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THRILLING WONDER STORIES

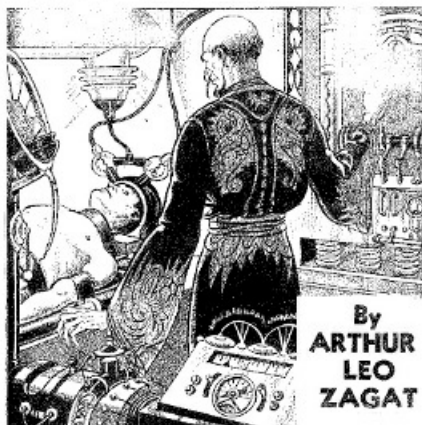


The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

FLIGHT OF THE SILVER EAGLE



A Complete
Novelette
of Future War



By
ARTHUR
LEO
ZAGAT

"Well, if you must have it—" His fingers closed on a lever that connected to Thomas' helmet.

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By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Author of "The Lanson Screen," "The Land Where Time Stood Still," etc.

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CHAPTER I

The Empty Stratocar

Against a sky glorious with flung streamers of scarlet and purple, New York's leaping towers and arching aerial streetways traced a prismatic arabesque epitomizing the wonder and the beauty of the Twenty-first Century. But Don Atkins, his lithe, compact body poised on big-thewed legs widespread and firmly planted, was as oblivious to that far-off glory as to the bustle of the Federal Skypport all about him.

Ultra-Modern Science of Days
to Come Is Unleashed When
Two Powers Clash!

He stood beneath the high loom of the landing trap, squinting into the west out of slitted eyes from whose corners weather wrinkles rayed threadlike, and he was conscious of only two things.

Under the yellow silk of his airman's tunic a small, hard lump was cold against his breast. It was the talisman of the Silver Eagle, the throbbing pulse in his temples reminded him, symbol of the gallant fellowship into whose fold he had been inducted at last. The secret that for months had lain prickling between him and his one close friend, Bart Thomas, was a secret no longer. Bart himself, darting from the distant Pacific, would be here in minutes now to receive from him the twisting handgrip of the order. In minutes—in seconds—*now*—

A siren howled across the field. A black speck notched the low sun's upper rim. "On time to the dot!" Atkins exclaimed. A white blur in the air was suddenly a silver, tear-drop shape caught in the high-reaching fingers of the landing trap's gaunt girders, a thousand feet above him. The gigantic beam surged down, pivoting on its huge hinge, perilously fast at first, then more and more slowly as its hydraulic shock-absorbers sapped the stratocar's incredible momentum.

Atkins dashed for the spot where the duraluminum-skinned, man-carrying projectile would ground to end Thomas' half-hour flight from 'Frisco Skypport.

A knot of brown-garbed mechanics clotted around the tiny car. Their wrenches clanged against the bolt-heads that had clamped tight the hatch cover against the airlessness of upper space. Twirling metal rasped against metal. The shining oval door swung back. With eager impatience Atkins shoved past the mechanics, thrust head and shoulders into the aperture.

"Happy landing, old sock," he shouted. "Welcome to—"

The greeting froze on his lips. The tiny cubicle was unoccupied; was starkly, staringly vacant. In the heatless light of the ceiling tube the televue screen mirrored the Skypport tarmac, glistened from the glossy leather of the cushion on which Thomas should have lain outstretched. But Thomas wasn't there—

Atkins' skin was a tight, prickling sheath for his body. The thing was grotesquely, weirdly impossible! Impossible for his chum to have got out of the stratocar unless someone had unbolted the hatch from outside. Impossible for it to have landed somewhere so that that might have been done. To have arrived on the dot of its schedule the stratocar must never have relented from the uttermost limit of its speed. Time lost in any halt could not have been made up.

Impossible for there to have been any halt; the device was propelled by the blast of an electrostatic catapult at its starting point and had no power of its own. Once stopped it could not have taken up its flight again. And it had come straight as an arrow to the landing-trap's hooks at which 'Frisco had aimed it.

A fleck of white on the cushion caught Atkins' eye. He reached in, snatched it up. It was a bit of paper, and on it—

"Mr. Atkins," a peremptory voice battered at his giddy brain, "Conceal that and bring it to me at once."

The airman thrust the scrap into his pocket, whirled. The groundmen were crowding in around him, their swarthy countenances curious, but it was evident that none of them had spoken. Then he recalled the tiny receiver clamped against the bone behind his ear, and he knew whence the summons had come.

"This device hasn't been perfected yet," the grey man in the hidden room had said, "but within the limits of the field I can speak to you through it secretly and at will." There had been a view-screen before him, too, whose cosmic-ray eye could scan anything within fifty miles.

"Close it up," Don Atkins snapped, "and say nothing to anybody." Then he was running across the long, level tarmac, was dashing up the broad steps of Flight Headquarters Building, was hurrying through the interminable maze of corridors within.

