

# THE SCARLET SQUADRON



**GEORGE E. ROCHESTER**

*Illustration*

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*Frontispiece.*

TAKING A FIRM GRIP OF MY REVOLVER, I LEANT FORWARD AND JABBED HIM BETWEEN  
THE SHOULDER BLADES WITH THE MUZZLE

# THE SCARLET SQUADRON

BY  
GEORGE E. ROCHESTER

AUTHOR OF  
"THE FLYING BEETLE,"  
"SCOTTY OF THE SECRET SQUADRON," ETC.

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

“Taking a firm grip of my revolver, I leant forward and jabbed him between the shoulder blades with the muzzle.”

“He roared over my top plane so close that I thought for a moment that he must rip the fabric.”

“The range was too short for me to miss.”

“Looking down I saw the long line of hangars and the huddled buildings of the village a mile away.”

# THE SCARLET SQUADRON

## CHAPTER I MY MISSION

THERE was little of mystery or intrigue in the air that glorious August afternoon. The sun shone in cloudless blue. Tiny wavelets rippled and murmured against the beach. The turf of the fairways felt crisp and springy beneath the foot, and away across the links nestled the little grey village of Alnmouth, where I was spending the first few days of my leave.

It has been said that coming events cast their shadows before. I do not think, however, that it has been recorded just what proportions those shadows bear to the events. I mention that because it was a very small shadow indeed which first impinged upon my vision, yet it was the herald of my being drawn into events which threatened to plunge the world into war and to rend asunder this Empire of ours.

The shadow fell across my golf ball as I was on the point of driving from the sixteenth tee. At the same moment a somewhat husky voice addressed me from behind:

“Major Beverley! A telegram for yer, sir!”

Turning, I found myself gazing upon the uninspiring features of the boot-boy from the hotel at which I was staying. He clutched in one hand a pink telegraph envelope, and in the other the leash of an aged and sad-looking spaniel.

“Missus said,” he explained, thrusting the envelope towards me, “that I was ter give th’ dawg a walk along th’ links, and give yer this here telegram!”

Murmuring my acknowledgments of the forethought on the part of the manageress of the hotel, I ripped open the envelope. The message it contained was from my chief, Sir Malcolm Douglas, of the Intelligence Department of the Admiralty. I was instructed to report at headquarters without delay, the remainder of my leave—three weeks, or more—being cancelled.

That evening I left Alnmouth, and arrived at the desolate terminus of King’s Cross in the early hours of the following morning. After a bath and breakfast, I hired a taxi and drove to the Admiralty buildings in Whitehall.

Sir Malcolm was sitting writing at his desk when I was ushered into his office. He welcomed me with his firm, quick handshake, then motioned me to be seated.

“I am extremely sorry, Beverley,” he said, “that it has been necessary to curtail your leave, but I have work for you of a certain urgency. Davies is missing!”

“The Flying Beetle, sir?” I exclaimed.

I do not know whether my voice betokened the surprise I felt. Harry Davies, little more than a boy in years, was one of the cleverest agents the British Secret Service



possessed. Under his self-chosen nomenclature of the Flying Beetle he had done good work, and somehow the name had stuck.

“Yes, the Flying Beetle,” replied Sir Malcolm, with a faint smile. Then the smile died as he proceeded. “Some time ago rumours reached us that a certain foreign power was casting envious eyes upon our possessions in the East. According to our information, agents of this power were operating in China with a view to stirring up in that country hostility against Britain. Davies was sent to investigate. From his reports we found that the rumours were well founded, and that Britain and the security of the Empire were being seriously menaced. I will go into details later. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, all communications from Davies ceased!”

Sir Malcolm paused and consulted a paper on his desk.

“The last message which we received from Davies was despatched from Suchow,” he went on. “Davies had moved from Hong Kong, almost due north-west across China. This last message was received by us more than six months ago. It contained one curious passage which, decoded, is as follows.”

He picked up a paper and read:

“To-morrow I push on from Suchow. Of late I have been intrigued to hear the hillmen and villagers of this desolate region speak of the ‘big red birds which nest in the hills’ beyond Suchow. It is impossible to obtain many details without displaying an ill-advised curiosity. Last night, when the sun had sunk behind the distant hills, I saw, silhouetted against the red afterglow, a steadily-moving speck. To me, it looked uncommonly like an aeroplane. . . .”

Sir Malcolm laid down the paper.

“That passage was included in the last communication we received from Davies,” he said. “As you have heard, he intended pushing on from Suchow. Did he do so? Is he ill, and thus prevented from sending a message to the outer world? Is he being held prisoner by someone in that wild region or—is he dead? We are sending you to investigate. You will spare no effort to find Davies. If he is dead, then you will ascertain full details as to his death and the manner of it. If Davies has been discovered, by the agents of this power, to be a British Secret Service man, then he will have died—horribly! However, you will leave for China at once, and will not return until you either have found Davies, or have ascertained his fate!”

. . . . .

It was an hour later when I quitted the office of Sir Malcolm Douglas and stepped out into the sunshine of Whitehall. I had been placed in possession of all the available data which might assist me in my search for Davies. His route from Hong Kong to Suchow was clearly defined by the despatches which he had sent through to headquarters. The disguises which he had adopted on the journey had been many and varied. At Suchow he had assumed the *rôle* of a buyer and seller of mules.

There is little need to go into the details of all that transpired between my leaving London that night and my subsequent arrival in Hong Kong. The voyage was uneventful, and I had plenty to occupy my mind in planning my course of action. Sir

Malcolm had been the essence of discreetness in his references to the foreign power which was working to the hurt of England, but he had given me clearly to understand that, should the agents of that power associate me with the British Secret Service, I could expect from them extremely short shrift.

And ever in my mind was the thought of Davies, that slim, perpetually tired-looking youth. I had met him at headquarters on one or two occasions since his great triumph when, in the guise of the Flying Beetle, he had brought about the downfall of that arch plotter, Sir Jasper Haines. Where was he now, that boy whose bored expression and almost weedy frame belied the alert and nimble brain and sterling courage which he possessed? It might well be that he was dead, for life is cheap and death comes easy in the back of beyond, whither he had penetrated.

Arriving at Hong Kong, I disembarked and lost no time in presenting my credentials at the British Consulate. There, in an ante-room, I renewed my acquaintance with an old friend—Parkin, the finest disguise expert in the world.

“What is it to be this time, sir?” he inquired, after we had exchanged greetings.

“A rather seedy, middle-class Chinaman who will pass muster as a painter of pictures!” I replied.

For such a disguise, I had decided, would stand me in good stead during my journey up country. My purse, even if I possessed one, would be but a measly thing, for which my throat would not be worth the cutting. Any eccentricities which I might develop—such as a desire to sojourn in remote districts—would be put down to artistic temperament; for artistic temperament is universal and knows no bar of colour or creed. And, without my sketching materials, I should be but one insignificant unit in the millions which people the vast tract of country that the world calls China.

Parkin laboured on me with wonderful dexterity. My nose was moulded into a squat caricature of itself by the injection of wax under the skin. Rubber pads were cunningly fitted inside my cheeks, giving the impression of the high cheek-bones of the Chinese. The outside corners of my eyes were drawn up obliquely towards my temples and fixed by a varnish impervious to water. My eyelashes were trimmed, then straightened by the application of a thin, colourless varnish. A further rubber pad was fixed beneath my upper lip and my face was coloured until it assumed a sallow, yellowish tint. My hair was shaved off and a close-fitting wig of short black hair fitted by means of a strong spirit gum. I then stripped and bathed in a tin bath full of a not ill-smelling mixture. My skin, when dried, had assumed a slightly lighter tint than my face. Parkin left nothing to chance. He himself selected the clothes I should wear and, when I was dressed, he made a few minor adjustments here and there. At length he expressed himself as satisfied, and led me to a large, full-length mirror. For a long minute I stood contemplating the seedy Celestial into which I had been transformed by the magic hands of Parkin. It was Parkin who brought me to myself.

“Your name, sir?” he inquired.

“Wu Chang!” I replied, and he jotted it down in a book.

“Well, good-bye, sir,” he said, holding out his hand, “and I wish you the very best of luck! Although it may be superfluous, I can only urge you to live the part. Sink your

real identity, and never, not even for the fractional part of a second, be other than Wu Chang, needy painter of pictures!”

I nodded, for I knew the truth of what he said. We shook hands, and as I moved towards the door, he snapped, “Get out of this, you thieving rat!”

He was ever an artist, was Parkin. I checked in time my start of astonishment, for who was I, Wu Chang, to offer protest. For the time being, my old self was dead and, shufflingly, my new self passed out into the street, in search of a night’s lodging.

I slept that night in a foul dive down by the docks. For company I had a choice selection of the scourings of the seven seas. I had purposely sought out such a place, for I knew it would abound with eyes which were sharp and minds suspicious. My disguise passed muster, however, and none appeared to take me for other than I seemed to be.

Next morning I crossed the water to the mainland and set out on the last stage of my journey. My destination was Suchow, the spot from which the Flying Beetle had sent his last communication.

## CHAPTER II

### UNDER SUSPICION

MY mission in China was to ascertain the fate of Davies. The continuation of the investigations upon which he had been engaged was not required of me. I consequently made as good progress as possible to Suchow, completing the latter part of the journey on the back of an ancient and cantankerous mule.

Dusk was deepening into night, and there was a bitter cold in the air when I rode into Suchow. Halting at a long, low-roofed inn I saw to the wants of my quadruped, then passed in through the main doorway. I found myself in a large room, low-ceilinged and reeking with the mingled fumes of tobacco and cooking. At small tables, so numerous as to fill almost every foot of floor space, sat a miscellaneous collection of humanity. There were massive, gaudily-dressed hillmen, sombre-clad peasants and blue-bloused villagers. All were either smoking and drinking, or eating and drinking. Seating myself at one of the few vacant tables, I ordered food and coffee. Whilst it was being brought I casually studied my fellow customers. Here and there, I noted with surprise, were Chinamen and swarthy Mongolians wearing dingy and frayed uniforms of an unmistakable European cut. One fellow in particular took my eye. His nationality was difficult to distinguish, but I would have hazarded more than a guess that he was born somewhere in Central Europe.

He was a huge fellow, black-bearded, and with little pig-like eyes surmounted by black, bushy eyebrows. His face was tanned the colour of leather. A hideous disfiguring scar ran the length of his right cheek, from temple to mouth. He was clad in a high-necked tunic of dirty grey cloth, trousers of the same material and black, uncleaned knee-boots. His tunic gaped open almost to his waist and one great calloused hand played idly with a glass on the table in front of him.

He was seated within a few feet of me, and on one occasion, finding my gaze upon him, he scowled at me and his thick lips muttered something unintelligible.

A steaming bowl of stewed meat and vegetables was placed in front of me by a slatternly Chinese boy and I fell to with gusto, for my appetite had acquired an extremely sharp edge through my having spent a day in the saddle, and as I ate I pondered anew upon my course of action. I would see what clue I could pick up in Suchow, and, failing anything tangible, I would push on into the hills. . . . "The big red birds which nest in the hills beyond Suchow." Davies—from what he had seen—had been under the impression that the big red birds were aeroplanes. Was there then an aerodrome somewhere in the fastnesses of the hills west of Suchow? It seemed absurd, nay, almost impossible.

More than once during the course of my meal I looked up to find the little eyes of the bearded one fixed intently upon me. But, confident in my disguise, I returned his stare blankly enough, then moved my gaze as though unaware of his scrutiny. As I pushed my empty bowl away and turned to my thick, greasy black coffee, he hoisted himself to his feet and, crossing to my table, sank into a chair opposite me.

I sipped my coffee, waiting for him to speak. But, spreading his great arms akimbo on the table, he thrust forward his great head and peered at me in silence. Then, leaning back in his chair, he lit a cheroot and deliberately blew a cloud of rank smoke into my face. I coughed, but displayed neither anger nor protest. He laughed harshly, and his voice rumbled up out of his throat:

“So you swallow that, my yellow friend?”

His Chinese was fluent enough, but guttural.

“And feel honoured that there is one here who should deign to notice me!” I replied, with a slight bow.

He stared at me suspiciously for a moment, then reached forward and grabbed my wrist. With a twist he turned my hand, palm upwards, and examined it closely. As though satisfied he grunted and released his grip.

“Where are you from?”

He shot the question at me abruptly.

“Canton!” I lied.

“What do you seek here?”

“I am but a poor painter of pictures, and my pictures I cannot sell! I journey in search of new scenes, of new peoples, and——”

“Spare me that,” he cut in, gruffly, “and do not whine. You are from Canton, you say; yet yours is not the frame, the body of a Cantonese. And the whites of your eyes are white, my yellow friend. You are well-built, and your hands are not those of a workman. You say you are a painter of pictures. Well, that will explain your hands, but where are your pictures, where are your brushes and your colours?”

“In the pouches of my saddle!”

“Then bring them here!”

I would have protested at this, but, seeing my hesitation, he crashed a huge fist on the table and bellowed:

“Bring them here, you lying, yellow scum!”

I departed, and returned within a few minutes with my portfolio and colour box. He snatched them from me and opened the portfolio on the table. I had not been idle on my journey, and had purchased one or two passably good canvases which—may their originators forgive me—I intended to pass off as my own. In silence the bearded one examined what I had brought him, then, shoving them aside, he leant back in his chair again and said:

“No stranger rides in here without my knowing. I am waiting—waiting—waiting. Some day will come the one for whom I wait.” He leant forward and said harshly, “You might be he. That frame of yours, those eyes of yours, are not those of the true-blooded Celestial. If you are other than you seem,” his voice quivered with passion, “then you will never ride back the way you have come!”

His words caused me to tingle with excitement. No stranger rode in without his knowledge. He was waiting for a certain someone riding in. Could there be any

connection between this man and his statements, and the Flying Beetle. I had no evidence to that effect, but I was inclined to think so. I decided to draw a bow at venture.

“I am Wu Chang, painter of pictures,” I murmured; “I have said that I journey in search of new scenes and of new sights. I have heard whispers of the great red birds which nest in the hills beyond Suchow, and it is towards them that I wend my way. Who think you that I am, if I be not Wu Chang?”

My eyes had never left his face whilst I was speaking, and I saw him look at me sharply as I mentioned the great red birds. His huge hulk of a body then shook with silent laughter as I concluded, and he said:

“You seek the great red birds, Wu Chang! Then assuredly shall you find them, for you ride into the hills with me at dawn! But yes, you dog,” as I shook my head protestingly, “for I am not satisfied with you yet. Those eyes . . . But there is one who will smell you out, and, by the beard of Confucius, you will die by inches if he finds you to be other than you are. I——”

He broke off sharply as the main door was thrown open. A draught of bitter cold night air swirled into the room.

“Shut that cursed door!” he shouted, wheeling in his chair, “or, by——”

The words died on his lips. His jaw dropped and a look almost of fear crept into his eyes. Following the direction of his gaze, I saw, standing on the threshold, the figure of a man dressed in a scarlet uniform and with a scarlet cape about his shoulders. His high-necked tunic with gold facings fitted his lithe figure as though made by a tailor in Saville Row. A scarlet cap, black peaked, was cocked at a jaunty angle on his head. His face was lean and tanned. A short, dark, military moustache surmounted his upper lip, whilst a tuft of dark hair just below the lower lip gave a somewhat sardonic expression to his face, an expression which was not belied by the curl of his thin lips into a mirthless smile. Screwing a monocle into his right eye he stood framed in the open doorway, ignoring the discomfort caused to the inmates of the room by the swirling, bitter draught.

“*Nom d’un nom,*” muttered my companion, in excellent French, “*C’est le diable!*”

Slamming the door shut behind him the scarlet-clad stranger advanced, almost mincingly, towards where my companion and I were seated. Reaching us he cast a cursory glance at myself, then, still smiling his mirthless smile, turned to the bearded one and murmured:

“My good Bolponi, pray continue with your remarks! You were saying—about the door——?”

“Don’t jest with me, Pulhausen,” replied my companion hoarsely, “I did not know it was you!”

“That long tongue of yours will be the death of you some day, my good Bolponi,” purred the other. “But pray acquaint me with your Celestial friend!”

Bolponi flushed.

“No friend of mine, Pulhausen!” he spat out angrily, “but one whose *bona fides* I seriously doubt!”

“Indeed!”

There was a world of mockery in the voice and in the elevation of the eyebrows. Turning, this scarlet-clad Pulhausen surveyed me interestedly through his monocle.

“So you doubt its *bona fides*, my good Bolponi,” he said, speaking of me as though I were some dog of doubtful pedigree. “Why? Does it not speak its native tongue with that ease and fluency which you so rightly describe as being the very hallmark of genuineness?”

This conversation, to my astonishment, was being carried on in English.

“He rode in here to-night,” snarled Bolponi. “I knew of his coming, as I know of the coming of all who approach Suchow. Look at his eyes—the eyes of a cursed Englishman, almost. Yet he says he is a painter of pictures! I am not satisfied——”

“Then you shall have him, my good Bolponi,” purred Pulhausen, “and if he will not speak the truth you will try the red-hot irons on the soles of his feet, hey? Ah, pretty sport, Bolponi! But the wind blows cold to-night, and I must needs warm the inner man!”

He called for a dish of hot wine and, whilst it was being brought, he drew from the breast-pocket of his tunic a small, gold cigarette case. Lighting a cigarette, he proceeded to saunter backwards and forwards, passing and repassing me as I sat looking straight ahead as though entirely unconcerned with either him or Bolponi.

Finally he came to a halt just behind my chair.

“Tell me, Bolponi,” he said, “are the men ready to ride out at dawn?”

“Yes, all is ready!”

“Excellent! What new recruits are there?”

“Four. Three yellow, one white. Good men all of them, and passed our doctor at Kanchowfu.”

I was listening to this conversation and jotting it down mentally in order to examine it at leisure, when I suddenly became aware that Bolponi was looking at me strangely. At the same moment Pulhausen sauntered into view from behind me.

“A remarkable fellow this, Bolponi,” he drawled. “A very remarkable fellow indeed!”

Bolponi growled delightedly.

“You have——” he began.

“Burnt a hole in his scalp with the end of my cigarette,” nodded Pulhausen, “and throughout the operation he has sat calmer than he would were he contemplating one of his own pictures! Truly, a remarkable fellow!”

With a triumphant roar Bolponi launched himself to his feet.

## CHAPTER III

### CAPTURED

I PUSHED back my chair and half rose, but, with an agility surprising in one so massive, Bolponi threw himself forward across the table and his great hands clutched at my throat.

I was conscious of Pulhausen stepping back, his perpetual mirthless smile upon his thin lips, then Bolponi and I were engaged in what had all the appearance of a life and death struggle. His little eyes were blazing with fury, and his hands pressed on my throat as though to choke out my very life. We crashed into the small table at which we had been sitting and it clattered to the floor. Backwards and forwards we staggered, he pressing tighter and tighter on my throat, and I fighting with all my strength to release that merciless grip.

“You treacherous spy!”

He gritted the words out from between his lips. I felt my senses reeling. The blood was pounding in my temples, and my lungs seemed as though they must burst. My efforts at resistance were becoming almost futile in their feebleness, and I know there remained for me but one chance. Beneath my blouse I carried a small automatic slung in a holster at my waist. With my left hand clawing at his hands I groped with my right beneath my blouse. My fingers closed on the butt of the gun. I was dimly conscious of a warning cry from the bystanders, then the next instant I had the muzzle shoved into his fat paunch. He sensed at once what that pressing ring of steel was, for his grip on my throat slackened and a look almost of panic leapt into his little bloodshot eyes.

