboy; Arthur Hislop, a nightclub bouncer who had introduced Scanlon to Mrs. Taver; Vicky Seymour, ex-glamour girl with a possessive eye on Hislop; Linda Hay-

wood, beautiful debutante of the current season.

And me—Bat Mason, reporter—sent along by my boss to keep a log of the screwy trip. Screwy and—for some of us—fatal.

First casualty was Timmons, the radio operator, who went over the side one night leaving a trail of blood behind him. He was finally hauled out, and buried at sea; but never a clue as to who had done him in.

THEN there were two attacks on me, on successive nights: and in the darkness of my cabin I knew only that my assailant was a man—a mighty husky one. In the first struggle he left a knife which had obviously

This story began in the *Argosy* for December 30