The chaos within his skull took on a pattern as the amazing revelations of his initiation came back to him. The nation dreamed itself at peace with all the world. The Asafrican Alliance, Americans fatuously thought, having driven out the white races from the continents they had so long dominated, wanted nothing but to be left alone.

They reckoned without the driving ambition of Hung-Chen, the new Genghis Khan, who had forged an irresistible war machine behind the inscrutable mask of the East and awaited the auspicious moment to launch it against the Occident and the Americas. If he could not be stopped, war, rapine, slaughter, must inevitably destroy the Golden Age to which civilization had at last attained.

But here was the wall-panel, in a guarded corridor, whose curious quality he had been taught less than an hour before. Atkins halted, glanced cautiously left and right. He was unobserved. He bent to get his lips close against a certain whorl in the blue tracings with which the marble was figured, whispered a password. A whirring sound, seeming to come from the very stone itself, told him that the impact of his voice had set in motion the sound-lock within. The apparently solid marble slid open and the airman went through.

The wall thudded shut behind him. In the windowless room he entered a short, grave-faced man, mouse-like in grey silk, looked up from his desk.

"Let me see what you found," he said without preamble.

Atkins fumbled in his pocket with shaking fingers, pushed the paper across the desk to the chief of the Silver Eagle. The red lines on it leered at him again, the ominous design that had pronged him with knowledge of the catastrophe that had overtaken Thomas. A deftly drawn dragon was coiled around the orb of Earth, one taloned claw sprawling triumphantly to obliterate the double triangles of the Americas.

The chief's grey face was almost expressionless as he touched the thing with a fingertip, but under his pale, inscrutable eyes little muscles twitched uncontrollably.

"The token of Hung-Chen," he said. "Like him to let us know that he's defeated our last device against his spies."

"What does it mean?" Atkins groaned, mental agony making him forget rank for the moment. "What does it mean?"

The other's tones were very calm—only the vaguest flattery betrayed the despair that must be closing in on him like a pall.

"It means that the key to the gaps in the West Coast electro-barrage is in his hands, the only thing he needed to enable him to strike. Thomas was bringing the plan to Army Headquarters, and he's got Thomas."

"But—but you said that the Silver Eagle memorizes all its messages. You said that Hung-Chen's spies had tapped every means of secret communication we've had and that's why the Silver Eagle was organized—"

"Correct. We thought that a band of glorified couriers, shot across the continent at a speed greater than any yet known, would circumvent him. But we've failed. This lets us know that we have failed. They will get it out of Thomas—"

"No!" Atkins' fist pounded down on the desk. "Bart will never tell. He'll die before he tells."

"He won't die until they know. They'll strip his brain—" The chief broke off. "But that may take time. If we can find him before—" He ripped a long tape from a machine on his desk. A straight purple line traced on it wavered at a single point. "Look here. This deflection in the flight-graph shows that an extra amount of power was being absorbed between three minutes, twelve seconds out of Frisco and seven minutes, forty-six seconds after the start. I noticed it and thought that the projectile had swerved slightly from its course, was taking additional energy to straighten it out. But it occurs to me—"

"What, sir?" Atkins demanded, excitedly. "What?"

"That something may have come into the field, there between three hundred and twenty and seven hundred and seventy miles from the Pacific, on the great circle course. We might look that region over."

"I'm going, sir!"

Grey eyes stabbed keenly at the trembling airman.

"You're new, Atkins. I don't know—"

"Bart Thomas is my friend, Chief. More than a brother—"

"Very well," the grey man made his decision. "You may go. And God help you if you are caught. Listen—"

CHAPTER II

The Kappa-Ray

A green light from Traffic Control flashed the "all clear" signal and Atkins thrust his throttle home. His gyrocopter leaped straight up from the fields, shot up through the night past the successive glows of the level markers. The red of the lumbering freighter-lane, the yellow of the local-flight zone, the cerulean blue of the five-thousand-foot level in which the great transoceanic liners plied cometlike; they surged past in his view-screen, dropped below.

Sunburst came to him from over the bulge of the rounding terrain as his 'copter staggered logily. Its roaring vanes could no longer find any support in the near vacuum of the stratosphere. Atkins twisted the controls.

The lifting-vanes collapsed into their slotted grooves. The flyer was a sleek silver fish from whose tail the crimson flame of rocket gases fanned out. It darted westward, silent and swift as a bat out of hell.

Atkins throttled down, reluctant but obedient to the chief's instructions. He must not overtake the sun; darkness would be his best aid. Two red spots burned bright on his cheeks and secret fires flickered in his glowing eyes.

"I'm coming, old man," he muttered between his teeth. "I'm coming, Bart. Stick to it. Don't give in. Don't tell them—"

Endlessly blurred Earth streaked underneath him, endlessly the red position dot drifted with nerve-shredding slowness across the map framed at the flyer's elbow. He shut off the feed, unfolded once more the gyrovanes. He drifted down through the darkness, silent as a cloud in a foggy night and as invisible. A rugged mountainside, forest-cloaked, swam up into dim view.