“You—you——”

His voice was hoarse as he mouthed the words, but with my free hand I tore myself loose from his grip and croaked:

“Put your hands up!”

I jabbed him with the automatic to give emphasis to the words and, waveringly, his hands crept above his head.

“At the first hostile move by any man in this room I shall fire!” I said.

I glanced quickly round the circle of faces, and what I read betokened naught of good for me. Who and what this man Bolponi was I did not know, but it seemed he did not lack for friends. Pulhausen, lounging against a table, was looking on with an air of amused detachment. He might have been watching some third-rate melodrama on the stage.

“Soho, Bolponi,” he drawled. “It seems you have caught a Tartar!”

Bolponi’s reply was a strangled oath, but he never took his eyes from my face.

“You will walk in front of me to the door,” I said, “and if any man attempts to prevent our passage, then I will shoot you!”



With my automatic pressed against his waistcoat he commenced to shuffle backwards towards the door. Then came the voice of Pulhausen, cold and emotionless:

“Stop! Do not move another step!”

“Pulhausen,” Bolponi’s voice was almost a scream, “do not interfere; he will shoot—he means it——”

From the corner of my eyes I saw that Pulhausen was toying idly with a small silver-plated revolver and my heart sank. For it was no intention of mine to shoot Bolponi in cold blood. I was bluffing, and it seemed this scarlet-clad Pulhausen was going to call my bluff. I determined to play the game out to the end. Jabbing Bolponi with the automatic, I said:

“Go on; move!”

“Spy,” Pulhausen’s voice was deadly calm, “another step and you are a dead man!”

“Curse you, Pulhausen, leave him alone!” screamed Bolponi. “He will kill me!”

“And is that a matter of great import, my good Bolponi?” purred Pulhausen. “I do, also, confess to some little curiosity as to how you will greet death. It has intrigued me vastly of late!”

Bolponi groaned aloud and his face became livid. No matter what the consequences to Bolponi, Pulhausen did not intend to allow me to escape. As I have said, it was not in my mind to shoot Bolponi in cold blood. Neither did I intend to stand where I was at Pulhausen’s request. Dropping my head, I charged forward. With a roar Bolponi staggered aside. Hitting out left and right I gained the door, for so sudden had been my onslaught that I had taken the onlookers by surprise. As I wrenched open the door a hand grabbed at my arm. Wheeling, I hit a sallow-faced Chinaman full between the eyes. He released his grip and staggered back, and next moment I was out into the night running pell-mell along the uneven road in inky darkness. From the lighted doorway of the inn poured my pursuers.

I ran as I had never run before. I still carried my clubbed automatic. Behind me, on the roadway, I could hear the pounding of pursuing feet. Pausing a moment, I fired two shots over my shoulder and then ran on. More than once I tripped and nearly sprawled my length. I could scarcely see a foot in front of me, so dark was the night. I moved outwards towards the edge of the road, groping, as it were, with my feet. It seemed to me that the road was bordered by a ditch. I halted for a few precious seconds, and, dropping on hands and knees, found that my theory was correct. Then, without waiting to ascertain whether the ditch was wet or dry, I dropped into it and lay flat. As luck would have it, it was perfectly dry.

The vanguard of my pursuers pounded past on the road above. They had little chance of finding me in that impenetrable darkness. None the less I could not but foresee that my capture was probably only a matter of time. When dawn came I must not be in Suchow. Yet how was I to leave Suchow on foot? It was madness to think of it. And, leaving Suchow, whither was I to head? If only I had been forewarned that this Bolponi was suspicious of all strangers in Suchow. Why should he be? Was it he or his men who were responsible for Davies being missing? What was Bolponi’s game?

Events had happened with almost incredible swiftness since I had entered the inn, and in the reaction I found it impossible to think coldly and calmly. Two facts, however, I did realise quite clearly. One was that I must get out of Suchow before morning came, and the other was that I must do so on the back of either a pony or a mule. My own mule was stabled in the tumbledown quarters behind the inn; it might be possible to creep back there and get it. Obviously Bolponi would scarcely credit me with such foolhardiness as to return into the enemy's camp, as it were. It was either that or commandeering a mule from somewhere. The latter course I dismissed as impossible. It would be fatal to go round the village endeavouring to obtain a mule, for I did not know where they were stabled. No, if I wanted a mule I must get my own.

The noise of pursuit had quite died away. Keeping to my ditch I crept back towards the inn. Once a strolling cur paused to investigate me, and snarled angrily as I put out my hand to pat him and keep him quiet. That snarl was the prelude to a succession of angry barks, which I thought could not but have the effect of bringing the searchers for me to the spot. But nothing eventuated, and I crept on. Short of the inn I clambered out of the ditch and crawled across the road. Rising in the safety of a clump of stunted shrubs I stood listening. Down the road I heard voices approaching. Slipping round to the rear of the inn I literally groped my way to where I knew the stables were situated. They were in darkness. The silence was unbroken save for the restless stamp of an uneasy beast inside. I dare not strike a light, but, groping along the ramshackle building, I found the door. So far, so good. I began to feel vaguely elated at the success of my plan. I would pad my mule's hoofs till clear of the village—lead the brute by the halter; then I would ride back to Kanchowfu, adopt another disguise and return to Suchow. But this time I would be on the look-out for the lynx-eyed Bolponi or his like.

Cautiously I lifted the wooden bar and swung the creaking door open. The next moment I was inside the stable. At the same instant the darkness was cut by the beam of an electric torch, and the mocking voice of Pulhausen said:

“So, spy, we meet again! Steady, I have you covered!”

I stood stock still, half-blinded by the brilliant light. Before I could gather myself together to resist, half a dozen Chinamen sprang at me from out of the shadows. I did, I think, put up a bit of a struggle then, but in a remarkably short space of time my hands were bound securely behind my back.

Pulhausen advanced into the light. There was a smile on his lips, but little of mirth in his eyes.

“Fool, oh, fool!” he murmured. “To return here was madness!”

I did not answer and he went on:

“Yet I expected it, although the good Bolponi would have none of it. You would not have got far on foot!”

“Farther than I have got!” I answered, bitterly enough.

He laughed at that and nodded.

“Yes, farther than you have got. But you would not have escaped. It was a cruel fate, my friend, that brought you face to face with Bolponi to-night. He would suspect his own father!”

“Of what?”

“Of being a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He has the eyes of a hawk and the soul of a rat. But before he inflicts his grossness upon us there are one or two questions which I wish to put to you. In the first place, what is your nationality?”

I did not reply, but he nodded as though I had, and said:

“English, of course! The question was, I admit, rather superfluous!”

“Indeed?” I snapped. “And why?”

His lips parted to show a flash of brilliant teeth.

“A stamp may be defaced until it is almost unrecognisable,” he said, with a slight bow, “but always the watermark remains!”

“What do you mean?”

“The English public school! The mark is always there for those with eyes to see!”

And then I understood and, understanding, wondered what manner of man this was.

“But, Bolponi,” he went on, with an airy wave of the hand, “one could not expect. . . . No matter! Now, my Englishman, what seek you in Suchow?”

I remained silent for a moment, then replied:

“As your powers of observation or deduction seem so acute you can probably answer that yourself!”

“I do not advise you,” he murmured, “to be insolent. Tell me, what do you seek in Suchow?”

I remained stubbornly silent. He moved a step forward till his eyes held mine.

“Perhaps,” he said, “you seek a fellow-countryman!”

I cannot think that I showed any great surprise at the words. Subconsciously I had already associated these men with the disappearance of Davies, though it might not, of course, have been Davies to whom he referred.

“It may also be,” he went on, “that you seek information which your Government ardently desires!”

He paused, and, as I did not speak, continued:

“Thirdly, you might be one of that noble band of adventurers who is ready to sell his sword and his good right arm to the highest bidder. In that case you have come to the right market, but have started ill in upsetting the good Bolponi. He has vowed a horrible death for you!”

He consulted a gold wrist watch, and said sharply:

“I will give you exactly a minute in which to tell me what you are doing in Suchow, who sent you, and why you are here. If you refuse to speak, then the consequences will be extremely unpleasant for yourself!”

There was a silence in which I thought rapidly. I had not the slightest intention of telling this suave Pulhausen the nature of my business in Suchow. I could only hope against hope for something to turn up. The ease with which he had penetrated my disguise, when the seeds of suspicion had been sown by Bolponi, rankled. There was

something dominant about the man, some great potentiality for good or for evil. There returned to me in that moment the look of fear which had crept into Bolponi's eyes when this Pulhausen had appeared in the doorway. Then the easy, contemptuous manner in which he spoke to Bolponi. In what relationship did they stand, these two? What was at the back of it all?

"Your time is up!" Pulhausen's voice cut in on my thoughts, "I shall refuse to hear you speak now!"

He turned to the six Chinamen who were grouped about me:

"Guard him well, for he rides with us at dawn. If he escapes, then everyone of you shall hang!"

He strode to the door of the stable and, halting on the threshold, turned to me.

"Englishman," he said coldly, "Suchow is the pass which leads into the valley of death, and we are the seneschals of Suchow!"

With that he was gone, and I was left with the mules and my guard. I spent the remainder of the night on a heap of dirty straw. I slept fitfully and in brief snatches. So this, then, was the inglorious end to my quest for Davies. Probably to be butchered somewhere out in the hills. Bitterly I regretted not having sought out some obscure lodging instead of staying at the inn. But it is always easier to be wise after the event than before, and certainly it had not entered into my calculations that every stranger in Suchow was scrutinised and, if necessary, asked to prove his *bona fides*.

From Hong Kong to Suchow my disguise had passed muster without question. It is said that a fool can find what he looks for. Whether Bolponi was a fool or not I could not say, but certainly he had looked to find in me other than I appeared to be, and by the aid of Pulhausen he had found it.

It had been an ingenious method of unmasking me, that cigarette end laid so lightly upon my false scalp. So simple, yet I had sat like a fool through it all, unconscious of anything untoward happening.

I was wide awake with the dawning. A grey light filtered in through a hole in the wall. I was almost numbed with cold, and was grateful for the bowl of steaming coffee which one of my guards brought me, together with a hunk of brown bread. My bonds were not unloosened, but I was fed by the simple expedient of having the bowl held to my mouth, and likewise the bread. I was then led outside the stable and hoisted on the back of a mule, with my feet tied beneath its belly. The mule was then led round to the front of the inn, where already stood a long string of pack-mules and ponies heavily laden. Twenty or thirty men, Chinese, Mongolians and hillmen, were bustling about. The majority were armed, some with knives and revolvers stuck in their belts and ammunition pouches slung over their shoulders, others with rifles under their arms or in the saddle slings.

A group of villagers and mangy curs were collected watching the preparations for departure. My mule was backed into place near the forefront of the line, and two armed Chinamen ranged themselves one on each side of me. Then in the doorway of the inn appeared Bolponi. He squinted here and there, then strode forward as his eyes took in myself.

“Well, you dog!” he snarled, and struck at me savagely.

The blow made me reel in the saddle, and he laughed harshly.

“I’ll make you sorry you did not shoot, you hound!” he shouted, and struck me again.

“Poor sport, Bolponi!” came the drawling voice of Pulhausen, “but doubtless excellent for circulating the blood on a raw morning such as this!”

Snarling, Bolponi turned to Pulhausen who stood at his elbow.

“Why take the dog along, Pulhausen?” he roared. “Why take him, I say? He is a proved spy, and better let his bones rot in Suchow than take him with us!”

“Ah, but think of the death which will be his,” drawled Pulhausen. “What think you, Bolponi, will be the sentence of the Tribunal? A death by inches, my fat one; and think of the enjoyment you would miss were we to slay him now! A death befitting a spy will be his, Bolponi, and I doubt not that you will be master of ceremonies!”

Bolponi laughed harshly, but with evident enjoyment.

“Aye, he threatened to shoot me, the dog! *Nom d’un chien*, but he will regret the impulse that stayed his finger on the trigger!”

“I do not doubt it!” murmured Pulhausen courteously. “But to horse, Bolponi!”

He and Bolponi were muffled in great-coats. As for me, I sat shivering with chattering teeth. To my surprise, Pulhausen pulled a blanket off a mule pack and threw it round my shoulders.

Bolponi roared his protests, but with a smile Pulhausen remarked:

“What, would you let the cold and exposure of this desolate region cheat you of your spy, Bolponi?”

Obviously Bolponi would not, for he protested no more, but lumbered into the saddle of his pony. There came a sharp order from Pulhausen, at the head of the cavalcade, and we jolted into motion, heading westwards into the hills.

## CHAPTER IV

### ATTACKED BY BRIGANDS

ALL that day we rode, climbing steadily over rocky, uneven ground, and ever it grew colder and more cold. I spoke but once to my guards, and that was more to break the awful monotony of the journey than for aught else.

“This Tribunal,” I asked; “what is it?”

“They are the lords of life and death!” was the muttered response, but as to who “they” were I received no enlightenment.

That night we camped on a high wind-blown plateau of rock. The mules and ponies were tethered in a circle, and I noted that sentries were placed outside. As for myself, I huddled with my guards in the lee of a boulder and forgot my troubles in another fitful sleep. We were up and moving with the dawn, but a change had taken place in the formation of our cavalcade. Pulhausen rode in front with ten armed men. Then followed myself, my guards and the pack animals. Behind us rode Bolponi with a further ten men armed. Ahead of us spread fan-wise, as far as possible in that wild country, were scattered scouts mounted on wiry mountain ponies. It seemed as though we were expecting attack, and in reply to my question one of my guards nodded, but did not vouchsafe to reply in words.

It was shortly after noon, when we were riding through snow-covered country, that one of the scouts fired a shot, and, wheeling his pony, dashed back towards us. At the same time the cavalcade closed up, and the other scouts lost no time in rejoining us. Pulhausen spoke rapidly with the man who had given the alarm, then rapped out the order:

“Dismount! Prepare to receive attack!”

With astonishing military promptness and precision the pack animals were led to what cover afforded amongst the rocks and boulders. Then, forming a semi-circle around them, and facing towards the spot from whence had come the alarm, the men sought cover and saw to their rifles and ammunition. I was forced down behind a boulder between my guards. Each cuddled his rifle into his cheek and waited. We were entrenched in a wide valley and, although I searched the broken ground ahead, my eyes could pick up no sign of any attacking force.

Pulhausen, erect and debonair, went round our defences, pausing here and there for a word with his men. Bolponi was sitting behind a boulder, a rifle by his side, and busily engaged in demolishing a cold fowl by the simple process of gnawing at it as he held it in his gloved hands.

Pulhausen’s round eventually brought him to us. He stood looking down at me for a few moments, his face expressionless.

“My scout informs me,” he said quietly, “that we are outnumbered by about ten to one! It may be necessary, Englishman, to offer you a rifle and your parole!”

“To help protect your valuable skins,” I answered surlily. “The attacking force which outnumbers you by ten to one is so conspicuous that I can’t even see it!”

“So,” he laughed softly. “But you will see it, my Englishman. The attacking force is there,” he swept his arm, indicating the upper portion of the valley. “And as for our valuable skins, you will but be protecting your own, for they will slaughter us everyone if they get the opportunity!”

“And what of that?” I snapped. “It will be but a hastening of my ultimate fate!”

“You do not believe, then,” he said mockingly, “that whilst there is life there is hope?”

I had the grace to flush at that.

“Listen,” he said urgently, “those men out there, who are now crawling on us, are led by Kang Chu, a Chinese war-lord who has been driven to the hills. He has turned brigand and fears neither God nor man. He slays all that fall into his hands—men, women and children!”

“The pot calling the kettle black,” I said jeeringly. “I have noticed nothing particularly virtuous about you or Bolponi!”

“I am not asking your assistance,” he replied stiffly, “I am offering you to die—if death should come—with a gun in your hands. If you prefer to lie there in your bonds, then you may do so. Look at me!”

I looked up into his cold blue eyes, wonderingly.

“Please understand,” his voice was tense, “that these attackers can in no way represent a rescue party as far as you are concerned. They take no prisoners, and every man here, including you, will be slaughtered should they defeat us!”

It was borne in upon me that this man spoke the truth. Moreover, I had no desire to be shot down in my bonds.

“Give me a rifle!” I growled.

He rapped out an order, and one of my guards severed my bonds with a clasp knife. A rifle was handed to me and an ammunition belt.

Pulhausen nodded, and, turning, walked away.

“One moment,” I called after him, “haven’t you forgotten something?”

He paused, looking at me inquiringly.

“My parole!” I informed him.

“But is not that understood?” he replied courteously, and somehow I felt overwhelmingly foolish and childish. To hide my confusion I turned to examine my rifle, and at that moment there came a crash of rifle fire from up the valley.

Bullets whined through the air above our heads and thudded on the rocks and boulders which afforded us cover. And, even yet, I had seen no sign of an attacker. I had yet to learn the mode of warfare employed by these brigands of the hills. Slipping from cover to cover, from boulder to boulder, they were worming their way along so as to be always almost completely hidden.

Crack! Crack!

The man on my right fired twice in rapid succession, and, squinting round a corner of our boulder, I saw a blue-clad figure throw up its arms and collapse amongst the rocks two hundred yards away.

I manœuvred my rifle barrel into a niche and waited expectantly. There came another volley from the attackers and, seeing a head pop into view, I fired. The head dropped out of sight with fluttering abruptness, and I hoped that I had registered a hit. Our men—for I had forgotten they were my captors—were firing spasmodically. It was obvious to me that we had not ammunition to waste. I fired whenever I saw the vestige of clothing or anatomy. There might have been twenty men or two hundred in the valley for all I could have told. They stuck to their cover, firing an occasional volley or, like ourselves, engaging in judicious sniping. Two hours dragged by. Our casualties were not heavy, although I counted three forms lying ominously still in our semi-circle. But I realised that the shooting was coming from closer and closer quarters. Slowly but surely they were closing in on us.

Then suddenly there came a wild yell and the valley in front seemed to become alive with men. They sprang up from behind their boulders, some within thirty yards of us. They were armed with knives, swords and revolvers. Their rifles were discarded and, yelling like fiends, they tore down on us. There were over a hundred of them, big swarthy hillmen.

We met their charge with a withering rifle fire. They wavered, but kept on. Another volley we crashed into them, then they were on us. Clubbing my rifle I rose to my feet and retreated till my back was against a rock. Side by side with me stood my erstwhile guards, their lips drawn back from their teeth, snarling like cornered rats.

A huge fellow, wielding a two-edged sword, sprang at me. I swung my rifle with blind force and he went down, his skull smashed like an eggshell. Another sprang in, stabbing furiously with a dirk. I swung at him, missed, and felt something like a red-hot iron sear my shoulder. It was no time for nice measures. I brought my knee up sharply and caught him full in the stomach, then, clubbing my rifle short, I crashed the butt full into his face. He reeled backwards, and bending down I retrieved the two-edged sword which lay almost at my feet. It was a move that was like to cost me dear, for before I could recover my balance a brown-skinned brigand leapt at me and almost bore me to the ground. I hurled him off, and as he leapt in again he impaled himself on the sword. It was ghastly, grisly work. My guards were fighting desperately. We had no moment to spare to see how the battle was going. My new weapon did yeoman service for me. I had little notion of how to use it, but I slashed savagely right and left, and that procedure proved effective enough. One fellow dived in under the whirling blade and lunged at me viciously with a dagger. It was the belt which I wore under my blouse that saved me from serious damage, but the leather was not tough enough to withstand the full force of the blow. One of the guards felled him before he could strike again, but I felt suddenly deathly sick. A wave of nausea swept over me; then dimly I heard the voice of Pulhausen:

“Keep standing, men! Keep standing, and we’ve won!”

Scarcely conscious of what I did, I hacked, slashed and hewed. The bearded, wild-eyed faces of our attackers seemed to recede, then come again into focus. I was dimly



aware that the guard on my right was down. Then suddenly the faces seemed to recede altogether. I laughed foolishly and started in pursuit. Again came that wave of nausea and deathly sickness. I felt my senses swimming. As though far away I heard the notes of a bugle, then the world went black about me, and I remembered nothing more until I found myself sitting propped against a rock, a thousand hammers at work in my head, and my arm in a rough sling.

The valley seemed alive with men and, as I sat striving to collect my thoughts, the fat form of Bolponi loomed into view.

“Well, dog,” he sneered, “they say you fought well to preserve your carcase!”

“Naturally; it has some little value in my eyes!” I replied.

“And in mine,” he snarled. “I am glad you are not among the dead!”

“I regret that I cannot say the same of you!” I snapped, for the fellow irritated me.

“You can’t, hey?” he snarled, and raised his clenched fist as though to strike me. He dropped it abruptly, however, as Pulhausen came up.

“At it again, my good Bolponi?” drawled the latter. “Your hatred of English spies will become an obsession with you if you are not careful! First that cursed Flying Beetle, and now this gallant unknown!”

I started at this mention of Harry Davies, but I was doomed to disappointment, for, with an angry exclamation, Bolponi turned on his heel and stalked away. I had hoped that something more would be said. However, it was now established beyond doubt that these men knew something of Davies.

“Well, my Englishman, and was it not better to fight?” inquired Pulhausen of me.

“Yes,” I admitted, “but I know little of what happened beyond my own share in it!”

“Reinforcements arrived to our aid in the nick of time, and Kang Chu drew off his men, or it would have gone ill with us. Our casualties were heavy!”

“Reinforcements?” I repeated. “From where?”

“From our base,” he replied slowly. “From Zadan Camp!”

“And where is that?”

“Two hours’ march from here. Word was brought to the camp that Kang Chu and his men were out, so, scenting trouble, an armed party came to meet us. And now, inquisitive one, we are ready to take the saddle. Your wounds have been dressed, for Bolponi wishes you to be preserved intact!”

I was weary indeed when, late in the afternoon, we rode up a narrow, stony defile. At its head stood two armed sentries and a tarpaulin-covered field gun. I was too apathetic to feel much surprise, but I caught my breath sharply as we reached the head of the defile.

A winding trail led downwards to a rocky plateau about four square miles in area and entirely encompassed by rugged hills. And on the plateau, looming bulkily in the deepening dusk, stretched row upon row of aeroplane hangars and airship sheds. In the creeping shadows of the coming night they looked grey and ghostly, and for a fleeting moment I had the impression that I was gazing upon some strange phantom aerodrome.

About a mile beyond the hangars twinkled the lights of what appeared to be either a town or an encampment.

With Pulhausen riding at the head, we took the downward trail. Reaching the level of the plateau, I marvelled at the smoothness of its surface. It was as though some vast cauldron of molten rock and lava had cooled and formed a surface unbroken by crack, ridge or seam.

We skirted the rear of the hangars and sheds and, although I made no effort to count them, I realised that here was housing for hundreds of machines. More than once we were challenged by armed sentries, but at a word from Pulhausen were allowed to pass onwards.

Darkness had fallen by the time we reached the end of the rows of hangars and came upon a large block of long, low, brilliantly-lighted huts. These I took to be the living quarters of the *personnel* of the aerodrome.

At a harsh command from Pulhausen, the cavalcade came to a halt, and, wheeling his mount, Bolponi rode along the line till he came abreast of my guards and me.

“Lodge this dog safe in Zadan prison!” he snarled. “If he escapes, then you will answer for it with your lives!”

He turned to me and struck me across the mouth with the back of his hand.

“That for you, spy!” he chuckled hoarsely. “When we meet again you will tell me how you like the prison of Zadan!”

My hands were tied behind my back and my feet bound beneath the belly of my mule. The gross creature was safe, therefore, from any reprisal, and I checked the hot retort which sprang to my lips.

“Sullen, hey?” he sneered. “*Nom d’un chien*, but we’ll make you talk before we’re done with you!”

“Enough of this,” came the crisp voice of Pulhausen, who had ridden back along the line. “If you must taunt your miserable prisoner, Bolponi, then do so in the jail! You but waste our time!”

Bolponi muttered something beneath his breath. In an instant Pulhausen whipped into action. Thrusting out a hand he grasped Bolponi by the collar of his greatcoat and swung him round in the saddle.

“Have a care, my friend,” he said, his voice icy, “else you may find yourself in Zadan prison along with this cursed spy!”

The incident, totally unexpected, was of but a moment’s duration, for, releasing his grip, Pulhausen turned to my guards and rapped:

“Get you gone with your prisoner!”

My mule was wheeled out of the line and, between my guards, I set out towards the twinkling lights which I had first seen from the head of the pass. As we approached I saw that they emanated not from an encampment, but from a town of stone buildings and wretched hovels.

And, as I rode, I pondered on the obvious domination of Pulhausen over Bolponi. The latter was a brute, uncultured, almost bestial. The former most certainly had culture

and intelligence. But—and somehow the thought remained—Was he less dangerous, more kindly disposed than Bolponi?—and in my heart of hearts I knew the answer was in the negative. Pulhausen was less to be trusted than Bolponi, because Pulhausen could keep himself under perfect control.

We entered the village through a narrow gateway and rode along a filthy, squalid street accompanied by an eager, jostling crowd. Darkness made it almost impossible to distinguish the dress and nationality of these dwellers in this hidden village of the hills, but now and again a guttering oil-lamp or swinging lantern gave me a glimpse of yellow-faced Chinamen, swarthy Mongolians, dark-skinned Tibetans with, here and there, an occasional dirty, unshaven European.

They pressed about my guards till the latter were forced to draw their swords to win us passage, and from a rumbling questioning note their voices rose to a roar as the news percolated amongst them:

“A spy! A cursed spy!”

They jostled and pushed, plying my guards with questions and hurling abuse at me. We came at length to a massive gate let into a high wall. My guards severed the bonds about my ankles, pulled me from my mule, and hustled me through a postern gate into what appeared to be a large and spacious courtyard.

I was marched towards a narrow door, above which, showing evil in the light of a bracketed oil-lamp, was fixed a tiger’s head with staring eyes and jaws agape.

And I knew that this then must be the Zadan prison of which Bolponi had spoken, for the tiger is regarded by the Chinese as being the tutelary guardian of their prisons and possessed of singular virtues.

We passed through the doorway into a dark, narrow and foetid passageway. There I was halted whilst one of my guards went gropingly ahead, calling:

“Oho, Heng Chu! Show a light, you dog!”

At the end of the passageway a figure appeared, carrying a lantern. I say figure, for at first I could not tell if it were man or boy. But as it approached, I verily believe that I recoiled in horror, for the thing was a dwarf, hideously misshapen and grotesque, with arms of a length so abnormal that the hands almost touched the floor. He was clad in long, dingy, blue robes, with a broad belt about his waist.

“More carrion?” piped the creature, in a shrill, high-pitched voice, accompanying the words with a cackle of laughter.

He shuffled closer and held the lantern up in order to see my face. And, as he did so, the beams fell full on his own pitiable countenance with its deeply sunken eyes, huge beak-like nose, wide slobbering mouth, and wrinkled, jaundiced skin.

“He! He! He!” he cackled. “The good Bolponi, I vow!”

“Yes, Bolponi found him!” replied one of my guards roughly. “And look well to his chains, Heng Chu, for Bolponi will devise a fitting death for you should he escape!”

Heng Chu lifted a filthy, talon-like hand and caressed my neck. I could have kicked the wretched little creature the length of the passageway, but pity for his misshapen form was mingled strangely with my loathing.

Pity, yes; but before long I was to learn that pity was the last emotion that this foul thing deserved.

“Ah, but I shall find a nice little *cangue* to fit this neck!” he chattered. “He will not escape, but I think this skin of his will easily bruise!”

He cackled again as though at some delicious joke, and laughter rumbled from the throats of my guards. I was yet to learn that the *cangue* to which he referred was a large square collar made of wood, and so shaped as to prevent the wearer lifting his hands to his mouth for the purpose of feeding himself.

“Get on, Heng Chu!” growled one of the guards impatiently, “call your men, and take this dog off our hands!”

The dwarf took a whistle from his belt and blew a shrill blast. I noticed that a huge bunch of keys dangled from the belt, jangling metallically at every movement. An ugly-looking, double-edged knife, a revolver, and a miniature bludgeon of some hard wood capped with metal were also thrust into the belt. It was not difficult to judge the creature’s nationality, as by the light of his lantern I could trace the distinct characteristics of the Oriental.

In response to his whistle four Chinamen appeared at the end of the passage and shuffled towards us. One of them carried a lantern, and all had short-hafted, but long-tongued whips in the belts which they wore outside their blouses.

“Lodge this accursed dog in number three ward!” commanded the dwarf. “Fetter him well, for he belongs to Bolponi! Do not leave the ward until I have inspected his chains!”

The gaolers seized me, and I was dragged roughly along the passage and into a wider corridor which was lit with oil-lamps placed in wall brackets along its entire length. At the end of the corridor was a stout wooden grating which one of the gaolers unlocked to allow us to pass through into a small courtyard.

It was about fifteen yards long by eight yards wide. The far end was enclosed by a thick stone wall, but down each side ran a series of cages, like cattle pens, made of thick wooden bars with gaps between them. Around the walls and down the centre of each cage ran low wooden platforms crowded with the huddled forms of heavily-fettered prisoners. The stench was horrible, and for a moment I felt physically sick.

The place was but dimly lit by swinging, smoky oil-lamps, and for the time the full horror and wretchedness of the scene were mercifully spared me.

Our advent caused many a wretched prisoner to stir in his chains and stare at us in apathetic misery, but a hoarse, curt command from the gaolers nipped in the bud any undue curiosity. I was propelled roughly to the centre platform. Clumsy iron fetters were locked upon my ankles, and a heavy chain, attached to the platform itself, was wrapped round my neck and padlocked. Next I was compelled to lie down, and my fettered ankles were secured in thick wooden stocks which prevented any movement whatsoever of my legs. A rough stone was placed below my head, doubtless to serve as a pillow, and thus I lay helpless when Heng Chu, the misshapen chief gaoler, arrived.

“He! He! He!” he cackled, lowering his lantern and peering into my face. “They say you are a spy, you dog! A little sojourn here, and then the Tribunal, and then—*phwit!*”

He drew a dirty forefinger across his throat in an unmistakable gesture, then kicked me, and, clutching his lantern, turned and shuffled away towards the wooden grating.

## CHAPTER V

### CALLED TO THE TRIBUNAL

WITH the departure of Heng Chu I gave myself up to a survey of my position, and the more I dwelt upon it the more hopeless it appeared. It was, indeed, a sorry end to my quest for Davies. If only I had eluded the vigilant and suspicious eyes of Bolponi at Suchow!

Then I fell to thinking of the aerodrome which I had seen in the deepening dusk, and I wondered what it all could mean. I do not know how long I lay. I was weary and aching in every limb, but the intolerable discomfort of my position made sleep impossible. I was wedged in between two tattered emaciated wretches who lay sprawled face downwards, their manacled hands underneath them.

The one on my right moaned and whimpered fitfully in his uneasy slumber, whilst the one on my left lay so still and silent that once I raised myself and peered at him, a vague alarm in my heart that he was dead. But the rise and fall of his shoulders reassured me.

Long hours dragged by as I lay staring up at the smoky oil-lamp above my head. Then, above the groans, curses, and disjointed sentences of the sleeping and waking prisoners, I heard, muffled and far away, a faint drone. It grew in volume, thunderous and pulsating, till it roared overhead, and I recognised it as the sound of powerful aeroplane engines.

I must have slept at last, for suddenly I opened my eyes with a start to find the grey light of early morning had crept into the ward. And then it was that I saw my surroundings in all their stark ugliness and utterly horrible reality.

The floor of the ward was paved with rough stones, filthy with long accumulation of dirt. Tubs of foul, stagnant drinking-water stood here and there. At the far end of the ward was a shrine, obviously dedicated to some deity who was supposed to possess the power of turning the wicked into the paths of righteousness.

On the wooden platforms around the walls and in the centre of the ward, there lay, I estimated, about seventy prisoners. They were beginning to stir uneasily with the coming of the day. Even now, as I write, I can scarce suppress a shudder as the scene which greeted me that grey morning lives again in my memory.

Almost without exception the wretched prisoners were Chinese. They were all heavily chained, and necks and ankles were raw and bleeding where the heavy fetters had worn through the skin. Matted, tousled, filthy hair hung down over their emaciated and indescribably dirty faces. Many had eyes sore and swollen, others bleeding lips and blackened, toothless gums. Their clothes hung on their bony shrunken forms in filthy rags and tatters. Without exception they bore the marks of torture, of disease and festering sores. Hopeless, apathetic, like wild beasts they awoke to greet the coming of yet another day of long-drawn, loathsome existence.

The wretch on my left, so emaciated that he seemed but a skeleton, rose unsteadily to his feet. His fetters clanked as he dragged himself to a tub of the foul drinking-water, and his long, talon-like fingers tugged weakly at his chains in an effort to ease their pressure on his bruised and blood-caked neck.

As he reached the tub he stumbled and fell against it, so that it tilted over and upset. At the same moment the wooden grating, through which I had entered the previous night, was opened, and Heng Chu shuffled into the ward, two Chinese gaolers at his heels.

His sunken, rat-like eyes fell on the unfortunate wretch sprawled by the overturned water-tub. He turned and piped a shrill order to the gaolers. They rushed forward, and their long-thonged whips rose and fell on the man's back.

But my attention was distracted from him, although my blood boiled. Heng Chu shuffled forward till he stood looking down on me.

"Well, spy," he demanded, "and did your cursed bones lie easy throughout the hours of the night?"

"Easy enough," I answered, for I saw that the creature wished to gloat over my discomfort, and I was determined not to afford him the opportunity.

"'Tis well you slept," he snarled, "for then you will be in better pass for what is about to come!"

I did not answer, nor, I think, did I display any curiosity. He vented his obvious disappointment in a shrill cackle of mirthless laughter.

"He! He! He! But to-day the Tribunal sits—the lords of life and death. I trust that, when sentence has been passed on you, your miserable body will be returned to me for just a little while!"

Still I did not answer, and he continued rubbing his long bony hands, his face a study in maliciousness and hate.

"They whisper that you are English! The brave, the clever Pulhausen has said it is so. Ah, how I hate you English—hate you—*hate you!*"

His voice rose to a scream, and he raised his grotesquely long arms above his head, clenching his hands and shaking with passion.

It was on the tip of my tongue to inform the little bundle of evil that I looked upon his hatred as a compliment, but I refrained, for it seemed to me that he wished for nothing better than that I should answer him back.

"You lie there silent, you foul dog!" he shrieked, and kicked at me savagely. "But the Tribunal will make you talk; Bolponi will make you talk! And when you have talked your tongue will be torn out by the roots."

He bent forward and, with almost incredible swiftness his talon-like fingers tore my blouse from my shoulders. Snatching a whip from the hand of one of the gaolers, he brought the lash viciously across my back. I could have shouted aloud with the agony of that stroke, for the knotted leather bit deep and blood oozed through the quivering flesh.

“There is my brand, you dog,” he snarled, “and all who see it will know the mark of Heng Chu, the gaoler of Zadan! I would flog you to your bones, but Bolponi likes not his victims marked till he himself has tired of the sport!”

He threw down the whip, and his wide, slobbering mouth twisted into a grimace, the very travesty of a smile.

“But you will come back to me,” he said, “and I will make you die one thousand times before death comes at last as a happy release to you! They say that to-day Pulhausen sits in the seat of judgment when you appear before the Tribunal! I like it when Pulhausen sits, for he is cleverer by far than the good Bolponi!” His voice became tense. “For Pulhausen has brains; he is clever; he knows how to hurt the very soul of a man!”

He tapped himself on the chest as though to indicate, in his opinion, the lodging place of the soul.

Turning to the gaolers he gave an order in his shrill, cracked voice. They hastened away, to return in a few moments carrying between them a ponderous block of rough granite to which a heavy chain was attached. Placing this on the ground they turned their attention to me.

First they released my ankles from the stocks in which they rested, and then uncoupled the chain which fettered me to the platform. I was jerked to my feet, and the chain of the granite block placed around my neck and padlocked in position, and then the whole procedure became suddenly obvious to me.

My ankle-fetters were just long enough to enable me to walk, but in order to do so it was necessary for me to stoop down, lift the heavy block of granite, and, holding it as best I could, stagger a few yards before its sheer dead weight caused me to drop it.

Heng Chu watched his gaolers shackling me, with the very liveliest satisfaction upon his face.

“That will bend those straight shoulders of yours, you dog,” he snarled, “and wear those hands of yours to the bone!”

He rapped out an order, and from the platforms there shuffled near a score of emaciated wretches, clutching to their bony frames blocks of granite of various sizes. More than one stumbled and fell, but the gaolers rushed on the unfortunate and plied their whips till at length he rose, and picking up his burden staggered onwards.

We were formed into a rough line with myself, for some reason, at the head. Then, at a word from Heng Chu, we shuffled forward towards the wooden grating, which stood open to afford us egress from the ward.

We passed along the wide stone corridor which I had traversed the previous night. Once or twice, through sheer exhaustion, I was forced to put down my block of granite, but Heng Chu, who was shuffling by my side, brought the whip lash curling about my shoulders till I stooped and, picking up the block, continued onwards.

It was a ghastly procession which we made, and I knew not whither we were heading. But enlightenment soon came, for we passed through a doorway into a large courtyard open to the sky and as I stepped into the courtyard, there came a roar from a



motley crowd of three or four hundred blue-bloused Chinamen who seemed to be awaiting our advent.

“The spy!” they shouted. “The English spy!”

With that they made a rush towards me, and I was like to have come off ill had not Heng Chu insinuated his grotesque form between myself and the mob.

“Patience, my children,” he cried, his arms raised. “The carrion is not for you yet! To-day he appears before the Tribunal, and I doubt not the brave Pulhausen will give him back to me and to you!”

The rush was stayed, and the mob fell back muttering and growling.

“Look on him to your fill,” cried the little wretch, as though I were some wild beast, “but do not molest or strike him till the Tribunal have sat in judgment. Pulhausen will not rob the people of their sport, and that you know!”

This fact the mob did seem to know, for a thunderous shout acclaiming Pulhausen came from their throats. They then fell to watching me sullenly as I shuffled forward, and, placing my block of granite on the ground, flung myself wearily down beside it and took stock of my surroundings.

The courtyard opened on to a street which was busy even at that early hour of the morning. The public seemed to have full access to the courtyard, which was crowded with unshaven, dirty, tattered prisoners, heavily fettered around the ankles and with massive chains padlocked about their necks. Some were chained, like myself, to large stones, others to heavy iron bars. Some were sitting, their heads drooping apathetically on their chests; others were lying full length in the squalor and filth. Almost all had raw and bleeding wounds from the weight of their chains.

Near where I sat a poor, wild-eyed wretch was wearing a *cangue*, or large wooden collar, which weighed, I should think, fully thirty pounds, and prevented him from lying down or obtaining any rest. He could not raise his claw-like hands to his mouth, yet each hand clutched a filthy scrap of food.