Atkins checked the descent, hovered. A twist of his wrist, and the beam of his kappa-ray projector was searching the serried carpet of the trees. To the unaided eye that beam was utterly imperceptible, but on the specially treated screen at which the airman peered avidly a flickering disc cut through imaged foliage, through dark underbrush. To the kappa-ray all organic matter is transparent; only earth, stone, or metal can reflect it and become visible.

Minutes dragged. Bare ground, only bare ground, netted by branching streamlets. Then—what was that?

Atkins held the ray steady, quivering with bowstring tenseness. An irregular cube of stone showed mistily. A house! A human habitation in the wilderness! His heart bumped crazily against his ribs. But—wait a minute—it might be a Ranger station, a depot of the men who patrolled this primeval forest that was preserved as a national park. Beyond the house a metal *something*, huge, curiously formed, bulked vaguely.

Atkins' pulse leaped. He had found that which he sought. Thomas' captors thought themselves well hidden beneath the leafy screen. Evidently the kappa-ray was one secret that had been successfully kept from them.

Lower still Don Atkins dropped, until he was a bare hundred feet above the treetops. Too bad his search beam could not reveal human forms. He dared not send the map coördinates of this place by radio. He would be overheard, the gang would be warned and escape. But at full power it would take him seven minutes to reach 'Frisco Skyport. Then a hundred pursuit rockets would leap into the air. In minutes the mountain could be surrounded by well-armed men. He reached for the throttle.

The sea of foliage, almost black in the long evening shadows, glowed suddenly into green flame. Just above the strange building an orange pin-point leaped into existence. An inverted cone of radiance soared lightning-swift from that focal point. Instantly the 'copter was bathed in the flare. Intolerable heat struck at Atkins. The steel walls about him flamed cherry-red. He was frying in the torrid blast.

Already his senses were leaving him—with despairing instinct he thrust at the release lever of the emergency hatch beneath his seat—no time to snatch at the parachute cone. He was falling, falling—

Atkins lifted slowly back to consciousness. His body was seared with pain. An iron band constricted his chest and his

blood was salty warm on his lips. A black silence enveloped him, broken by vague rustlings and the sound of trickling water. His dazed eyes adjusted themselves to the dimness, and he saw twisted tree branches, moonlight sifting through leaves all about him. He was lying across a sturdy, gnarled bough. Above him he could make out broken branches, a funneled path torn through thick interlacing foliage.

Slowly it dawned on him what occurred. Plunging down, he had struck the lofty crown of some forest giant. The smaller branches, the massed verdure at the top of the tree, had absorbed the force of his fall. This larger branch had caught and held him, had kept him from crashing through to the ground.

He had failed miserably. The realization wrenched a groan from him. Suddenly he tensed, clinging tightly to his bough, listening acutely. A voice sounded. Heavy bodies threshed through the underbrush. A yellow glow flickered among the trees below, and was gone. It came again, held steady as it grew brighter. Two bulking shadows appeared, forcing through the thick growth. The dim back-throw of a lantern beat against the dull green of a Ranger's uniform, familiar to Atkins from hunting and fishing expeditions in these very woods.

This was luck! Their post could not be far off, with its radio-phone. He'd chance a coded message to the chief. His throat tightened to a cautious call—

The lantern-bearer stumbled, ripped out an oath. It was not in English! His light found his face. High cheekbones, thick lips, narrow, slanted eyes. They were Orientals! They were searching for something!

Of course—it was he for whom they were looking—his body. They wanted to make sure of his death, make sure that his crumpled form, lying perhaps near a trail, would not betray their hiding place.

The lantern glow flashed dartingly along the ground, into the treetops. Atkins tried to make himself a part of the limb. Rough bark rasped a deep wound in his palm. He flinched uncontrollably, lost his grip. He was slipping, was falling ... A desperate tightening of his gripping knees, a flexing of his aching arm muscles, stopped the disastrous fall. But the leaves still rustled with his movements.

A sharp challenge ripped the forest silence. A tube in the yellow hand of one of the searchers spurted blue flame. It shot through the leaves and its heat, the acrid smoke of seared greenery, stung Atkins' nostrils. A second bolt came still nearer. Even if they missed him the light of those ray-tube flashes must reveal him to the hunters.

"Cut it out, Mingai," the other Asiatic's voice rasped in English. "It's nothing but a wildcat, or some other animal."

"I do not think so. I do not like that we have not found the body of the flyer."

"Forget it. He was burned up in the ray."

"The orange ray does not slay. It merely accelerates the electronic vibration of metallic atoms until the melting point is reached. But I forget, you would not understand. You are as stupid about scientific matters as the Americans among whom you have been raised. You even speak their barbarous tongue better than the language of your ancestors."

"You give me a pain. Come on, let's get back. We'll tell Fu-Kong to do his own dirty work."