But I was the star attraction in that foul spot of despairing souls and rotting bodies. As the morning progressed the crowd about me grew in volume, and many were the choice epithets which were hurled at me.

I had never lost sight of the possibility of Davies being, like myself, a captive in this prison of Zadan. But, eagerly as I scanned the faces of the shackled and manacled wretches, I saw none that caused me to look twice. I had heard Heng Chu say that my ward was number three. There were, therefore, other wards, and it added nothing to my peace of mind to reflect that Davies might well be languishing in one of these. Yet, even if he were, how could I help him? It is said that hope springs eternal in the human breast, but stout indeed must be the heart which can hope amidst the misery and unutterable horror of a Chinese prison.

It was towards the middle of the morning when Heng Chu pushed his way through the crowd about me. At his heels marched four Chinese soldiers, clad in ill-fitting uniforms of grey cloth. They carried, slung on their shoulders, rifles with fixed bayonets, and I noticed the bayonets were longer by a full six inches than those in use in the British Army.

“This is he!” piped Heng Chu, pointing towards me with a dirty forefinger. “Say to Bolponi that I have guarded him well, and not a bite of food has passed his cursed lips!”

The soldiers laughed rumbly, and one growled:

“By the beard of Confucius, but the Evil One himself must laugh with glee at your antics, Heng Chu!”

Heng Chu nodded his great ugly head, grinned, and rubbed his bony hands as though he had been paid the greatest compliment in the world.

“Come,” went on the soldier, “release the dog from his chain, for the Tribunal waits!”

My neck-chain and that terrible block of stone were removed: my heavy ankle-fetters remained and, in addition, my arms were now roughly forced back and closely manacled together behind me. The four soldiers formed themselves about me, and at a word from the one whom I took to be the leader I was marched out of the courtyard and into the busy street.

My going was the signal for a howl of execration from the loafers, and I noted many of the prisoners also lifted their shrill voices to swell the chorus. Poor wretches, I little doubt that they welcomed the opportunity to be the jeerers and not the jeered at.

I did not know what lay in store for me, but, whatever it might be, I cared little. Suffice it that, for the time at least, I was turning my back upon that ante-room of death—the Zadan prison.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE TRIBUNAL

ZADAN was obviously an old Chinese town, which must have stood hidden here in the hills long before the coming of the aerodrome, and the streets through which I passed with my guards were typically Chinese.

Rickshaws passed me drawn by lithe, brown, straw-hatted Chinamen. The streets were crowded with a human miscellany in which the Chinese predominated, but in which I noted a smattering of Shapés, hillmen in flowing robes, Mongolians from the Gobi Desert regions, and even pale Nuwaris and turbaned Cashmiri with their cloaks of butcher's blue.

One or two faces I saw, dirty and unshaven, but undoubtedly European, and here and there we passed groups of grey-clad soldiers whose features stamped them as ranging from the Cantonese district to that of the Sin-Kiang.

We passed through a narrow gateway, and I saw, what I had failed to note in the darkness of the previous night, that the town was walled in. We took the road leading towards the grey hangars and airship sheds about a mile distant. My guards marched in silence, making no effort to keep in step, but ambling along in slipshod fashion.

As we neared the hutments, which were situated at the end of the aerodrome where Pulhausen had halted the cavalcade and ordered me to be taken to Zadan prison, I saw in the distance a huge black bombing machine being wheeled from a hangar. It was twin-engined and of a prodigious wing span. I was able to make out a figure clamber up to the forward cockpit, then on the morning air there broke the shattering roar of powerful engines.

The mechanic, or pilot, was obviously tuning-up, for the roar died away, then sprang into being again. As we reached the first of the long huts, which I took to be the living quarters, the bomber commenced to move slowly, lumberingly away from the hangars. I watched with more than passing interest. The nose turned into the wind, the engines roared with powerful, pulsating rhythm, the machine gathered speed, then the tail came up and the bomber took the air in a long smooth glide. It circled once, then made off westwards, climbing steadily.

My guards halted me at the door of a long, low hut, built of stone and with a corrugated iron roof. An armed sentry paced backwards and forwards in front of the door, and after a low-toned exchange of remarks with the guards stood aside to allow us to enter.

I was marched along a corridor and ushered into a small ante-room bare of furniture and with bars across its solitary foot-square window. Here I waited fully half an hour with two of my guards.

I was weary, unkempt, unshaven, and very hungry. That in itself had brought about a certain apathy, and the thought of my imminent appearance before the Tribunal—whatever that was—failed to stir me.

Suddenly the door of the ante-room was thrown open and a Chinaman, clad in long brown robes of silk, appeared on the threshold. Obeying his gesture, my guards fell in on each side of me, and I was marched out of the room and along the corridor till we came to a halt outside a closed door. Motioning my guards to wait, the Chinaman knocked discreetly, and opening the door slipped into the room. I heard a murmur of voices, then he reappeared and beckoned my guards to enter with me.

I confess, then, to a certain tingling of my blood, for now the moment had come I was curious to see this Tribunal—these lords of life and death.

The room into which I was marched was large and spacious. At a table, near the wall opposite the door, sat five men. Four of them faced me, whilst the fifth—Pulhausen—sat at the head of the table on their left. He was clad in a scarlet uniform with high-necked tunic and gold facings. On the left breast of his tunic there glittered two small golden wings. He was slewed round in his chair, so that he faced me, and one field-booted leg was thrown negligently over the other. Although he seemed to loll in his high-backed ebony armchair there was, nevertheless, an air of alert briskness about him.

Three of the remaining four men were Chinamen, and judging by their robes and the cold austerity of their countenances they appeared to be of some high order. Most certainly they were not of the common herd. They wore black satin skull caps, rich blue brocaded robes, and over their robes each wore a sleeved cloak of scarlet satin lined with ermine fur.

They sat hunched up in their chairs, their heads thrust forward, their yellow faces inscrutable. And as they peered towards me I was reminded in some manner of three elderly, but evil, birds of prey.

The fifth man was an European. He sat on the extreme right, farthest away from Pulhausen. His hair was close cropped and greying round the temples. Cold eyes of a peculiar greenish hue were set in a sallow face. His nose was sharp and prominent, and the severity of his cruel, thin-lipped mouth was somewhat lessened by a carefully trimmed moustache which merged into a small goatee beard. He was clad in a well-fitting lounge suit, and the hand which played idly with a pen on the table in front of him was white and well-cared for.

So much for those whom I took to be my judges. At both ends of the room, standing stiff and erect against the walls were Chinese soldiers. There were eight ranged against each wall, their rifles held stiffly by their sides.

My guards marched me to within a few feet of the table, then compelled me to kneel upon the bare floor—the customary position for the accused in a Chinese court. And thus I perceived the stage was all set for my mockery of a trial, for mockery I never doubted it would be. But I missed one of the leading characters, the gross Bolponi. He, I presumed, would be my chief accuser. Scarce, however, had my guards forced me to my knees than he appeared and took up his position at the foot of the table opposite Pulhausen.

He was considerably smarter than when first I set eyes on him in the ill-fated inn of Suchow, though he wore the same uniform as he had done on that occasion. His

massive hand clutched a sheaf of papers, and these he laid on the table in front of him, then turned to subject me to a scowling stare.

The brown-robed Chinaman who had summoned us from the ante-room glided to the table and seated himself, quill pen in hand. Ink wells and paper were already in position before my five judges on the table, which was covered with a scarlet cloth.

There was a long minute of dead silence in the room. I stared back at Bolponi, then swept the faces of the five. Pulhausen's eyes were fixed on me, hard and emotionless. Then suddenly he sat bolt upright in his chair, and turning to Bolponi demanded harshly:

“Is this the prisoner?”

“Yes!” growled Bolponi. “It is he whom I found in the inn at Suchow, and whom I suspect of being a cursed English spy!”

“Why?”

The word rumbled up from the throat of one of the Chinese.

Bolponi thereupon launched into a detailed account of how he had interrogated me, and how his suspicions that I was masquerading in the guise of a Chinaman had been aroused. He dwelt upon the trick Pulhausen had played upon me when he burnt my false scalp, and upon my attempted escape.

He gave the whole affair with a wealth of detail, and the Chinese scribe wrote busily the while. When he had concluded, the man with the goatee beard turned to Pulhausen.

“It is perhaps idle to ask,” he murmured, in a curiously quiet voice, “but do you corroborate this as far as you were concerned in the prisoner's capture?”

“I do!” replied Pulhausen harshly; then turning to me continued: “You have heard what has been said! We have made no effort yet to remove your make-up and thus ascertain your nationality! It will save time if you will answer my questions! Do you deny that you are English?”

I was not going to deny it, and a stubborn silence did not appeal to me. I had not forgotten Pulhausen's remark in the stable of the inn.

“I do not deny it!” I answered boldly enough, but I am afraid, with a hint of cheap bravado in my voice.

“I knew it!”

Bolponi's voice was triumphant. He wheeled on me, shaking a clenched fist.

“He is a spy!” he cried. “A cursed English spy! Ask him that, and see if he will deny it? Ask him——”

“Silence!”

Pulhausen's voice cut in on his words like the crack of a whip, and I saw a thin flush of anger mount to his cheeks.

Bolponi relapsed into silence, but the glance he cast at Pulhausen was not lost on me, and I knew in that moment that, whether I lived to see it or not, some day there would be trouble between these two.

“Now answer this, you Englishman,” went on Pulhausen, turning to me. “What did you seek in Suchow?”

I look back on my answer with mingled feelings. Sometimes I feel proud of it, and at other times I am guilty of a feeling almost approaching shame. But the truth I could not, would not, tell, and I was too weary to indulge in diplomatic guile.

“You can find out!” I replied defiantly, and my tone was such as a fag might have used to an over-inquisitive prefect.

Pulhausen smiled—a smile so bleak, so utterly lacking in anything akin to mirth, that I would rather he had flown into a towering passion.

“The dog is insolent!” growled one of the Chinese, and crashed his fist angrily upon the table.

Pulhausen ignored him.

“Perhaps it will not be necessary to find out!” he said suavely, addressing me. “You will, however, allow me to point out that refusal to answer our questions will not incline us to deal leniently with you!”

At that I was stung to hot response.

“Have done with this mockery!” I cried, “for I tell you here and now that not one question will I answer!”

“There are ways and means of loosening stubborn tongues!” murmured Pulhausen. “You will not, I trust, force us to introduce them to you!”

“You can do your worst!” I snapped, for his suave tones flicked me to the raw.

“You hear him!” snarled Bolponi. “You hear the stubborn English dog! They are all alike! Give him to me, and I vow I’ll make him speak!”

Pulhausen looked at him coldly.

“You shall have him, Bolponi, if he refuses to answer!” he said. “I think, however, that he will be amenable to reason! Such stubbornness is a characteristic of these English!”

With that he turned to me, and at a gesture my guards dragged me closer to the table.

“Now tell me,” he said quietly, “what think you of the prison of Zadan?”

I saw little point in the question. It had been asked in tones which were almost conversational. Pulhausen never took his eyes from my face as he asked it, but I noted that his hands were playing idly with the papers on the table in front of him.

“Ah, you do not answer,” he went on. “Maybe your thoughts are too deep for words. But surely you will tell us what you think of that estimable seneschal, Heng Chu?”

Again I saw no point in the question, yet his eyes were fixed searchingly upon my face. Then suddenly he leaned forward in his chair. With a flick of his fingers he threw a piece of paste-board on to the floor almost under my nose.

“Then tell me what you think of that, you dog?” he shouted harshly, and jumped to his feet.

I did not answer. I was staring at the piece of paste-board. It was the size of a small visiting card, gilt-edged, and bare of all lettering. But, embossed in the centre, was the replica of a black flying beetle!

[NOTE.—The incident of the sudden production of the card, after a few apparently pointless questions to put Beverley off his guard, is based on an actual experience of the author while a prisoner-of-war in Germany.]

“Your answer, Bolponi!” cried Pulhausen. “Read your answer in his eyes!”

His voice brought me to myself. I raised my eyes from the card and stared at him. With an oath Bolponi rushed forward and grabbed me by the arm.

“What know you of that?” he shouted, shaking me savagely and pointing at the card. “What know you of that, you English spy?”

“I know that it lies there before me!” I retorted.

“You know more than that!” cut in Pulhausen harshly. “Bolponi is vindicated. He swore you were a spy, and your eyes betrayed you! You know that card, and you know what it means and from whom it came!”

In very truth I knew. It was a card such as this that Harry Davies, the Flying Beetle, had left at the scenes of his exploits when he had brought the fabric of intrigue and plot crashing down upon the heads of its originators on a previous occasion.

“Answer, you cur!” shouted Bolponi. “What do you know of this Flying Beetle?”

“Leave this to me!” said Pulhausen sharply.

He sank into his chair, and leaning forward fixed his cold eyes upon my face.

“You say you will not answer my questions,” he said, speaking slowly and distinctly, “yet I am going to ask you one, and by your silence you will give me the affirmative.”

He paused, and I knew what was coming. I realised also why he had spoken of the prison of Zadan and of its head gaoler, Heng Chu. He had thought to throw me off my guard, and by swift action bring a start of surprise from me when the card was suddenly thrust before my vision. Had I possessed no knowledge of Davies then the card must perforce have left me cold. I sensed also why I had been given no food since the previous morning. My *morale* had been lowered, and I was more subject to swift and uncontrollable emotion than would be the case were I well fed and in full control of myself. It wanted but the flicker of an eyelid to show this Pulhausen what he looked to see. That I knew full well.

“Did you,” Pulhausen’s voice cut in on my thoughts, “come to Suchow in search of a British Secret Service agent, Davies by name, whose alias is the Flying Beetle? Alternatively, did you come to Suchow working in conjunction with this man Davies?”

There was a long silence. The five men at the table watched me grimly. Even the Chinese scribe raised his yellow face and turned his motionless eyes upon me. Bolponi glared at me, his breath coming in labouring gusts.

“I will give you one minute in which to answer!”

Pulhausen’s voice came harsh and unreal to my ears.

Again silence settled on the room, and I fell to speculating on Davies' fate. Was he still alive and somewhere in the neighbourhood. It might be possible. Yet, were he dead, my interrogation would naturally proceed on the lines which it was now taking. These men were convinced I was a secret service agent, and wished to know what I knew and also my mission. Of one thing only could I be tolerably certain and that was that Davies was not a prisoner. Had he been held captive by these men, then doubtless they would have confronted me with him. I knew full well that nothing I could say would alter my ultimate fate. It would, however, give me some satisfaction were I able, even at this eleventh hour, to discover something of the relationship between these men and the Flying Beetle. They were in possession of one of his cards, so he must obviously have come in contact with them. I decided to bluff, and with the decision came the voice of Pulhausen:

“You have five seconds left!”

“You but waste your time,” I retorted, “for I will tell you nothing! As for this Flying Beetle of whom you speak, you know more of his whereabouts than I do!”

And like the dull impetuous fool that he was, the gross Bolponi swallowed the bait.

“You lie!” he shouted. “You lie, you dog! I'll force the truth out of you, you cursed spy! You know where he is, and *nom d'un nom*, but I'll——”

“Be silent, you loud-mouthed fool!” shouted Pulhausen, and leapt to his feet. For a fleeting moment I thought he was going to strike Bolponi. It was the first time that I had seen him lose his self-control, and Bolponi recoiled before the passion in his blazing eyes.

But a wild elation had surged through my soul at those words of Bolponi's.

“You do not know,” I cried triumphantly, “and rest assured of this: the death you mean to mete out to me will not go unavenged!”

“Enough of this!” snarled Pulhausen, flinging himself back into his chair.

He motioned to my guards, and they dragged me back from the table. Then my five judges conversed together in low tones whilst Bolponi stood sullenly by, his flushed face turned towards them as though to miss nothing of what was said.

As for myself, reaction had set in. I felt strangely weak and apathetic. I verily believe that, had they taken me out then and there and shot me in cold blood I would have cared but little, for I knew that there could be no escape for me. Had I been even the most harmless and inoffensive of Englishmen I would never have been allowed to depart from Zadan after what I had seen. And yet I understood but little the reason for that giant aerodrome. That it was to be the base for the outfitting of a gigantic air-arm which was to be directed in some manner against the British Empire I did not doubt, for I knew something of the results of Davies' investigations as told me by Sir Malcolm Douglas. There were strong and sinister influences at work in the East, backed by a foreign power and working to the hurt of England. And it wanted but little deduction to connect this hidden aerodrome with those enemies of Britain.

Suddenly Pulhausen straightened in his chair and his colleagues leaned back in theirs. I was forced to shuffle forward on my knees a few feet, then brought to a halt. Pulhausen looked at me coldly and his voice, when he spoke, was emotionless.



“Englishman,” he said, “you are a spy! Of that there cannot be the slightest doubt! We are also convinced that you are a colleague of this Flying Beetle! It is idle to question you further, for you have refused to answer. This, then, is our verdict.”

He paused, then continued, spacing his words with slow deliberation.

“You are to be taken back to the prison of Zadan. At dawn to-morrow you will gain experience of the means by which we persuade the stubborn to speak. Release can come in either of two forms. You may speak, and thus save the crushing and breaking of your limbs and the blinding of your eyes. But should you remain stubborn, then release will come only with death, and, in the latter case, death will be the most welcome visitor whom you have ever received!”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE BEETLE APPEARS

I HAD been expecting some such sentence, and I showed, I think, but little of emotion. Not so Bolponi.

“Why wait?” he thundered, and crashed his great fist upon the table. “Why wait, I say? Am I to have no voice in these councils?” He pointed a quivering forefinger at Pulhausen, and swung his great head towards the impassive Chinese judges, “Are you always to listen to the words of that upstart?” he roared. “Are you to be led by his glib tongue in every course you take? The English spy is mine, I say! It was I who found him, so kill him and have done!”

Pulhausen sat silent, his eyes on Bolponi, and a faint, contemptuous smile playing about his lips. It was that very contempt which seemed to goad Bolponi to an almost insane fury. His little pig-like eyes blazed, and he shook a clenched fist at Pulhausen.

“I know your game,” he roared. “You thwart me at every turn, and take the power which is mine by right into your own hands. But you will go too far, Pulhausen! You cannot ride roughshod over me, and your cursed cleverness will earn you a knife-thrust in the back!”

“How exceeding droll!” murmured Pulhausen. “But have done, my good Bolponi, this jealousy is unseemly!”

He used the word jealousy, I think, with deliberate intent to provoke Bolponi further. But it afforded me an instantaneous and illuminating insight into the relationship which existed between these two men. Bolponi was heavy, loutish; Pulhausen was clever, coolly, calculatingly so, and by every natural law his stronger personality was destined to dominate that of Bolponi. The latter knew it, and the knowledge rankled. Jealousy! The word was crude, but eminently suitable.

“Control yourself, Bolponi!” said one of the Chinese sharply. “We are not led by Pulhausen, and your words border on the insulting! As for your threat, should you be so ill-advised as to carry it into execution, then you shall die a death more horrible than any you have yet devised for the prisoners of Zadan!”

The words seemed to act like a douche of cold water on Bolponi. A look of fear leapt for a moment into his eyes, and he was silent.

Pulhausen leant forward in his chair, and when he spoke his voice was soft, almost courteous.

“Bolponi,” he said, “you wrong me when you say I thwart you at every turn! In very truth the prisoner is yours. But there are certain questions which it is imperative that he should answer. Do you not understand? To kill him now were to still his tongue for all time. It is the sentence of this Tribunal that he be put to the torture and given some little time first to reflect on his position. However, if my colleagues,” and he bowed gravely to the four, “will give their consent, I suggest that, as you are athirst for blood, the interval for reflection be shortened, and that the torture takes place at

midnight! In that eventuality the prisoner will be lodged here in solitary confinement, where you yourself may keep a watchful eye on him!”

The magnanimity of this compromise was not such that it appealed to me, but it most certainly appealed to Bolponi.

“But yes,” he cried. “*Nom d’un chien*, but yes, I agree to that!”

Pulhausen turned to his colleagues.

“Is it permitted,” he asked softly, “to afford Bolponi some little satisfaction in this matter?”

“It is a thing of small account!” replied one of the Chinamen harshly. “It cannot affect the issue, just when and where the English dog is tortured! I agree, Pulhausen!”

The others nodded their assent, and Pulhausen turned to Bolponi.

“Take the spy then, Bolponi, and guard him well!” he said.

Bolponi snarled out an order to my guards. They seized me roughly by the shoulders and dragged me to my feet, and I was propelled from the room, Bolponi treading heavily at our heels. We traversed the long corridor till my guards halted me before a heavy wooden door, braced with iron and fitted with double locks, bolts, and a small sliding shutter. Bolponi fumbled beneath his tunic and produced a bunch of keys from his belt. With one of these he unlocked the door, the guards drew back the bolts, and I was thrust roughly inside as one of them swung open the door. My crossing of the threshold was hastened somewhat by a powerful kick from Bolponi. As a matter of fact, fettered as I was, it sent me staggering forward, and I nearly fell.

“Now rest there, you hound!” snarled Bolponi. “We will come for you at midnight!”

With that the door slammed shut, the key turned in the lock and the bolts screeched home.

The cell in which I found myself was about twelve feet long by six in breadth. The only lighting and ventilation were afforded by a barred window, little more than a foot square. There were no furnishings whatsoever, but a filthy heap of straw lay in one corner. On to this I sank, then, stretching myself out, fell instantly asleep. For reaction had set in, and I made no effort to fight against the overpowering weariness that took possession of my mind and body.

I awoke with a start. The cell was almost in darkness, but the grey square of the window told me that night had not yet quite come. I was conscious of an acute hunger, and my throat was parched and dry for want of water. My arms were numb, for my hands were still manacled behind my back.

As the aftermath of sleep cleared gradually from my brain the full hopelessness of my position came flooding back on me. Well, the beginning of the end was but a matter of a few short hours, and I take pride that in that moment my predominant prayer was—God send I might meet death in a manner befitting an Englishman.

One thing I did know, and took comfort from the thought. Davies was alive and at large. That much Bolponi had let fall. I rose to my feet and moved to the small window, for it well might be that I was looking my last upon the outside world. But I could see

little in the greying dusk, save a few indistinct forms moving amongst the hutments. I pressed my brow against the cool iron bars, for my head was aching intolerably, and as I lowered my eyes I saw what appeared to be scratchings on the stone window sill.

The marks showed up freshly against the black, timeworn stonework, as though they had been made but recently. I stared at them idly, then it slowly dawned on me that the scratchings took the form of lettering. I bent my head and peered at them with idle curiosity. I think the thought uppermost in my mind was that perhaps some unfortunate wretch who had occupied the cell before me had whiled away his time in this manner.

Then, as I looked, my face a few inches from the sill, I caught my breath sharply. For, despite the dusk, I could trace the scratched letters which formed three words, "In Fide Fiducia," and underneath the words there was the crude design of a flying beetle.

For a long moment I stared, then, lifting my head, gazed through the barred window with unseeing eyes.

"In Fide Fiducia!"

I know not how many times I repeated the words, but there was the dawning of a new hope in my heart. "In my Faith my Confidence"—the motto of my old school, back home in distant England. And as I gazed through the window I saw once again the grey buildings, mellowed in the dusk of a summer evening, the green sward of the playing fields fringed with the elms now merging in the creeping shadows of the coming night.

Davies had been at the school, though not in the same house as myself. There could be little doubt that the words had been scratched by him, else why was the design of a flying beetle added? Were the words meant as a direct message for myself? That was impossible, for how did Davies know I was to occupy this cell? Apart from that, how could he ever have won an entry to the cell?

The only alternative, then, was that he had been here as a prisoner. But I was convinced he was not a prisoner. It was possible that he had been held captive in this cell and had escaped. But the scratchings were almost new.

There was a third theory. Had someone amused themselves by scratching the words; someone who was not Davies, but who knew of him. This was possible, but—and this was the unsurmountable snag—how came it that the words were the motto of our old school?

No, rightly or wrongly, I was convinced that the words had been scratched on the stonework by Davies, but why, and under what circumstances, was a complete mystery to me. The more I thought of it the more inexplicable it appeared.

I moved from the window and seated myself on my heap of straw, better to think the matter out. I had become conscious of a muffled tramp, tramp, tramp, backwards and forwards past the door of my cell, and I guessed that the vigilant Bolponi had posted a guard.

It was quite dark outside by this time, and inky black inside the cell. Long hours dragged by, and yet I was no nearer a solution of my problem. More than once my thoughts turned to what was in store for me when midnight came, but resolutely I attempted to put them aside.

Occasionally the silence would be broken by the reverberating roar of aeroplane engines out on the aerodrome. Once I heard muffled voices outside my cell, and the incessant tramp, tramp of my guard ceased for a few minutes, then recommenced. But there was a difference in the tread, and I judged that the lull had been caused by the changing of my guard.

Then, when interminable hours had passed, I heard gruff voices in the corridor and a key rattled in the lock of the door of my cell. I little doubted that my hour had come, and my pulse quickened, for I had heard something of Chinese “methods of persuasion.”

The door swung open, and Bolponi appeared on the threshold, a lantern in his hand. Behind him stood two Chinese soldiers and by his side that misshapen fiend, Heng Chu, from the Zadan prison.

Bolponi stood a moment on the threshold, his great head thrust forward, peering at me as I sat with my back against the wall. Then he strode forward and kicked me savagely in the ribs.

“Well, you dog,” he snarled, “there wants but an hour till midnight strikes!”

“Then at least you might have spared me the pleasure of your company till then!” I replied, for truly I cared little what I said.

“Insolent pig!” shrilled Heng Chu. “Your tongue will be the better for a cutting!”

“And you shall have the cutting of it, Heng Chu!” promised Bolponi rumbly. “Oho, but those long fingers of yours shall do good work this night!”

He slapped the dwarf on the back with a hand like a ham, and with such hearty violence that the grotesque little creature almost sprawled across me.

I was wondering to what I owed the visit, but I might have spared myself any such thought on the subject, for it was obvious that Bolponi had merely come to gloat over me. Heng Chu, I did not doubt, had been brought from the Zadan prison to assist in the torturing of me.

“You have but an hour, you cursed spy,” went on Bolponi, “and then we shall see how far your bones will squeeze before they are crushed!”

I think he was disappointed that this reference did not wring from my lips some protest or rejoinder, for he continued snarlingly:

“And that this short hour may be made more sweet for you, you hound, I will give you food for reflection. You are a spy, and, being English, have been sent here by the British Government. What we want from you is an answering of questions concerning this Davies, the Flying Beetle. With your own eyes you have seen this aerodrome of Zadan, but you have not seen the Scarlet Squadron!”

“Pulhausen’s squadron!” cried Heng Chu.

“Yes, Pulhausen’s squadron, curse him,” went on Bolponi, “but the finest fighting squadron in the world. Nothing can live against them in the air, and they are ours—ours!”

He slapped himself on the chest as though to emphasise the proprietorship.

“But that is not all! That is just one claw in the great beast of war which we are stirring into life, here in the East! A wonderful beast, you English dog; a beast which will stalk triumphant over England and her Empire, devouring her cities and her peoples!”

“I congratulate you on your choice of simile!” I said, and he stared at me for a moment in angry puzzlement.

“Why tell the foreign devil all this?” ventured Heng Chu, a trifle fearfully. “If Pulhausen heard——”

“Curse Pulhausen!” shouted Bolponi. “He’s drinking himself drunk down in the village! I tell the spy this, you dwarf, so that he may know what is coming to his arrogant country! They love their country, these English hounds, and this hurts him more than you can understand!”

Here, indeed, was a psychology which I had not looked for in Bolponi.

“The hordes of China are about to rise,” he went on, and something in his voice told me that he spoke the truth, “and with China in arms, the whole of Asia will flock to our banner. India will become ours in a night, and we shall sweep westwards till we call a halt only in mighty London itself! What of your flag then, you spy? What of your great Empire? Pah! A shambles, and we the butchers!”

He broke off, his great chest rising and falling with the violence of his outburst.

“What have you to say to that?” he snarled.

“Only that you are the most imaginative liar I have ever encountered!” I replied, and got a savage kick in the stomach for my pains.

His boot had the effect of doubling me up in a spasm of pain, and as I lay gasping for breath he turned on his heel and strode to the door.

“Chew well on what I’ve told you,” he bellowed, pausing on the threshold and turning to look at me, “for it is the truth. The dogs of war are straining at their leashes and their hungry eyes are fixed on England!”

With that he was gone. The door banged shut and I heard it being relocked and bolted. The wave of nausea occasioned by his kick passed off, but left me strangely weak. I wondered a little why he had not taken me out to my fate then and there. The Tribunal had said midnight, however, and I doubted not that the loud-mouthed bully dare not contravene their orders.

I reckoned it wanted yet half an hour till midnight. A black despair flooded over me as I thought of the menace which threatened England, a menace which I was powerless to avert or even give warning of. But Davies was at large. I clung to that as a drowning man to a straw. He would know what was afoot, and would get word through somehow. From the very bottom of my heart I wished him God speed.

The minutes dragged by; resolutely I tried to put from me the thoughts of what was coming. I fell to counting the muffled footbeats of the sentry outside the cell. But I lost the thread of that, though I fought hard to concentrate upon it.

The half hour had passed twice by my own reckoning, though I know now that it wanted still ten minutes to midnight, when I heard the tramp of the sentry come to an

abrupt halt. A low murmured word came to my ears. A key was inserted in the lock, and I heard a faint click as it was turned. The screech of bolts withdrawn from their sockets, slowly and carefully, heralded the opening of the door.

I rose to my feet, for I had no wish to be dragged out, preferring to walk. Then I stood stock still in utter astonishment, for, as the door swung slowly open, the Chinese sentry backed into the cell, his hands held above his head. I saw this, not only by the dim light from the corridor, but by the strong beam of an electric torch held in the hand of a blue-bloused, masked Chinaman who followed the sentry into the cell. And the other hand of the Chinaman held a squat automatic within a few inches of the sentry's chest.

As they crossed the threshold the masked man kicked the door shut behind him with a quick movement of his foot. I watched, tense and silent.

"Take the smallest key of the bunch you hold, and with it unlock the prisoner's fetters and the manacles on his wrists!"

The words came from the lips of the masked man in little more than a whisper. He spoke in Chinese, and I noticed for the first time that from one of the sentry's upstretched hands there dangled a bunch of keys.

Slowly the sentry lowered his hands.

"One false move and you are dead!"

There was no mistaking the grim determination in the low voice of the masked man. The sentry turned towards me, and then in crisp English came the words from the man with the gun:

"Let him release you! Every moment is precious!"

With a wild hope in my heart I turned my back and felt the sentry's shaking hands fumbling with the manacles about my wrists. There came a faint click, and they clattered to the ground: the leg-irons followed.

"Quick! Secure the sentry and gag him!"

Explanations would follow. At the moment I had no other thought than to obey the orders which came from the man in the mask. Snatching the keys from the sentry's hand, I picked up the irons and clapped them on his limbs, taking care to keep him so that the automatic covered him.

My very eagerness was like to defeat its own ends, for I fumbled a few precious seconds away in looking amongst the bunch for that smallest key with which to lock the manacles.

But I found it, and in a moment had the sentry's hands locked together behind his back and his feet secured.

"Hurry! They will be here any moment!"

I knew only too well who "they" were. In eager haste I ripped two long strips from my tattered blouse. One I rolled into a ball and thrust into the sentry's mouth. The other I utilised to tie the gag securely. This done, the masked man laid a hand on my arm.

"Give me the keys!" he whispered urgently. "Follow me, and ask no question! Here, take this!"

He thrust the automatic into my hand, and, oh, the feeling of elation which came to me when I felt the cold butt in my hand. Let Bolponi come upon us now. There would be one bully and plotter less that night.

The masked man led the way out of the cell. He paused a moment to lock the door and thrust home a bolt. Then, thrusting keys and electric torch into his pocket, he produced an automatic, and keeping close to the wall led the way along the silent deserted corridor.

Suddenly he grasped my arm and together we shrank into the cover of a nearby door. We were just in time, for at the far end of the corridor had appeared a gross form, which I recognised as Bolponi's. The man was approaching us, accompanied by Heng Chu and with two soldiers following in his wake. I heard my companion try the handle of the door, then give a sharp, stifled exclamation. The door was locked.

The heavy tramp of approaching feet told me that the men were almost upon us. I heard a faint jingle of metal, then a click. The door behind me swung open a foot, and, my companion's hand upon my arm, I slid through the aperture into the room beyond.

There was no time to close the door, for the movement might have betrayed us. With bated breath I waited, my finger on the trigger of my gun. Bolponi's booming tones and the shrill, hideous cackle of Heng Chu seemed to pass within a foot of where we crouched. Then the danger was past, and my companion quietly closed and locked the door.

Taking his electric torch from his pocket he swept it round the room, which I saw was bare of any furnishings. In the opposite wall was a fair-sized window, constructed on the lattice principle.

"Quick!" whispered the masked man. "The alarm will be raised in a moment! He was prompt!"

He crossed rapidly to the window and jerked it open. Then pocketing his torch he whispered:

"Out you go! It's no drop!"

I clambered through, and dropped to the ground a few feet below. Then came a faint thud as my companion landed alongside of me. Grasping my arm he set off running through the inky blackness of the night, moving with unerring instinct and avoiding the lighted hutments.

I saw we were making towards the aerodrome on which twinkled a few stationary lights. Scarce had we reached the first of the hangars, however, than there came a hubbub of shouting from the hutments behind us.

"Bolponi will be frantic!" murmured my companion, and I fancied I heard him laugh softly.

There could be no doubt what the shouting betokened. My escape had been discovered. We ran onwards, keeping in the rear of the hangars, and I marvelled anew how the man by my side could find his way without so much as a stumble.

We paused at length against the rear of a large canvas hangar. Behind us the hubbub had swelled, and I heard the sharp report of a rifle.



“A signal!” murmured my companion. “They cannot, however, tell which way we have gone!”

There was a confidence in his tones which communicated itself to me. He dropped to his knees, and I heard his hand groping along the canvas. Then came an exclamation of satisfaction and his voice floated up to me in a whisper:

“Down on your knees and follow me!”

I dropped to my hands and knees, and with one hand touching his ankle I followed him through a rent in the canvas and rose to my feet inside the hangar.

He switched on his torch, and I saw that a medium-sized, single-engined aeroplane stood in the middle of the otherwise empty hangar. The machine was about the size of a Bristol fighter and was painted a jet black.

“Hurry, for I dare not keep the light on!” said this strange companion of mine, and led the way towards the middle of the machine’s fuselage. There he switched off his light, and I heard the fabric creak as he leant against the fuselage.

“Now listen,” he said tersely, in a low voice, “for we have little time for talk. I got you out of that cell, and I can get you out of the country. This is no time for proving *bona fides*, but look at this!”

He flashed on his torch for a moment and showed me in his hand a small metal disc, the emblem of the British Secret Service.

“I show you that,” he went on, switching off the light, “because I want you to answer my questions without the slightest hesitation. Who are you, and what do you seek here?”

“I am Major Beverley, late of the Royal Air Force, and now of the Service,” I replied promptly. “I came here in search of Davies, and that is—you!”

He laughed softly and said:

“Yes, I am Davies!”

There was silence for a moment. I think each of us had his own thoughts.

“We have such a little time,” Davies’ voice was low but urgent. “Some day we may be able to compare notes. Now listen! If you were in the Air Force you will be able to pilot a machine?”

“Yes!”

“My original plan was this. I learnt Bolponi had captured one of our men, and I had planned to get you away in this machine. It leaves here at dawn with despatches for Sianfu! The rear cockpit is covered with a laced-down tarpaulin, and in it I have placed water, food, and ammunition for you. The machine stays one night at Sianfu, and, by biding your time, you would have a chance to get clear and report to headquarters in England.”

“And what of you?” I demanded.

“I remain here! There is work to be done and terrible issues at stake!”

“But the sentry saw you in that disguise! He will recognise you——”

“This is a disguise which I adopted for one night only! The sentry has seen me almost every day, but it was in a very different disguise. So has Bolponi. If that mass of vindictiveness only guessed——”

He broke off, as though communing with his own thoughts, then resumed sharply:

“Your being able to fly a machine, Major, gives me an ally I am sorely in need of here!”

“You have but to say what you require——” I began, but he cut in on my words, his hand on my arm.

“I know that! Now think carefully. Has anyone with whom you have come in contact in China, seen you minus the make-up and disguise which you now wear?”

“None, except Parkin at Hong Kong!”

“Good! Then none would recognise you if you rid yourself of your disguise?”

“I think I can safely say no one!”

Davies was silent for a few moments.

“Do this, then,” he said, speaking rapidly. “Keep under the tarpaulin till you are well clear of the aerodrome. Somewhere over some desolate region between here and Sianfu take the pilot by surprise and force him to land. The machine is dual control, and you will be able to fly it from the rear cockpit. Get the pilot out of the machine, relieve him of his despatches, and take the air again alone. You will then have to make another landing somewhere in order to get rid of your make-up and to change your garb. Return here when you are ready, and report that Ho Sin—mark well that name—of Sianfu, instructed you to bring back the machine!”

“But will not the pilot of the machine make his way back here?”

“Not he! He will be afraid to face Pulhausen after losing both his machine and his despatches. He will just vanish!”

“Then will not the deception be discovered when communication is re-established with this Ho Sin!”

“That is a risk which we must take. But, for reasons into which I cannot go, it is not so great as it appears. When you land here, adopt the *rôle* of a swaggering, cosmopolitan adventurer who cherishes a lively hatred of England and all things English!”

“And my identification papers!”

“Leave that to me! You will have to report to Pulhausen when you land here, but between your landing and your meeting him I will get your papers to you somehow. I will not fail you!”

“Then the name I shall adopt?”

“Von Mauser! Address, any capital in Europe—reason for present occupation, a chance for easy money, coupled with a strong desire to avoid the police of Europe!”

Davies paused, and in the silence which followed I heard voices somewhere outside the hangar, but close at hand.

“I must go!” Davies’ voice was scarcely audible. “One last word. Do not seek me out when you return here. I will get into communication with you when necessary. Play your part boldly, and obey all orders unquestioningly. Should you be discovered, then you know what will follow. And now good-bye and good luck!”

Our hands met in the darkness, then he stood aside whilst I clambered up the fuselage and groped for the tarpaulin-covered cockpit. I found that the tarpaulin was partly unlaced, and, slipping beneath it, I dropped into the cockpit and seated myself, as best I could, on the floor.

## CHAPTER VIII

### I ESCAPE

ALTHOUGH more than once throughout the night I heard distant voices, no one entered the hangar in search of me. It was probable that my pursuers thought I had made towards the village.

I found sandwiches and a flask of water in the cockpit, and I ate with gusto, for it was long since I had broken my fast. The food sent new life coursing through my veins, and having eaten I curled up, making myself as comfortable as possible in the cramped space. I first took the precaution of lacing the tarpaulin into place, and although I had to work in total darkness I managed tolerably well.