"Very brave, you are, when he cannot hear you," Mingai sneered. "But in his presence you cringe and are meek like the rest of us. No, friend Li-San, we do not return as yet."

"All right, if you're going to be that way. Let's look further."

"Not till I discover what there is in this tree." Hope died in Atkins' brain.

"Going to keep on raying till we're spotted by some snooping Ranger?"

"No, there is a better way." Mingai turned back to the tree. His cylinder again jetted its blue flame. It was continuous now—was boring across the trunk. Back and forth the steady yellow hand drew the disintegrating beam. The great bole quivered, started to sway. Atkins got his feet beneath him on the perch, leaped down.

His aim was true. His heavy boots struck square on Mingai's shoulder. He felt bone crack beneath the impact of his weight. Even as the man dropped the American jumped sideward, catlike, his lithe form twisting in mid-air so that he faced the other Oriental. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a startled countenance—then the saffron face was obliterated by the crashing thud of his fist. He whirled away, hurtled into the shadowed brush.

Thorned tendrils caught and tore at Atkins. A root tripped him, and he crashed headlong into a tree trunk. He thudded to the ground—lay there—his tortured lungs laboring—his outstretched hands plucking at the earthy loam.

From behind, Atkins heard a thin whistle, shrill almost above the range of human hearing. From far to his right another, responding. Evidently the men from whom he had escaped were signalling for aid. He struggled erect. He was unarmed, alone, bruised and battered, terribly fatigued. But he knew now that he could escape by working down the hill, to his left. In the other direction were desperate men, weapons at their ruthless command that could whiff him into eternity at will. He turned to the right.

CHAPTER III

The Pursuit Squadron

Don Atkins crouched in the shelter of a bush. Before him the stone structure he had seen from the air loomed blackly. Over the clearing a rope network carried a camouflage of tree branches that his kappa-ray had pierced. He could hear a murmur of voices, but the sounds came from beyond or within the squat building.

On the side toward him there was silence, and nothing moved. The darkness of the wall he faced was relieved by a horizontal line, a thread of light, almost imperceptible. The American's eyes clung to it. Then he was crawling across the bare ground that lay between. Twenty feet of shelterless surface, flecked with the revealing light of the moon. Could he make it, unobserved?

Inch by crawling inch, every muscle, every nerve, taut with expectation of a sudden hail, of a blue flash that would sear him into nothingness, Atkins slid toward the beckoning line of light. After an eternity, he was in the solid shadow of the wall. He raised himself cautiously and found the place where the light shone through. It was the lower edge of a steel-shuttered window, just at the level of his eyes.

He could not see much of the room within, the aperture was a mere slit. But what he saw was enough! Just within range of his vision was a table-top, black, and glistening like glass. Fastened to its surface, leather straps cutting deep into the flesh of his arms and legs, was Thomas! His friend's stocky body was stark naked. In a cold lurid light that beat down, Atkins could see his knotted muscles writhe snakelike, the sweat of agony gleaming on his skin.

Thomas' face was deathly white, his clenched teeth were revealed by lips that curved away, his eyes were closed and his cheek muscles were quivering. His forehead, his hair, were covered by a metal helmet, from which wires curled away out of sight.

A low, mechanical hum rose steadily in pitch. Bart Thomas' form arched slowly up from the table, straining against its creaking bonds. Suddenly the hum stopped, and the twisted body slumped flaccidly, inertly, down. A yellow hand, slim, its long fingers ending in pointed nails, came into view, holding a small sponge to Thomas' nostrils. The prisoner quivered, his eyes opened, and Atkins' fists clenched as he read the despair that stared from them.

He heard a voice, suavely cruel.

"It is very painful, this searching of your brain. If you chose to talk you would save yourself much anguish."

Atkins' scalp was a tight cap for his skull as the bound man's eyelids dropped, and lifted again. Even speech seemed too great an effort for him, but his lips moved. A hand was clamped over Atkins' mouth, a powerful arm wound around him from behind, pinning his own arms to his sides. He was lifted from the ground. He drove a desperate heel backward into a hard shin. Something crashed against the back of his head and he hung, dazed and barely conscious, in huge arms that carried his hundred and fifty pounds as though he were a child.

The room whirled dizzily about Don Atkins. He saw men, a television screen, a black tube that rose through the ceiling from some unknown device. He was carried through another door and a saffron-hued face, lengthened by a wisp of grey beard and drooping mustachios under a hawk nose, drifted hazily before him. Only the eyes were clear; black eyes, piercing behind their slanted lids.

Atkins was set down in a chair. Hands fumbled at him, passed a rope around him, binding him to his seat. He scarcely noted it, spellbound by those glittering eyes. His fogged brain cleared a bit and he saw a tall Oriental, imperturbable. There were banked tubes glowing behind him, and bright copper coils. To one side, a table, its black top glistening like glass. Thomas, strapped down, was looking at him with eyes in which incredulity and horror flared.

The tall Oriental spoke.

"Who is this, Na-Garri?"

From behind Don a huge black came in view. Dressed, like the others of the gang, in the olive-green of the Rangers, he was still redolent of the jungle. His skin was a deep, dull black that swallowed light. His bullet head sat queerly on wide shoulders from which arms thick as saplings hung loosely almost to his knees. His voice was a throaty rumble.

"I don't know, Lord Fu-Kong. But the electric-eye alarm he flash, and I find this one peeking in. So I bring him to you. Maybe he the one who we bring down from the plane, the one who jump on Mingai and Li-San."

The other nodded.

"Probably. He seems very persistent." To Atkins: "You display a great deal of interest in our proceedings. I hope you are satisfied with your present opportunity to observe them."

He reached out a clawlike hand and ripped away the front of the airman's shirt. He snatched at the token hanging there. The fine gold chain snapped, and he had it in his hand. A faint smile crossed the jaundiced mask of his face and he held the tiny bird out to the black. Not a half inch long it was, but exquisitely wrought. An eagle, poised as if in flight, it seemed almost alive.

"See, Na-Garri, this is another of the brood. They wear talismen about their necks, like your own tribesmen, to bring them good luck. But I fear the Dragon of Hung-Chen is too strong for their puny godlet." He turned back to the American. "I shall deal with you in a moment, when I have finished with your comrade. Watch closely, American, and I wish you joy of what you see."

Now he was talking to Thomas, and his voice was a crawling threat.

"Have you decided to answer my questions?"

"No!" Thomas' voice was a tortured whisper, but his lips closed tight and firm. Fear and despair drew haggard lines across his face.

Fu-Kong shrugged, stepped to the wall where a tall slate panel glittered with switch-points, gages, gleaming ebony wheels.

"Still stubborn. You will not believe me, then, that this searcher will delve deeper and deeper into the core of your brain till it wrenches the uttermost secrets of your ego from you. Yet it was an American who first proved that thought is an electric process, who first measured the tiny currents that flow along the nerves. Well, if you must have it—" His fingers closed on a lever just above binding posts to which the wires trailing from the helmet on Thomas' head trailed. "Now—"

"Fu-Kong. Fu-Kong," a shrill cry from the outer room stopped him. "Another plane has appeared above." Atkins forced his head around. Mingai was in the doorway, his shoulder bandaged, his right arm in a sling.

"Well, why burst in on me like this?" Fu-Kong was imperturbable. "Send someone to dispose of the remains."

The other's face was a sickly green. "But it got away," he gasped.

"It got away?" The phrase was like the purr of an enraged cat.

"Yes. My broken arm—I had to use my left—I missed with the orange ray, and before I could aim again he was out of range." Mingai's voice trailed away in an apologetic murmur.

"You—" the other began, fury breaking through the stony mask of his face. But again there was an interruption. A sallow Hindu appeared.

"Master, the plane that escaped is signalling to 'Frisco Skyport, and their rocket squadron is taking off."

The chief had not failed them! He had sent a following plane that by great good luck had escaped the Asiatics' lethal ray. Atkins calculated hastily. In ten minutes now this nest would be surrounded, the spies captured, Thomas freed and his secret safe.

But Fu-Kong was snapping peremptory orders. Mingai and the Hindu had disappeared, Na-Garri was unstrapping Thomas, was carrying him out. The Oriental leader himself, ray-tube in hand, was unfastening the rope that bound Atkins.

"Get up and precede me." The spy gestured with his weapon. The American obeyed, staggering on limbs that were needling with returning blood. He was through the outer room, his captor close behind him; was in the open. Straight ahead loomed a monstrous metal shape. Egg-shaped it was, save for one end that was sliced off sharply, and there was an opening, man-high, in its side. Na-Garri was just vanishing within, with his burden. Atkins followed. Fu-Kong clanged shut the slide behind him.

A steel ladder mounted through a dim green light, curving over an inner shell. Atkins' head came through a trapdoor above, and he was in a low, long chamber. Then he was once more tightly bound. A rough shove from the black sent him sliding across the floor to thud against Thomas' trussed and naked form.

Li-San was just closing the trapdoor. Mingai, fear in his eyes, was thrusting up on a valve-handle that projected from a large vertical pipe in the wall. At the far end, before a large view-screen, the Hindu was seated, black discs of phone receivers clamped to his ears. Beside him Fu-Kong bent over a serried row of gages and levers atop a metal console. A large view-screen before him showed the forest-bordered clearing and the stone building that had been vacated in such haste.

Fu-Kong pushed at a lever, and the view-screen was a flare of flame. It cleared. Where the house had been was a gaping hole in the ground. The Oriental's hand moved again. The screen was a down-rushing blur. It cleared once more. Velvet-black, star-strewn, the night sky was about them, and the far-below forest was a dark, mysterious sea.

"Don, old man," the whispering voice in his ear was Thomas', "how on earth did you ever get into this mess?"

"I came to find you," Atkins said grimly. "And I did. How are you?"