Throughout the remaining hours of the night I thought of Davies and the strangeness of our meeting. I remembered too late that I had forgotten to question him regarding the lettering on the window sill of my cell. But some day I would satisfy myself on that point, as I doubtless would on many others which were puzzling me.

At length I heard voices and the creaking of the canvas doors of the hangar, and I knew that the dawn had come. I still had the revolver which Davies had given me, and this I kept in my hand. He had seemed fairly confident that the tarpaulin would not be removed. To expert mechanics the extra weight of the machine caused by my presence on board might have given rise to investigation. But I had noticed, when Davies shone his torch on the machine, that the tail-skid was already mounted on the trolley which was used in wheeling the aeroplane from the hangar. This greatly obviated the risk of the extra weight being detected. The aeroplane was not one, I thought, which would require ballast in the rear cockpit when not carrying a passenger.

The voices came quite close to me, speaking in guttural Chinese. Then the fabric quivered as hands were laid upon it, and I felt the machine move slowly forward out of the hangar.

Someone mounted to the forward cockpit. I heard him fumbling about, then the engine burst into a shattering roar. The tuning-up took fully ten minutes, and was obviously done by a mechanic, for leaving the engine ticking over, he descended from the cockpit and someone else clambered up, someone with an infinitely lighter step.

This, I thought, would be the pilot, and in that surmise I was correct, for the engine roared into a full, deep note, died away, then roared again, and on this second occasion we commenced to move slowly forward, bumping and jarring a little. I felt the machine swing into wind and pause for a moment whilst the engine roared with new life on a high pulsating note, then we shot forward with ever-increasing speed. The aeroplane lifted, bumped slightly, then lifted again, and by the slope of the floor of the cockpit I realised that we were in the air and climbing steadily.

During the half hour which followed I cautiously unlaced the tarpaulin covering of the cockpit. It billowed and bellied wildly in the slip-stream from the propeller, and, at

length, judging the moment had come, I stood up and allowed the tarpaulin to whirl away into the air clear of the rudder and the rudder controls.

In front of me, so close that I could have touched him by stretching out an arm, was the pilot crouching over his controls. I did not fear discovery from him, as he had a clear sky, his engine was running well, and there was nothing to cause him to twist round in his seat and look behind.

My own cockpit was fitted with a dashboard, rudder-bar, and main control stick. The altimeter on my dashboard was registering eight thousand feet. The air was bitterly cold, and I decided to get the job over as soon as possible.

The country over which we were passing was rugged, with here and there a wide stretch of bleak upland. We were heading roughly east-south-east and a glance at the speedometer showed our flying speed to be wavering between the hundred-and-two and the hundred-and-five miles per hour marks.

Away on our left I saw the desolate stretch of the Gobi Desert, and this I decided to make for should I be able to overawe the pilot. Our landing would be tolerably safe from inquisitive eyes in that lonely region, and by striking southwards on foot the pilot would be able eventually to reach some remote and isolated village. For I had no mind to leave the fellow to perish, enemy of England though he was.

So, taking a firm grip of my revolver, I leant forward and jabbed him between the shoulder blades with the muzzle.

I do not know what he thought had happened, but he turned his head with a jerk, and then became rigid and motionless. My face was within a foot of his. He wore a face-mask and goggles, but through the triplex glass of the latter I could see the sallow skin and the almond-shaped eyes of the Oriental.

With that instinct which comes to all pilots, he kept his grip on the control, and the nose of the machine did not drop as I had been half expecting.

“Close down your engine!” I roared, and jabbed him again with the automatic to lend emphasis to the words.

He shook his head, but whether in refusal or to signify that he did not understand I had no means of knowing. I leant closer, my lips almost against the earguards of his helmet. At the same time I transferred the revolver to my left hand and shoved it under his nose.

“Close—down—your—engine!”

He heard then, and also understood, for he leant forward and his hand closed on the throttle. The nose of the machine dropped as he pushed forward the control and the roar of the engine died down.

“You will land on the edge of the Gobi Desert!” I shouted, the words plainly audible above the subdued hum of the engine and the whine of the wind in the struts and flying-wires.

He kept one hand on the control, but with the other commenced to fumble with the fastenings of his face-mask. Only by loosening this latter could he speak, but I was in no mind to hear what he had to say.

“Stop that!” I shouted. “Land! We will talk later!”

I made a movement with the gun, and his hand froze into immobility.

“Unless you obey I will shoot!” I roared. “I can land this machine, and at the first false move I will kill you!”

By that threat I meant to warn him against endeavouring to pull out the gun which he doubtless carried somewhere on his person. He stared at me for a moment, his eyes expressionless behind the goggles. Then he turned and gripped the throttle. The engine roared into life, and as he pressed with his foot on the rudder-bar, the nose of the machine swung round northwards towards the Gobi Desert.

At a height of 500 feet the pilot circled widely. Below us, grey and desolate, stretched the fringe of the Gobi Desert. I was cold, almost to my very bones, for I was in rags, and the slip-stream of the racing propeller cut like a knife.

But I dare not crouch down in my cockpit, dare not afford the pilot an opportunity of drawing his gun, for that he was armed I did not doubt. Only once during our descent did he venture a rapid glance over his shoulder, and on that occasion he found himself looking into the muzzle of the revolver within a few inches of his face. He turned his head then and peered downwards, looking for some likely spot upon which to make a landing.

As he banked, at 500 feet, I caught a glimpse of the ground below and wondered grimly if it would be possible to make a landing on that rocky, uneven surface. Of the capabilities of the pilot I knew nothing. Undoubtedly he could handle the machine well enough in the air, but was he equal to making a forced landing on the rough ground below without seriously damaging the under-carriage?

At 400 feet he brought the machine into a steep side-slip. Looking downwards I saw, some little distance ahead, a short stretch of sandy ground tufted with sparse grass and seemingly devoid of any outcroppings of rock. It would take expert piloting to make a landing upon its confined area. I transferred my gaze to the pilot. His hand was on the throttle and the noise of the engine died away to a subdued hum.

Lower and lower we dropped. My altimeter registered 200 feet—100 feet—then, having dropped to 80 feet, ceased to function. The pilot, peering over the edge of the cockpit, suddenly stiffened in his seat. The hand grasping the control-stick moved ever so slightly. The machine swung on to an even keel, her nose came up and we dropped like a stone for a few feet. Then came a jar and the next instant we were bumping along over the uneven surface of the ground with our engine switched off. It was as perfect a pancake landing as I had ever witnessed.

Kicking on full rudder the pilot brought the tail-skid into play as a brake. The machine swung a little, then lost way completely and came to a quivering stop.

The pilot rose slowly, stiffly, in his seat and, turning, confronted me. He drew off his flying gauntlets and, throwing them to the floor of the cockpit, fumbled at the fastenings of his face-mask. His eyes, behind his goggles, never left my face.

The face-mask loosened he thrust up his goggles and for the first time I saw his face. He was a Chinaman, sallow and with the pronounced high cheek-bones of his

race. There was nothing particularly striking about his face, save, perhaps, the glittering angry eyes.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded harshly, speaking in the dialect of the Cantonese.

“Put your hands up!” I replied sharply, for I was in no mood to mince matters with him.

He stared at me unwaveringly for a moment, then his hands crept slowly above his head.

Leaning forward with the revolver in my left hand and my right hand extended I ripped open his flying-coat, almost tearing the buttons off in my haste to get the operation over. For it was a ticklish task and one for which I had no liking. Had he, at that moment, conjured up the courage to whip into action then it might well have been that a bullet from my revolver could only, at the worst, have winged him. But it was obviously a risk which he did not care to take, for he stood passive.

Beneath his flying-coat he wore a high-necked, grey tunic. A loaded gun-holster swung from a belt around his waist. He made no movement whilst I possessed myself of his gun, a six-chambered automatic, and slipped it under my blouse.

“Now get out of the cockpit,” I ordered, feeling supremely master of the situation.

He made no effort to obey, but stood staring at me, his hands raised above his head.

“I will not ask you again,” I warned, and at that he snarled:

“As you will. But there will come a reckoning for this!”

He clambered out of the cockpit and dropped to the ground. For the fraction of a second I think he contemplated making a wild scuttle for the cover which might be afforded by the bottom plane. But again he lacked the necessary courage. And it would have taken courage, for I was leaning out of the cockpit and my finger was pressed tightly on the trigger of my gun.

“Walk twelve paces from the machine and keep your hands up!” I ordered.

He obeyed and carefully I clambered on to the edge of the cockpit. At the tenth pace he took I dropped to the ground and, still crouched, brought my revolver up sharply. I was just in time, for he had dropped his hands and taken a quick step forward.

But in the face of the gun he stood stock still and his hands crept upwards again. Straightening up, but keeping him covered, I approached to within a yard of him.

“Now listen!” I said, “You carry a despatch for Sianfu! I want it! I want also your flying-kit and the uniform which you wear!”

He swore fluently at that, then, as I took a step towards him, he bit off the words and shuffled backwards.

“Have done!” I said roughly, “else what I seek I will take by force! I am offering you your life in exchange for what I require! If you prefer me to shoot you and then take them I shall be most happy to accommodate you!”

“Who are you?” he demanded, hoarsely.

“A question I am likely indeed to answer!” I jeered, conscious that to him I was merely a ragged villainous-looking fellow-countryman of his.

“But I have not time to bandy words with you,” I continued, “as your life seems to have but little value in your eyes I will rid you of it and take those things which I require!”

So saying I took yet another step towards him, my finger curling round the trigger of the gun. My bluff succeeded right up to the hilt, for he proceeded to divest himself of his flying-coat without further ado.

An hour later I stood fully garbed in the uniform he had worn. It consisted of knee-high field boots, grey breeches and tunic. It was rather small and tight for me but was obviously of some stock pattern. He, in turn, wore my tattered trousers and torn blouse. The executing of this change in garb had been a tedious affair. First he had placed his outer garments in a heap near the machine, then had withdrawn twenty paces whilst I, between him and the machine and with both guns near to hand, had rapidly divested myself of my outer garments and struggled into his.

If he had cared to bolt during the operation I should not have attempted to stop him. At the first move towards the machine which he might have attempted to make I was ready to dive for a gun. But he stood shivering and swearing till I tossed him my own garments.

These he donned with a rapidity which, I vow, restored the circulation of his blood. In the breast-pocket of the tunic I found a thick, heavily-sealed envelope addressed in Chinese lettering to Ho Sin of Sianfu. This, undoubtedly, was the despatch and, in response to my question, I received a sullen affirmative.

Struggling into the flying-coat I turned to the glowering erstwhile pilot.

“What course you will pursue from now onwards,” I said, “I neither know or care! You will not starve, for scattered villages are not rare!”

“I will make my way back to Zadan Aerodrome!” he snarled. “You will pay for this, you dog!”

“Return to Zadan by all means,” I replied roughly. “Return and tell Bolponi that you have lost both aeroplane and despatch! Return and tell Pulhausen the same story! A fitting reward will be devised for you, I doubt not!”

Neither did he doubt it, if the look of fear which crossed his face was any token of his thoughts.

He kept his distance whilst I clambered into the front cockpit. A sudden thought struck me, and climbing into the rear cockpit I threw him the remains of the food and the flask of water which Davies had placed there for me. That, at least, would help him somewhat on his way.

That done, I clambered into the forward cockpit again and, with a gun thrust into the belt of my flying-coat, I switched on the engine and pressed the self-starter with which the machine was fitted.

The engine broke into a shattering roar and, from the corner of my eyes, I saw the man run forward towards the machine. I think he was about to make a final effort to



prevent me taking off. But already the machine was commencing to move bumpily forward with increasing impetus. I pushed hard on the rudder-bar and the tail-skid brought the nose of the machine round so sharply that the fellow had to fling himself flat on the ground to avoid being hit by the whirling propeller.

I opened the throttle to the fullest extent and the aeroplane shot forward. The space for taking off was small and, at the risk of a stall, I pulled hard on the control-stick. We bumped once horribly, then took the air, the propeller thrashing at full revolutions. At 20 feet I pushed the stick forward and the nose dropped. I think I was just in time to prevent the nose dropping of its own accord and the machine taking an inglorious dive to earth.

It was a wretched take-off, but I consoled myself by the thought that I was, at any rate, in the air and in sole possession of the machine. I climbed cautiously, striving to obtain the “feel” of the machine. I use that word for want of a better, for every aeroplane possesses a certain individuality all its own.

At 200 feet I banked sharply. Below me, tiny, insignificant, and the only living thing visible to the eye in that dreary waste was the figure of the pilot whom I had dispossessed. I drew the revolver from the belt of the flying-coat and dropped it over the side. It was no country for an unarmed man to wander in and he was welcome now to his weapon.

My engine was running smoothly and the instruments on the dashboard in front of me betokened that all was well with temperature and oil-feed.

As I write I am tempted to lay down my pen and live again in my memory some little of that grey morning over the Gobi Desert. For the rush of the cold, clean air served to sweep the horrors of the past few days from out my brain. I forgot the Zadan Prison and I forgot Heng Chu, the seneschal of that living tomb. Occasionally there would come, wafted to my nostrils, that curious aroma of mingled oil, petrol fumes and varnish which every pilot knows so well and which can stir the very chords of the heart in the memories of joyous hours in God’s fresh air which it provokes.

I know the cold air filled me with a new zest for life—I, who but a few short hours before had been so near despair. The pulsating roar of the engine was as music in my ears and the lift and sway of the machine seemed but to be a joyous materialisation of the *joie de vivre* which had been born anew in me.

At 8,000 feet I saw, far away towards the north-east, the waters of the Hwang-ho River. It was essential to find some secluded spot where water was abundant, for I had yet to remove my disguise. The banks of the Hwang-ho I considered—then dismissed as impracticable. Some wandering tribe, hugging the river, might come upon me. There were, I knew, many uncharted streams in the Gobi Desert, streams which lost themselves in the sandy ground long before they reached the confines of the desert. Near one of these, or near some isolated lake, I would land if I could but come upon one. So, swinging the nose of the machine towards the north and marking well my course to facilitate the return journey, I headed towards the interior of the desert.



*Facing page [129](#).*

HE ROARED OVER MY TOP 'PLANE SO CLOSE THAT I THOUGHT FOR A MOMENT THAT HE  
MUST RIP THE FABRIC

## CHAPTER IX

### MY RETURN TO ZADAN

I HAD flown for close on an hour when I saw below me, at some little distance ahead, the placid waters of a small lake. Throttling down the engine I pushed forward the control and, kicking on rudder, commenced to descend in a wide spiral. I kept a sharp look-out for any signs of human life or habitation, but, as far as the eye could see, all was dreary desolation.

At 50 feet I opened up the engine and made a wide detour of the country within a radius of about fifteen miles. But I saw no signs of life and, returning to the sandy shores of the lake, I dropped down and made a tolerably good landing on the sandy, uneven surface of the ground.

I will dwell lightly on the twenty-four hours which I passed on the shores of that nameless lake. The stain with which Parkin had tinted my face to its yellow, sallow hue was impervious to water, but it was not impervious to repeated rubbings with a cloth soaked in the petrol of the engine. The removal of the wax which had been injected under the skin of my nose was a painful process, but there was only one way of doing it thoroughly. With a sharp-edged chisel which I found in the comprehensive tool-kit carried under the pilot's seat, I made an incision in the skin. I ignited petrol, in a petrol tin battered into some semblance of a shallow receptacle, and over it boiled water from the lake in another tin. With the hot water thus obtained I bathed my wax-laden nose. When the wax softened sufficiently I squeezed it out and, at the end of three hours, my nose had pretty well assumed its normal shape. The incision I covered with a strip of adhesive plaster culled from the small first-aid outfit which I found in the locker underneath the dashboard of the forward cockpit.

The removal of my wig by continual applications of hot water was an infinitely more tedious process, and the dusk was deepening into night before at length it was accomplished. The removal of the rubber pads from my mouth had caused my supposedly high cheek-bones to disappear. When darkness had descended I stretched myself out beneath the lower plane in order to snatch a few hours' sleep. I was then, to all intents and purposes, a disreputable, unshaven, uniform-clad European.

I did not fear molestation during the night, for throughout the day I had seen nothing stir amidst my desolate surroundings. I kept my automatic close at hand, however, and lay in my flying-kit.

With the night there descended on me a feeling of unutterable loneliness. Not a sound broke the absolute stillness. It was as though the world had died—as though time stood still. Only the dark shadow of the lower plane above my head spoke of the materialistic, and even that seemed at odd variance with my surroundings.

At length I fell asleep and was awake with the dawn. I felt then some regret at having given the Chinese pilot all the food which was left, for I awoke very hungry. A tentative taste of the water of the lake showed naught amiss with it, so I drank my fill

and knew that there was little likelihood of breaking my fast with anything else till I reached Zadan.

I reckoned that by leaving the shores of the lake about the middle of the morning I should arrive at Zadan some time in the middle of the afternoon. There was a plentiful supply of petrol on board, so I passed the time by filling up the tank, emptying the radiator and filling it anew from the lake, and in overhauling the engine, controls and flying wires. I also examined the despatch. It contained statements as to the personnel of Zadan Aerodrome and, having mastered its contents, I destroyed it.

The machine was soundly built and I wondered from what aircraft factory it came. But a painstaking search brought to light no maker's name nor anything in the nature of such. There was a mounting in front of the forward cockpit for the fitting of a synchronised gun and by that I judged the machine had been built primarily for war.

It was ten-thirty by the watch on the dashboard when I pulled on the flying gauntlets and dropped into the pilot's seat. I switched on the engine and its shattering roar seemed deafening after the silence of the past hours.

Swinging the nose into the wind I took off and, turning on the climb, headed southwards towards the fringe of the desert, gathering height as I flew.

I passed out of the desert region at an altitude of 6,000 feet, then swung west-north-west towards Zadan. My course took me somewhat to the left of Suchow, and scarcely had that straggling township dropped behind than I stiffened in my seat.

Ahead of me, high up in the sky, were twelve aeroplanes. They were flying in V-shaped battle formation and the brilliant scarlet of the fuselages, wings and under-carriages stood out vividly against the greyness of the sky.

The words of Bolponi flashed into my mind. "The Scarlet Squadron. . . Pulhausen's squadron . . . nothing can live against them in the air!"

They were flying obliquely across my course, the deputy squadron-leader's machine 1,000 feet above the last two machines in the formation. (At least, I presumed it was the deputy squadron leader who flew this rearguard machine, for so we had flown when on offensive patrols in France.)

And as I watched I marvelled at the perfect formation they kept. Not one machine deviated a hair's-breadth from its course nor lost formation for a moment. The leader turned, wheeling towards Zadan. A white Verey light flashed from his cockpit and, at the signal, the formation closed up till wing-tip was almost touching wing-tip.

Again a Verey light flared—a red one this time—and with the very poetry of unison the scarlet machines broke formation, the machines on the right wheeling to the right, the machines on the left wheeling to the left. A green Verey light now, and, with the precision of automatons, the machines wheeled again into their original V-shaped formation.

An involuntary exclamation of admiration rose to my lips. As an exhibition of air drill, what I had seen was superb. It needed no words of Bolponi's to inform me now that the Scarlet Squadron was piloted by hands of an amazing skill.

I flew steadily onwards, now watching the formation and now peering ahead for a view of Zadan Aerodrome. Suddenly a red and green light dropped from the machine

of the squadron-leader. It was evidently the signal to break formation and land, for the machines wheeled out of line and, drawing away, circled widely. At the same instant the leader dropped the nose of his machine, and, turning in a steep downward swoop, came rushing towards me.