"Pretty rocky. But I'll keep until Fu-Kong gets a chance to work on me again."

"I can't understand how he ever got hold of you. Your carrier came in right to the dot. What happened?"

"I was zipping along, watching the U. S. shoot past in the screen, when suddenly something flashed over me and dropped down in front."

"Shot over you! I thought the rocket-stratocars were the fastest things ever produced."

"So did I, until I saw this craft. I'll bet it can make three hundred miles a minute. It passed me as if I were standing still. At any rate, there it was, right ahead of me, and slowing. The blunt end was toward me, and I thought sure I was going to crash into it. No way to swerve those carriers, you know. But just as I reached it, a hole opened and I sailed right inside."

"Good Lord! Then it's a—"

"A sort of flying trap. Damned ingenious, eh? I can figure out the rest of it now. You say the stratocar reached New York on time? That means they closed the stern and speeded up again till they were making just the rate I was. Afterward they went faster once more, got clear of my boat and dropped away. They had just picked me out of it on the fly.

"All I knew at the time was that my hatch opened, and the big black was pointing a ray-gun at me. He told me to get out, and I got. We were in an air-lock, and there was a rope ladder hanging down. I climbed it and found myself in this room. Fu-Kong was here, and the Hindu. Then in a little while we were down in the clearing, where the others were waiting. After that my troubles really began—Look at the screen!" he said sharply.

Atkins twisted himself back to his original position. In the distance a score of scarlet lights made a dancing crescent on the view-screen. They rose and fell, but came on steadily. He thrilled at the sight. These were the army flyers from 'Frisco Skyport. No mistaking that formation.

Those far-spreading wings would sweep around as the center checked, and the Asafrican craft would be caught in an enfiling fire. Fu-Kong and his gang were doomed! Peculiar how calmly they were taking it. Eastern fatalism, he supposed.

Eastern fatalism, hell! Memory fanged him! Thomas had just told of the incredible speed at Fu-Kong's command. The spy master was not trapped, far from it. He could get away at will. Why was he hanging here motionless, watching those oncoming flyers, a sardonic smile tingeing his yellow face?

Nearer and nearer the lights came. The dim shapes of the army rocket-planes showed, phantomlike. The central ship dipped, minutely, and the long line began to expand. The motley crew of the spy ship clustered behind their leader in the bow.

"Near enough." Fu-Kong's voice rang like a sentence of doom. A long pencil of orange light shot out from his vessel, wavered, impinged on the nearest plane. The flyer flared red, then dazzling white, at the tip of the beam. Then—there was nothing there. The death ray moved on to the next in line.

All along that far-flung line a coruscation of green swept, as the indomitable fighters shot out their futile answer. Lethal enough, those rays, but their range was far short. Another plane was caught in the orange beam and vanished! Another! But the squadron came on, their mile-long fire-tails lashing them through the night.

If one, only one, could get near enough to spear the Asafrican craft with its beam! Taking that one desperate chance the birdmen rushed into the face of destruction, never faltering, never wavering, as ship by ship the orange scythe reaped its deadly harvest. Only ten ships were left of the score that had first appeared, only nine—and still the green rays were miles short of their mark.

Minutes passed that were long as eternity. Eight of the intrepid attackers remained, then seven. But now the stabbing darts of emerald death were almost reaching their mark. A little more—only a little more. Suddenly the floor vibrated and Atkins heard the muted thunder of the craft's rocket blasts. The spy ship was moving at last.

Fu-Kong would escape—that was unavoidable. The terrific speed of his strange vessel could never be matched by the combination plane-and-rocket-craft of the Americans. But at least the pitiful handful remaining would escape the holocaust. Seeing the futility of their courageous attempt they would return to their base, perhaps effectuate plans for a countrywide encircling movement that might in the long run bring the yellow ship down. No—Atkins' mouth twisted in a soundless oath—the Oriental had no intention of permitting that.

The distance between the spy-craft and the nearest attacker did not increase. The Asiatic was keeping just beyond the range of the green rays—was taking toll on the American aviators with false hope while the merciless orange beam flared out, mowing the velvet night with destruction.

CHAPTER IV

The Dragon of Hung-Chen

Out of the twenty flyers who had soared to the attack a bare six still charged on. They were insane! They couldn't win—
But couldn't they? Atkins stifled a gasp, was taut with sudden hope. Five of the squadron's remnant had startlingly changed their tactics. They were zigzagging, were darting left and right, up and down, in what seemed a last panicky attempt to evade the Asiatic's ray.

Senseless, it seemed—but there was one ship that had left the group. Its green ray was doused, only the pin-point red of its tail-flame betrayed its course to Atkins. He flung out his soul in a wordless prayer that neither Fu-Kong nor his aides would notice that stealthy climb.

Steadily the squadron leader mounted till the scarlet dot that marked him out was touching the upper margin of the view-screen. Ten thousand feet below, his comrades flitted about in their macabre dance, cheating the orange death again and again by breathless inches. The attention of the enemy crew was concentrated on those darting shapes, on their darting, ineffective rays.