He roared over my top plane so close that I thought for a moment that he must rip the fabric with his under-carriage. Turning my head I saw his scarlet machine zoom up in a half-loop, hang for the fractional part of a second, then roll on to an even keel. It was an extremely neat Immelmann turn. The next moment he was alongside me, his scarlet wing-tip almost touching mine.

The machine he flew was a large-sized, single-seater scout. His flying-coat, helmet and gauntlets were of the same vivid scarlet as the machine. I noted that he throttled down his engine to keep pace with me. For a full minute or more he hung on to me, then, seeing the aerodrome below me, I throttled down my engine and, shoving the control-stick forward, commenced to descend. As for the scarlet-clad pilot, he took his machine earthwards in a tearing nose-dive. Thus had I seen young pilots act when learning to fly in the days of the Great War, and it savoured to me in this case, as it did then, of what we inelegantly termed "cheap swank." Your expert pilot does not throw his machine about in the air when occasion does not arise. To do so may earn the plaudits of some gaping fellow on the ground, but it earns also the contempt of the real flying-man. One might draw an analogy with him who flogs the last ounce out of his horse in order to keep up with the hounds and thus catch the admiring eye of the hunting-field.

A few minutes later I landed on Zadan aerodrome and taxied in towards the hangars. One or two of the Scarlet Squadron had already landed, the others were dropping down one by one.

Two Chinese mechanics ran out to hold my wing-tips as I taxied in and, shutting off my engine I came to a stop within a few yards of where the leader's machine already stood.

The pilot was standing by his machine in conversation with another man who was also clad in a scarlet flying-suit. As I clambered out of the cockpit and dropped to the ground he left his companion and crossed towards me. His leather fur-lined face-mask was unstrapped and his goggles pushed up to the front of his helmet. As he approached I recognised him as Pulhausen. I had guessed it was he in the air, for had not Bolponi told me he was leader of the Scarlet Squadron.

Pulling off my helmet and goggles I awaited his coming, inwardly wondering if he would recognise in me the miserable Wu Chang who had escaped. That something was amiss I could see by the expression on his face.

"What do you mean by this insolence?" he demanded, harshly, when within a yard of me.

"What insolence?" I countered; for in very truth I knew not in what way I had offended.

"That you land your miserable machine before my squadron is on the ground!" he snapped, then, to my utter astonishment, he stepped forward and struck me full in the

mouth.

I staggered back, so unexpected was the blow. But I was not taking that from Pulhausen or any one. I pulled myself together and would have leapt at him then and there but, sensing what was in my mind, he whipped a silver-plated automatic from his pocket.

“Reprisal would be the essence of foolhardiness!” he said, icily, then stopped suddenly and stared at me.

“But you are a stranger here!” he snapped, “I do not know your face! Who are you and where did you get that machine?”

“My name is Von Mauser!” I answered promptly. “Ho Sin of Sianfu ordered me to return the machine here!”

“Then where is the pilot?” he demanded, harshly.

“That I do not know!”

He stared at me suspiciously for a moment then barked:

“There is something in this which I do not understand! Have you your identification papers?”

I had not. Davies had said he would not fail me. He was somewhere on the aerodrome or somewhere in Zadan. What my position would be if Pulhausen demanded to see my papers then and there I dare not think. However . . .

“Why do you hesitate?” His words came sharply suspiciously. “Have you your identification papers?”

“Yes!” I lied, with more hardihood than I felt.

“Then come with me!” he said; “a certain gentleman called Bolponi will examine them in my presence and, if there is the slightest doubt as to their authenticity, you will be put against a wall and shot!”

With that he slipped his automatic into his pocket and turned on his heel with a gesture to me to follow him.

Pulhausen led the way towards a small wooden hut situated on the aerodrome at some little distance from the hangars. He paused once to order two staring, Chinese mechanics to overhaul my engine and have the machine wheeled into its hangar.

As I followed him I mentally revised my opinion of him. His insufferable annoyance because I had landed before the full complement of his precious Squadron was on the ground, the blow he had struck, both served to paint him as a swaggering bully and, after all, little removed from the gross Bolponi.

We came upon the latter in the hut. He was sitting at a table littered with papers, writing laboriously with arms asprawl.

“Who’s this weevil?” was his choice greeting, snarled out in his rasping voice. “Who’s this, Pulhausen?”

“He has landed the despatch machine which left at dawn yesterday for Sianfu!” replied Pulhausen, crisply, “he says his name is Von Mauser and that he is acting under orders from Ho Sin!”

"This is cursed irregular!" snapped Bolponi, his little pig-like eyes raking me slowly from head to foot.

"Exactly!" agreed Pulhausen, coldly. "Therefore, my good Bolponi, examine his identification papers so that we may be satisfied as to his *bona fides!*"

Bolponi stretched out a flabby hand towards me.

"Your papers!" he growled.

I had no papers; that I knew. On the way to the hut I had seen no signs of Davies. I had half hoped that as we passed through the press of pilots and mechanics the necessary papers would have been surreptitiously thrust into the pocket of my flying-coat. Otherwise I failed to see how Davies could have got the papers to me. The chances were, however, that he had not reckoned on this early meeting with Pulhausen and the swift demand for my papers.

"Come, your papers!"

Bolponi's voice was suspicious, impatient.

I made a show then of going through my pockets. But I knew the search was hopeless and, judging by the expression on Bolponi's face, he knew that as well. I candidly believe that the fellow would have been sorely disappointed had I at that moment produced that for which I was searching and for which he was waiting.

"It seems"—his voice was a rumble—"that you have unfortunately mislaid your papers!"

"It certainly does!" I agreed, pleasantly, but painfully conscious of the utter futility of the remark.

"*Mille diables!*"

The words came from Bolponi in a roar. He launched himself to his feet and crashed his great hand on the table.

"There is treachery here!" he bellowed, "*Nom d'un nom*, but the cursed place is infested with spies! The nerve of the dog!—to walk in here——!"

He broke off splutteringly, his face livid with passion. I had one chance—a thin one. Whipping my automatic from the pocket of my flying-coat I leapt towards the door. Pulhausen put out a hand to stop me, but I swung savagely with my left and had the good fortune to catch him flush on the mouth. He staggered back against the table and the next instant I had my back against the door, my gun wavering first at Bolponi and then at Pulhausen.

"Put your hands up!" I said, huskily enough.

Bolponi mouthed frantically. To me he seemed to be on the verge of a fit. But his podgy hands crept waveringly above his head.

"You—Pulhausen!" I snapped, and pale-faced Pulhausen slowly raised his hands above his head.

I had seen Bolponi writing with his right hand. The chances were that he was no more useful with his left than the average man.

"You, Bolponi," I ordered, "come round to the front of the table!"

He shufflingly obeyed, his breath coming in gusts, the fingers of his raised hands clenching and unclenching spasmodically.

“Lower your left hand! In the right-hand pocket of Pulhausen’s flying-coat you will find a silver-plated automatic! Throw it to me! At the first false move I will kill you!”

Gingerly he lowered his left hand and felt gropingly for Pulhausen’s pocket. His eyes never left my face. He found the pocket and slowly inserted his hand, then as slowly withdrew it. Pulhausen stood motionless. In Bolponi’s hand glittered the automatic.

“Remember . . . !”

I do not think that Bolponi required the warning word from me. His hand jerked forward and the automatic clattered to the floor at my feet. It was the work of an instant to stoop and pick it up. Pulhausen made as though to drop his hands and start forward; but I had him covered and he evidently deemed that discretion was the better part of valour.

And at that moment there came a knock at the door against which I stood.

This is a plain tale and I must set down events as they happened. I wish I could say that, following hard on the heels of the knock, I whipped into some brilliant and strategic action. But it was not so. For a moment I stood nonplussed, unknowing how to act. And in that moment Pulhausen called, coolly:

“Enter!”

Some one tried the door, but my back was against it and it refused to open. The handle was rattled and the unknown on the other side gave a lusty push. I was momentarily thrown off my balance. Pulhausen, sensing his opportunity, threw himself forward with incredible swiftness. His arms wrapped themselves around my knees and I crashed forward on top of him. One of my automatics exploded and, simultaneously with its bark there came a roar of pain from Bolponi. The next moment his heavy bulk descended on me with crushing force. I struggled desperately, dimly aware that the door had been thrown open and that a third man had plunged into the fray.

Events then became somewhat jumbled. Pulhausen had wriggled clear and had my right wrist in a vice-like grasp. Bolponi, sprawled across me and panting oaths, was wrenching frenziedly with his flabby hands in an effort to tear the gun from my left hand. I fought to retain possession; then something descended with crushing force on my skull and I lost all further interest in the struggle.

I recovered consciousness to find myself sitting bound to a chair. Pulhausen had taken Bolponi’s chair at the table whilst the fat Bolponi hovered around me, my automatic in his hand. A strip of adhesive plaster on his thick neck did not add a pleasing note to his appearance. From the corner of my eye I saw a Chinese soldier lounging by the door, his hand tucked in that part of his belt near where swung a loaded gun-holster. My bid for liberty had failed and my head ached intolerably.

“So you have come round, you murderous hound!” snarled Bolponi. “Look at my neck, curse you!”

“That,” I snapped, “is a pleasure which I would prefer to forego!”



Bolponi glared, half incomprehendingly. I saw Pulhausen's lips twist for a fleeting instant into a thin, mirthless smile.

"Your work!" shouted Bolponi, thrusting his face towards me and indicating the strip of plaster on his neck with a dirty forefinger, "*Nom d'un chien*, but another inch and the bullet would have gone through my throat! You'll pay for this, you toad!"

"Enough of this, Bolponi!" cut in Pulhausen, curtly. He turned to me, a thin batch of papers in his hand, "Von Mauser," he continued, "you have your own impetuosity and rashness to thank for what has happened! The bullet which winged Bolponi was discharged when you fell. It was an accident, but it would have gone ill with you had Bolponi been severely injured!"

I wondered at this, for I did not doubt it would go ill with me in any case. His next words, however, made me gape for a moment in amaze before I recollected myself.

"These are your identification papers!" he said, indicating those which he held in his hand, "they were found on the floor of the cockpit of your machine where, obviously they had fallen. A mechanic brought them, intact in their envelope, to me. I have examined them, also the covering letter from Ho Sin. It may interest you to learn that the person who knocked on the door whilst you were holding Bolponi and me at the point of the gun was the mechanic with your papers!"

I drew a long breath. Davies had not failed me after all.

"Perhaps then," I said boldly enough, "as my identity is no longer in doubt, I may be released from these bonds!"

"There is no reason why you should not be!" replied Pulhausen, but Bolponi burst forth:

"There is reason!" he shouted, "I will have the dog flogged! It is no fault of his that I am not dead, and I will take payment out of his miserable hide!"

"The fault is your own, you fat fool!" I snapped, for boldness and bluster was clearly indicated as my course. "Did you think that I was going to stand calmly by and be called a dog and a spy by a loud-mouthed bully like you? Because I could not produce my papers at your request did you think that I was going to permit myself to be taken out and shot? If you did, release me from these bonds and I'll give you cause to change your opinion of me!"

"Silence!" barked Pulhausen. "Your hotheadedness seems on a par with your carelessness! You may count yourself fortunate that these papers were found! As it is I am satisfied as to your identity! Bolponi has examined your papers and is also satisfied!"

He paused, then resumed slowly:

"All that remains, therefore, is the question of your punishment for having drawn a gun on us, to whom you owe allegiance and implicit obedience!"

He gave me no time to protest but continued, harshly:

"Ho Sin suggests that you be kept here as a pilot! From what I have seen I do not doubt your courage! I have a mind to see how your courage blends with your capabilities in the air and to give you an opportunity of earning either death or

honourable service under me! This course, I doubt not, will satisfy the outraged dignity of Bolponi!”

I was at a loss to understand his meaning; but not so Bolponi. The latter leant across the table.

“You mean a fight?” he cried.

Pulhausen nodded.

“I mean just that, Bolponi! We have had some little proof of this fellow’s nerve! Moreover, he is a European! You know perfectly well that I wish to replace the Chinese pilots of the Scarlet Squadron with Europeans if possible! I am not satisfied with Kiu Lo——”

“But he is your best pilot!” cut in Bolponi, astonishment on his heavy features.

“I alone am the judge of that!” retorted Pulhausen. “I say I am not satisfied with him. It is my ambition to form a squadron, perfect in every detail, an invincible air-arm! There must be no weakness, for the weakest pilot is the strength of the squadron. Do you follow me? I am ever on the look-out for new blood! If this man, Von Mauser, can prove himself better than Kiu Lo, then he shall take Kiu Lo’s place in the squadron!”

“And if he is not better?”

Pulhausen shrugged his shoulders.

“Then Kiu Lo will shoot him down in flames! Are you satisfied? If Von Mauser loses you will be avenged for your wound; if Von Mauser wins, this incident will be forgotten!”

Bolponi swung his head and surveyed me from head to foot. Then he rubbed his podgy hands and chuckled hoarsely.

“*Nom d’un nom*, but I agree! It will be a pretty fight, but this dog cannot win! You show us good sport at times, Pulhausen!”

Pulhausen turned to me.

“Von Mauser,” he said, “to-morrow, at noon, you will take the air in a single-seater scout fitted with a synchronised gun! You will ascend to five thousand feet and there engage in aerial warfare with a Chinese pilot of the Scarlet Squadron, named Kiu Lo! You have heard my remarks to Bolponi and must understand some little of my motive! If you can prove yourself a better fighting pilot than Kiu Lo you will take service under me in the Scarlet Squadron! Kiu Lo will not suffer defeat if he can possibly avoid it and I would impress upon you that——”

He paused, his cold eyes fixed on mine.

“I would impress upon you,” he repeated slowly, “that only one of you will reach the ground alive!”

At a word from Pulhausen, the Chinese soldier who was lounging near the door came forward and severed my bonds with a clasp-knife. I was then handed over to the care of a Chinese who wore the drab uniform of a non-commissioned officer.

This individual piloted me to a long stone hutment which proved to be the sleeping quarters of certain of the pilots. I was given a room about 12 feet square fitted with an

iron bedstead, a chair, a rough, unstained dressing-table, and a wash-basin which was fastened by a bracket to the wall.

In response to my request the man brought me shaving implements and hot water. Half an hour later I sauntered forth in search of food, for I was ravenously hungry. I had plenty of food for reflection, however, but I thought it would become more palatable if I could but refresh the inner man.

Near the hut I encountered the major-domo who had directed me to my room. He was seated on an upturned petrol tin, gazing abstractly at the machines on the aerodrome and engaged in the pleasing occupation of manicuring his long nails with a thin splinter of wood.

He jumped to his feet with alacrity when I questioned him as to the whereabouts of the mess and promptly led the way towards a long, low building of white stone. I passed in through the main doorway, and found myself in a long wide room. Four trestle tables ran almost the whole length of the room and were covered with white snowy linen and glittering cutlery.

It was towards the middle of the afternoon and there were no more than a score of men seated at the tables. For the most part they were Chinese, but here and there I saw a European face. All wore a uniform of sorts, some dark blue, others a lighter blue, but grey seemed the prevailing colour.

There was a lull in the conversation as I appeared, but affecting not to notice it I sank into a seat near at hand. A deft Chinese boy set before me a plate of clear soup and I fell to with gusto, striving to appear unconscious of the curious glances which I knew were being directed towards me.

I lunched magnificently and the menu would not have disgraced any London hotel. None accosted me during my meal, although many passed by me on their way to the door. When eventually I pushed back my chair and rose to my feet there were scarce half a dozen men remaining at the tables.

One of these rose to his feet simultaneously with myself and followed me to the door. I passed through, and as I stood for a moment wondering whether I should take a look round the aerodrome or give myself up to a pondering on my position in the seclusion of my room he ranged himself alongside of me.

“M’sieur will pardon this intrusion,” he said, with a slight bow, “but it may be that I can be of some little assistance . . .”

I turned and surveyed him. His face was tanned and clean shaven, his nose and mouth firmly moulded. But it was his eyes which held me for a moment—dark, twinkling and holding in their depths a certain amusement. But it was not unkindly amusement; rather did they seem to mirror a joyous, laughing soul.

For the rest his lithe frame was encased in a smart, tightly-fitting uniform of scarlet, high-necked and with silver-braided epaulets. On his right breast glittered two small golden wings, such as Pulhausen wore. He wore shiny black knee-high field boots and somehow by comparison I felt exceedingly shabby.

His attitude betokened friendliness and I was not averse to a conversation during which I might learn something of this aerodrome and of Kiu Lo of the Scarlet

Squadron, whom I was to fight on the morrow.

“I was thinking of taking a stroll round the aerodrome!” I replied, “and should be grateful for your company, m’sieur!”

The remark was clumsy enough but I was in no mood for the niceties of speech. I wanted his company and I wanted him to talk; so as he fell into step alongside me, I blurted out:

“Who exactly is Kiu Lo?”

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

“He is a Chinaman of the Mandarin blood, m’sieur! But Mandarin blood is—what you say—at a discount, so behold him at Zadan mingling with the common herd, the *canaille!*”

“I fight him in the air at noon to-morrow!” I said; then added, “By order of that swaggering braggart, Pulhausen!”

“Ssh—m’sieur!”

My companion’s hand closed on my arm and casting a quick glance to left and right he continued in a low voice:

“Such words are treason here at Zadan! Have a care, m’sieur, for this Pulhausen is a devil and the very air has ears!”

“He is looking for new blood—new pilots for his squadron,” I replied, “and if I defeat this Kiu Lo I am to have the honour of becoming a member of the Scarlet Squadron!”

“I am a member of that same squadron, m’sieur,” he answered stiffly, “and indeed it is an honour to be chosen as pilot of one of those machines!”

He had sensed the bitterness in my tone and it seemed he resented it.

But his mood soon passed and as we paced the tarmac in front of the hangars I learnt much of Zadan and what was afoot. His name was Montpellier, this companion of mine, and I more than suspected that he had once been a member of the French Flying Corps. He knew—in fact he assured me that it was by now common knowledge—that I had landed that morning, had signalised my advent by holding up Bolponi and Pulhausen and as a reward for such temerity was to be given a chance of life or death in the air on the morrow.

“But Kiu Lo is magnificent in the air,” he informed me. “So cold . . . emotionless . . . so deadly!”

I learned that these aerial duels were of no uncommon occurrence. Were doubts cast upon either a man’s skill or his nerve then he was sent up behind a synchronised gun to give the lie to his doubters. His antagonist was, as a rule, selected by the Tribunal and the duel was to the death.

I took care to confine my casual questioning to points appertaining to Zadan aerodrome, for, having landed only that morning and being to all intents and purposes a stranger I could be expected to know little of Zadan itself. As for the movement against England, I forebore to question at all on that subject. I should be expected to possess a

certain amount of knowledge on the matter and a discussion might have landed me in dangerous depths.

When eventually we parted Montpellier turned to me, his eyes serious.

“You will do well, m’sieur,” he said gravely, “to confine to yourself your opinions of Pulhausen or Bolponi! They are dangerous and life on Zadan is cheap! You understand?”

He paused, looking me straight in the eyes.

“You are wondering, perhaps, why I have talked with you thus,” he continued and, reading the affirmative in my eyes, went on, “It is, m’sieur, because there is a bond between men whose skin is white. There is another reason, of which I will speak later! I wish you success on the morrow!”

He clicked his heels together, bowed slightly, then turned and walked away.

Ah, Montpellier, you of the laughing eyes and gallant soul, if we could live again those few brief hours, would the end, I wonder, be still the same? . . .