Atkins' eyes flicked back to the lone flyer. He saw the sudden crimson burst, saw the downward curve of its flaring wake as a terrific swoop began, saw the green ray dart out ahead, spearhead of the diving hawk. Down and down and down, adding the pull of Earth to his own driving blasts, the avenger plunged in one last, magnificent effort to catch the destroyer unaware; zipping faster and faster until even in that tenuous air the steel plane-body glowed dull red with the friction of its unleashed speed.

A minute's grace—sixty unobserved seconds of that lightning slant—and it would snip the yellow menace from the skies.

"Look—Fu-Kong—look!" It was Mingai who yelped the alarm. The orange ray swept up. *Jammed*. By luck—by the luck with which the gods award the greatly daring—the down-darting American had found the one vulnerable angle of the spy ship. Green flame licked out hungrily, but Fu-Kong's hand was light-quick in its flash to the throttle lever. His ship lurched—jerked aside in the last possible moment of safety.

The American was under, now, right under the spy-craft. But the dragon ship was driving ahead. In an eye-blink Fu-Kong would be able to bring his death ray to bear on the daring flyer! Don Atkins flung heavily across the floor by the sudden jerk, saw, not quite three feet above him, a gleaming copper handle—the valve at which Mingai had twisted just before the take-off.

Legs lashed, arms bound, sweat pouring from his lined brow, eyes bulging from their sockets, by sheer power of stomach and trunk muscles alone he swung his torso from the floor. His head came level with that handle. His teeth clamped around it. Corded sinews stood out on his neck as he drove the valve lever down. Suddenly he was snatched loose by a lurch of the craft, and his preposterously twisted body crashed down.

But that very lurch told him of success! It *was* the main fuel-valve! He had cut off the rocket-tube's supply! In an instant, now, the vessel would be caught in the ray-beam of the pilot below. Atkins tensed to meet the green flash that would mean oblivion for Fu-Kong and his myrmidons—and for Bart Thomas and himself.

It never came! A shrill, high-pitched oath, footsteps running toward him, pulled open his eyes. Fu-Kong was bending over him, face livid with wrath, ray-gun rising for the *coup de grâce*. Behind him Li-San came up, a strange glow between his slant lids. Atkins' eyes flicked past the couple. In this final moment of life he must know what had happened, why his intended sacrifice had failed.

A blue electric veil, shimmering and sparking in a cerulean network of tiny lightnings, curved all across the view-screen. Beyond it the misty shapes of the attacking aircraft spat their green beams. The emerald death rays spattered harmlessly on the ionic curtain, and were quenched. From within, the orange ray thrust futilely against the hollow, defensive sphere

of force.

This Atkins saw in a single, flashing glance. Then he was staring up at the enraged Oriental, was waiting in a timeless void for the blue spurt that would sear thought and consciousness and life itself from his despairing brain.

"Wait, Master!" Li-San snatched at Fu-Kong's hand, swerved it aside from its aim. "Wait! That way is too easy for the pale-skinned dog. Let me and Mingai take care of him. We have a debt to pay for what he did to us in the wood!"

In the other's slitted eyes a glint of satisfaction showed.

"I had my doubts of you, Li-San. Twice you have shown deplorable softness in your tasks. This I like much better. You may have your wish. But take him below—I have much to do and do not wish to be disturbed."

Atkins' skin crawled. Death he could face calmly—but that which the fanatic gleam in Li-San's saffron mask promised made him a coward.

"Fu-Kong," he croaked, barely able to force the words through his constricted throat. "Don't give me to him! Kill me yourself. That would be clean and honest." But the Oriental was walking away.

They took him down through the trapdoor, carried him down, flung him heavily on the plates in the narrow space between the entrance hatch and the curving inner shell.

"Untie him, Mingai." There was an undercurrent of eager excitement in Li-San's tones. Even in the face of what was to come, Atkins wondered at the gratuitous cruelty of the Oriental mind. Mingai stooped to him, fumbled at his lashings. As they fell away, the American leaped up to make a fight of it. Hopeless, of course, Li-San had his ray-gun poised for action. Better to go out that way than to suffer the planned revenge of the sadistic duo. Now—

"Hands up, Mingai! Quick!" The virulent threat in Li-San's voice made the low command seem a crashing shout. Mingai straightened. His arms flew above a saffron face from which amazement and horror had stripped its habitual mask. Li-San was braced on spread feet, his ray-gun thrust before him. His countenance was alight with a strange flame, and his eyes snapped menace. "One whimper from you and I flash!"

There was an instant of stunned silence. Then Li-San spoke again.

"Here, you American! Grab those ropes. Tie him up and gag him. Quick, man!"

Dazed by the sudden turn, Atkins obeyed. What lay behind this sudden act on the Asiatic's part? Had he suffered a sudden change of heart—He recalled, in the wood, Li-San trying to argue Mingai out of his determination to search the tree in which he was hiding. He recalled Li-San's intervention with Fu-Kong a moment ago that had certainly saved his life—

His task was finished—Mingai tightly bound, and a strip from his own tunic jammed none too gently into his mouth. Before Atkins could voice his questions there was a sudden dull roar which shook the vessel.

"He's getting under way again," Li-San barked. "We've no time to lose." He plucked Mingai's ray-gun from his belt, thrust it into the American's hand. "Come on!" He was flitting silently up the ladder, Atkins, perforce, after him.

They were just beneath the rivet-studded trap. Li-San lifted the lid, slowly, till a narrow crack of brighter light showed along its edge. Atkins managed to crush in alongside of him on the narrow step, and together they peered through the slit.

The blue defensive sphere was gone and the attacking ships had vanished. But something else showed in the sky; a long, slim, torpedolike object that sped straight for the spy ship. From its nose a white light flickered in a rapid series of dots and dashes. Atkins felt an electric quiver of tenseness run through the yellow man against whose body his own was crushed.

A strange pattern formed itself in the American's mind as he crouched there, waiting for he knew not what. That oncoming shape had the very form of the rocket-stratocars used by the Silver Eagle. Yet this was no messenger, waylaid

as Thomas had been. He had signalled to Fu-Kong. Why had the spy-craft waited here, chancing the fight with the American planes, when it might have been away and gone with only the slightest effort? What was it that glowed from Li-San's eyes, that shook him with an ague of eagerness?

Nearer came the speeding rocket, and nearer still, until it passed out of sight at the lower edge of the view-screen. The larger craft lurched, and lurched again. Fu-Kong thrust at his levers, there was a hiss of rushing air. Then a buzzer shrilled.

"He's picking up the stratocar," Li-San whispered. "Get ready."

"All right, Na-Garri," Fu-Kong called. "The air in the entrance lock is at normal pressure. Open up."

The black bent to a ring in the center of the floor, and pulled on it. A round manhole lid came away. A head appeared, and a squat, broad body followed it.

Straight black hair, tiny black eyes almost hidden by high cheekbones, broad flat nose over thick, red lips—this was a Tatar face, a throwback to the Mongol hordes that in the Thirteenth Century ruled half the then-known world by force of arms. From that stocky figure emanated an aura of power, of dominance. Unbounded ambition, lust for power, savage cruelty, were stamped on the round, flaccid countenance.

Li-San clutched Atkins' arm, his fingers sinking into the flesh.

"It's Hung-Chen! Come himself to receive Fu-Kong's reports. Tomorrow the attack." Atkins understood why the spymaster had been unable to flee. He had had to wait here for his chief—no way to change the course of the stratocar once it had started.

The huge black bowed low. The Hindu joined him in humble obeisance. The haughty Fu-Kong came away from his controls, abject servility in every line of his tall body. The Mongol spoke sharply, and there was a rapid exchange in a shrill, high-piping tongue.

"Now!" The snapped word from Li-San galvanized Atkins into action. He thrust upon the hatch, leaped. *Clang!* The yellow men swung to the sound of the falling trapdoor, saw two apparitions spring into view, ray-guns at the ready.

"Throw up your hands! Up with them!" Atkins' shout drove through the chamber. "Up, or we wipe you out!" Li-San's eyes were blazing pits of wrath. Na-Garri's simian arms went ceilingward, the Hindu's, Hung-Chen's. Fu-Kong ripped out a virulent, "Traitor!" at Li-San and snatched at the cylinder in his belt.

"S-s-s-s-s!" Blue lightning hissed from Atkins' weapon. A blackened corpse crumpled slowly to the floor. "Any more?" His voice was thick with fury. But the remaining three stood statuelike. "We surrender," came the voice of the captured overlord. "Don't flash."

Their captives tightly bound, the two—Don Atkins, the American, and Li-San, the Chinese, turned to one another. Atkins' hand went out to the other, then hesitated—drew back. Li-San straightened.

"No," he answered the question in the American's eyes, "I am not a traitor to my own people. Here," his hand tapped his own breast, "there are two loyalties—one to the race among whom I was born, among whom I have lived my life and have my friends, the other to the race of my ancestors. War between them was unthinkable to me." He glanced down at Hung-Chen, bound and glowering, looked up again, a wistful smile hovering on his saffron face. "Now there will be no war. I'm sorry I couldn't save the squadron of planes. I had to wait until *he* arrived, you see. And it was too dangerous before to attempt to capture the ship."

"You joined their rotten gang, risked death and worse, to defeat their plans—to save your own people, and mine, from the horrors of war!" Atkins exclaimed. "By God, Li-San, you are a man!"

Yellow hand and white met and clasped.

"Hey, you fellows," came Bart Thomas' weak voice from the floor. "When you get time you might take three or four of

these ropes off me and get me something to wear. You'll get all the handshaking you want when we get back to New York."

[The end of *Flight of the Silver Eagle* by Arthur Leo Zagat]