## CHAPTER X

### THE GAME OF DEATH

DINNER, I had learned, was served in the mess at seven o'clock. I spent the intervening time lying on the bed in my room staring up at the ceiling, my hands locked behind my head.

Well, here I was on Zadan, and Davies' orders were that I was to carry out the *rôle* of cosmopolitan adventurer. If things went wrong in the air to-morrow then I was not likely to assume that *rôle* for any lengthy period. I wondered if Davies knew of the coming duel and what he thought of my chances against Kiu Lo.

My squadron in France had been composed of fighting scouts and I did not greatly fear the issue on the morrow, for I was determined to prove as elusive a target as possible for the bullets of this Kiu Lo, whose efficiency Pulhausen doubted.

There was something grimly ironic in Pulhausen's method of testing his pilots. He was a juggler, Pulhausen—a juggler in men's lives.

And thus I lay and pondered till close on seven, when, after a refreshing wash, I made my way across to the mess. The mess, I had learned from Montpellier, was reserved for the pilots and certain members of the ground staff. The pilots of Zadan numbered in all a little over eighty and there were almost the same number of ground staff admitted to the mess.

I entered, to find the majority already seated. Some, in fact, were busily engaged in eating. Slipping into a vacant chair I fell to covertly studying my companions. They were, for the most part, Orientals. Here and there, as at lunch, there was a smattering of Europeans.

At the head of the room on a raised *daïs* was a long table placed at right angles to the trestle tables at which we sat. Seated at the table on the *daïs* were twelve scarlet-clad men, together with ten Chinamen clad in silken robes of blue and silver. At the head of the table in a high-backed ebony armchair, was an aged Chinaman, his robes heavily braided with gold, his face wrinkled and bloodless. On his right sat Pulhausen, wearing a vivid scarlet dress-uniform. On his left sat another Chinaman clad as was Pulhausen, and the face of this man held my gaze for more than a moment.

It was almost a perfect oval in shape, and the skin was lighter than one looks for in the Oriental. The eyebrows might have been pencilled, so delicately were they fashioned. The nose was finely moulded, the thin-lipped mouth cruel and imperious. His eyes were jet black and glittering. I do not think that I am unduly impressionable, but as his gaze met mine I felt a shudder of repulsion.

I looked away but knew instinctively that he was watching me. Then suddenly there fell a hush and turning my head I saw that he had risen to his feet, his eyes still upon me.

Then with a bow which was a strange blend of humility and courtliness and which was directed towards the aged Chinaman by his side, he said in a low, even voice:

“There is one here to-night, O my father, whose presence I doubt not would grace this board!”

Again his eyes met mine and he continued:

“For it may be that to-morrow he will occupy this chair of mine!”

The aged Chinaman sat mute and motionless. It might have been that he had not heard. Then suddenly in a very paroxysm of fury he wheeled in his chair towards Pulhausen.

“Curse you, Pulhausen!” he screamed. “Is not even my son, Kiu Lo, exempt from your murderous schemes, you presumptuous upstart? Curse you, I say! Curse you——”

He raised his scraggy clenched hands above his head, then fell back choking and exhausted with the violence of his outburst. Pulhausen watched in silence whilst Kiu Lo—for now I knew it was he—held a small wine-glass to the lips of the old man. Then slowly he rose to his feet, fingers of his right hand playing idly with the cord of a monocle which hung loosely on the front of his tunic.

“Gentlemen,” he said harshly, “you have heard the protest which has been made against this aerial duel of Kiu Lo’s which takes place at noon to-morrow. How far that protest has been actuated by paternal love, I will not venture to say! It is no wish of mine to set my face against Cheng Lo, the father of Kiu Lo, for he has given us yeoman aid in this movement of ours against the cursed English! He has devoted his vast fortune to our cause and has made possible many things. But is it not our law, gentlemen, that favour be shown to none, no matter how highly he be placed? Is it not our law that nothing must stand in the way of the perfecting of that war-machine which we are slowly forging here in China? I say Kiu Lo fights, so that he may prove himself worthy of a place in the Scarlet Squadron! I leave it to you, gentlemen, was I right or wrong when I came to that decision?”

And at that there arose a thunderous shout of acclamation from the men around me. Waiting till the tumult died away Pulhausen bowed a curt acknowledgment, then turned to the aged Chinaman.

“Your answer, Cheng Lo!” he drawled, and dropped back into his chair.

As though stung to reply Kiu Lo leapt to his feet.

“It was no wish of mine,” he cried, “that this fight should not take place! My father has given his fortune to assist those who work against the British Empire, but he will not be called upon to sacrifice his son in that cause! I will send the white man down in flames and that I swear on the bones of my ancestors! Let him stand so that he can better hear my words! Nay, let him be seated at this table of ours that he may sojourn for awhile amongst the glorious company of that Scarlet Squadron whose uniform he will never live to don!”

I hoisted myself to my feet at that, for this Chinese braggart was like to rouse my ire.

“Here I stand, Kiu Lo,” I replied, “and if it is permitted I will join you at your table!”

Kiu Lo turned to his father and said something in a low voice. What it was I do not know, but the old head nodded and Kiu Lo turned to me.

“It is permitted,” he said, and as I made my way towards the daïs a Chinese boy placed me a chair at the table there.

I did not enjoy the meal which ensued, for I was conscious of a tension in the air. More than once I looked up to find the glittering eyes of Kiu Lo taking stock of me. I did note with interest that the twelve scarlet-clad men whom I took to be the pilots of the Scarlet Squadron numbered amongst themselves eight Europeans and four Chinamen.

Montpellier was sitting some distance from me, but once he caught my eye, nodded and smiled. It was a little thing, but it meant a great deal to me.

With the clearing away of the last course Kiu Lo rose to his feet. In front of him were two glasses of red wine, placed there by one of the Chinese servants.

“Will you,” he said in even tones, with a curt inclination of his head towards me, “honour me by drinking to the success of the better man to-morrow—be he white or yellow?”

There was nothing in the words at which to take offence. I rose to my feet, then stood as though frozen. For on the tablecloth in front of me was a small card bearing the replica of a black flying beetle. And scrawled across it was:

“The wine is poisoned!”

I made an attempt to cover the card with my hand, but the man on my immediate right, a silk-robed Chinaman, leant forward and grasped my wrist. Pulhausen stiffened in his chair.

“That card,” he demanded, raspily, “what is it?”

It was useless then for me to attempt to conceal that message from Davies. From whence and in what manner had it come? It had seemingly materialised out of nothingness, for I would have sworn that it had not been lying there a minute before.

I waited in silence whilst the Chinaman who had stayed my hand picked up the card and handed it to Pulhausen. The latter scanned it closely, then looked at me with cold, suspicious eyes.

“Whence came this card?” he demanded, harshly.

“I do not know!” I replied, and the very sincerity of my voice seemed to convince him that I spoke the truth.

He dropped his eyes again to the card and his lips moved almost inaudibly. But I caught the words:

“The Flying Beetle!”

Then, as though deciding on his course of action, he passed the card around the table. It went from hand to hand, each man examining it curiously, till eventually it came to Kiu Lo, who was still on his feet. I watched the fellow closely but his face was calm and inscrutable as he handed the fatal accusation against himself to his father, Cheng Lo. The old man peered at it through his faded eyes, then with an impatient



gesture flung the card on to the table in front of Pulhausen. The circuit thus completed Pulhausen rose leisurely to his feet.

“Gentlemen,” he said harshly, “it seems as though this mysterious one, this Flying Beetle, is in our midst! Can any one of you afford an explanation as to the manner in which that card came to be placed on the table?”

That no one could was evident by the perplexity on every face. Pulhausen waited a moment, then continued:

“I will give ten thousand pounds to the man who can show me this cursed Flying Beetle. That is in addition to the reward of twenty thousand pounds which has already been offered by the Tribunal!”

He had himself well under control, had Pulhausen, but he could not suppress the quiver of passion in his voice. Then suddenly he wheeled on Kiu Lo.

“The accusation against you has come from a quarter which, under any other circumstances, would have caused me to ignore it!” he said, harshly, “but after what has happened to-night I do not choose to ignore it! Answer me, is that wine, which you were about to proffer to Von Mauser, poisoned?”

“It is not!”

Kiu Lo’s voice was calm; nay, it held a hint of contemptuous laughter at the absurdness of the question.

Pulhausen nodded.

“You swear it!”

“You verge on the insulting, Pulhausen!” replied Kiu Lo gratingly.

“Answer my question, Kiu Lo.”

“Yes, I swear it, on the bones of my ancestors!”

Pulhausen turned to Cheng Lo.

“You do not doubt the word of your son, O, Cheng Lo?” he inquired softly.

“My son is an honourable man with a code of honour more rigid than thine, Pulhausen!” replied the old man angrily.

Pulhausen smiled and bowed ironically.

“I do not doubt it, Cheng Lo,” he replied. “Then show us the faith you have in your son by quaffing the wine which was intended for the man, Von Mauser!”

A tense silence settled on the room. I saw the hands of Kiu Lo clench on the table. Cheng Lo peered at Pulhausen then rose shakily to his feet.

“Pulhausen,” he said shrilly, “thy words degrade the Mandarin blood which flows in the veins of Kiu Lo! By what right dost thou give such an order, thou presumptuous dog?”

“I give no order!” replied Pulhausen, almost mildly, “an accusation has been made against Kiu Lo and I but ask you, who have such faith in the honourable Mandarin blood, to refute that accusation!”

“But dost thou not take the word of Kiu Lo?” screamed Cheng Lo.

Pulhausen shrugged his shoulders.

“Whether I do or not cannot affect the issue,” he replied; “you have a strange manner of showing your faith in your son, Cheng Lo!”

“Then thus do I show my faith, dog!” screamed the old man and, wheeling, he clutched at the nearest glass with a claw-like hand.

Kiu Lo thrust out a hand to stop him, but froze into immobility as Pulhausen with incredible swiftness whipped a silver-plated automatic into view and, covering him, cried:

“What do you fear, Kiu Lo?”

Raising the glass to his lips, Cheng Lo drained it to its very dregs then hurled it full into Pulhausen’s face.

“Thou hast won, thou devil!” he screeched. “It was Kiu Lo to die, or I! That I could read in thine eyes! But I am old and my course is all but run, so ’tis I who choose to go! But I will be avenged on thee, thou murderous hound, avenged—avenged—on—thee —”

His voice died away and he clutched at his throat with a skinny hand. A fleck of foam appeared on his lips, then he crashed forward and lay asprawl across the table. I knew then that he was dead—had died the death Kiu Lo had meant for me.

As for Kiu Lo, he had sunk back in his chair, his face emotionless, his eyes fixed on Pulhausen.

“Thus then has your treachery against a brother-in-arms recoiled on your own house!” said Pulhausen, sternly. “Every man who takes service under us is entitled to some measure of protection and of justice!” He turned to me, “Von Mauser,” he said, harshly, “you have a right to charge Kiu Lo before the Tribunal of Zadan! It is for you to say whether you will adopt that course or whether you are content to settle what is between you in the air to-morrow!”

“We will fight to-morrow!” I replied, for it was no wish of mine to avoid the duel by having Kiu Lo placed under lock and key, as Pulhausen’s words suggested. Surely if Kiu Lo had any filial affection whatsoever he had been punished enough.

Five minutes later I was out in the fresh air and walking slowly to my hut. In the darkness Montpellier joined me and fell into step alongside. For a few yards we walked in silence; then he said in a low voice;

“Ah, but he is the clever one, Pulhausen, and is, I doubt not, grateful to you!”

“In what way, my friend?”

“There has long been—what you say—friction between Pulhausen and Cheng Lo. We who know have whispered amongst ourselves that Pulhausen was but waiting—waiting. Cheng Lo represented the Chinese element and wished—for his son—much power. Pulhausen is so strong—so ruthless. To-night came the break—Pulhausen saw his chance and, *voilà!* Cheng Lo is dead!”

“And I was but a miserable pawn in the game of death Pulhausen played!” I said bitterly.

“*Oui, m’sieur!* With Cheng Lo out of the way Pulhausen will attain yet greater power!”

I walked on in silence for some little while. Kiu Lo had attempted to poison me, doubtless to avoid the coming duel. Pulhausen had said in the hut that he was not satisfied with Kiu Lo in the air. Well, that opinion had been vindicated, for obviously Kiu Lo shirked the coming fight. But apart from that Pulhausen had dragged Cheng Lo into the affair and had deliberately encompassed his death.

“Pulhausen did not force Cheng Lo to drink the wine!” I said, breaking the silence.

“*Mais non, m’sieur!*” replied Montpellier, “I tell you he is the clever one—so clever! Honour, to those of the Mandarin blood, is dearer far than life! Cheng Lo was asked to choose between complicity in his son’s dishonour and death. He chose death! Pulhausen knew he would so choose!”

“Do you think Cheng Lo knew the wine was poisoned?”

“M’sieur, I do not know! No man will ever know!”

We parted, Montpellier and I, at the door of my hut. I would have questioned him concerning the appearance of the card on the table, but to a tentative remark of mine he merely shrugged his shoulders and said:

“The Flying Beetle! Ah, who is he? No man can tell! He is here, he is there, but none have seen him! I have a—what you say—theory, which some day I will explain! Good-night, m’sieur!”

With that he turned on his heel and vanished in the darkness.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE DUEL

I LAY awake a long time that night before eventually I dropped into an uneasy slumber. I was awake with the dawn, and as I lay thinking on what the day might hold in store for me I became aware of a steady tramp, tramp, tramp of muffled feet backwards and forwards past the door of my room.

It continued unceasingly and, rising, I crossed to the door and threw it open. An armed sentry in the passageway nodded to me familiarly. He was a European, a dark, stocky fellow with a not unpleasant face.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, not knowing whether this patrolling of the sleeping quarters was a regular occurrence or whether I was once more a prisoner.

“Guarding you!” he replied, his tone as familiar as the nod with which he had greeted me.

“By whose orders?” I snapped.

“Bolponi’s! He and one or two others do not trust the Chinks after what happened last night! They thought you might be knifed during the night!”

“Do you actually mean to tell me that Bolponi, fearing an attempt on my life, has had me guarded during the night?” I inquired, wonderingly.

“Yes, after a late meeting of the Tribunal! We have justice here and we do not encourage murder!”

I withdrew into the room and closed the door. Walking to the window, through which the grey light of early morning was filtering, I thought over this latest phase and I could have laughed aloud at the Gilbertian situation which had arisen. If Bolponi only knew the truth. . . .

But one thing was becoming more and more evident to me. Here at Zadan there was a strong undercurrent of feeling between the Europeans and the Chinese. They were banded together, plotting against Britain and the Empire; forging—as Pulhausen had said—a colossal war-machine. But there was, undoubtedly, a rift within the lute.

My thoughts reverted to Pulhausen and the death of Cheng Lo. Pulhausen was either possessed of a tremendous courage or else was very sure of his ground, for the Chinese element at Zadan was, numerically, by far the stronger. Yet he had slain—there was no other word—Cheng Lo before their eyes and had done so calmly and deliberately. How the Chinese element looked upon the death of Cheng Lo I had yet to discover. He was of Mandarin blood and there was a possibility that this fact had not endeared him to his countrymen at Zadan, for the ruthless reign of the Mandarins was not forgotten.

What did Davies know of it all and to what end was he working? I came up against a blank wall when I started to think along those lines. I knew Davies was somewhere near at hand and that was all I did know. How he had got the warning card on to the

table in front of me I could not tell, and the more I racked my brains the more mysterious did the incident become. There was a possible solution, and this I adopted for want of a better. One of the Chinese servants who waited at the table was probably in his service and must have dropped the card from his sleeve as he removed a dish or plate.

I dressed leisurely and after breakfast in the mess I sauntered out on to the aerodrome. Mechanics were wheeling machines from the hangars, whilst others were tuning-up or overhauling the engines. There were single-seater scouts, two-seater machines fitted with synchronised and Lewis guns, others fitted with cameras for aerial photography, big twin-engined bombers fitted with forward and rear guns and other machines which, by their wireless accoutrements, I judged were to be used for artillery observation.

From huge hangars in the centre of the low line of sheds the twelve machines of the Scarlet Squadron were being wheeled out on to the macadam. In design they were very like the French "Spad," as used in the Great War. They were larger, however, than that gallant little flier and fitted with short, double-bladed propellers.

Handsome, indeed, they looked, and extremely powerful. Pulhausen had a squadron to be proud of in these hawks of the air. They were obviously built for speed and their streamlined fuselages were the work of a master-craftsman.

And, as I stood revelling in the beauty of such aircraft, Pulhausen came upon me from the hangars.

"Are they not superb?" he said as though reading what was in my mind; and there was a note of pride in his voice.

"They are, indeed!" I replied, making no effort to disguise the enthusiasm which I felt.

He glanced at me curiously.

"We ask questions of none who seek service with us," he said, "and I do not question you! You hate that rag, that Union Jack of the cursed English, else Ho Sin would not have sent you here! Yet there is that in your voice which tells of a deep appreciation of these machines of mine—an appreciation which one looks for only in a man who has spent long hours in the air!"

I saw the trend of his remarks, so I answered, curtly enough:

"I fought in the air during the War, Pulhausen, but whether my aerodrome lay east or west of the trenches is a matter which concerns myself alone!"

He nodded, showing no signs of resentment.

"What think you of your coming duel with Kiu Lo?" he asked quietly.

"What can I think?" I retorted hotly, "I had no quarrel with Kiu Lo, yet at your word we must take the air and kill or be killed! To me it savours of murder, as did the death of Cheng Lo last night!"

"Yet I saved your life last night!"

The words came so quietly, so mildly, that he might have been stating the veriest commonplace. But they struck me almost with the force of a blow. He had saved my

life! Strange that I had not looked at it from that angle before!

“Von Mauser,” he said, laying his hand on my arm, “I am working to a certain end, and that end is—power! You held Bolponi and me at the point of a gun, and from that moment I never doubted your courage. Your life was, I think, worth the saving last night. If you emerge successful from the coming duel then I shall know that it was indeed worth the saving. The day is close at hand when the dogs of war will be unleashed. The hordes of the East will sweep westwards and we will not call a halt till mighty London is ours. And when that day comes those who have served me well and faithfully will not go unrewarded! And, quixotic though it may seem, I prefer that my gallant squadron should be manned by men of my own colour!”

“Why quixotic?” I demanded.

He turned and looked away across the aerodrome.

“Why, indeed?” he said, and his voice was more than a trifle wistful. “Why, indeed? For who am I that I should spurn the yellow man, without whose aid my dreams of power could not materialise?”

He was strangely human in that moment, was Pulhausen. But the next instant his mood changed.

“Come,” he said crisply, “and I will show you the machine in which you will do battle!”

He led the way towards where two Chinese mechanics were tinkering with the engine of a black, single-seater machine.

“This is your machine,” he said, “and it is at your disposal from now onwards. It would, perhaps, be as well if you took it up for a short flight and made yourself acquainted with the controls.”

The advice was sound, so, instructing the mechanics to replace the engine-cowling, I went to my room in search of my flying-kit. Returning, I spent an hour in the air. The machine allotted to me was very fast and answered at once the lightest touch of the easily working controls. It was fitted with a synchronised gun, the trigger of which was fixed on the main control-stick.

When eventually I landed and taxied in towards the hangars Pulhausen was waiting in conversation with two of his scarlet-clad pilots. He came towards me as I clambered out of the cockpit.

“Are you satisfied with the machine?” he asked.

“Yes, perfectly!” I replied.

He nodded and turned away, saying:

“It wants but a short while till noon. Be ready to leave the ground on the stroke of the hour!”

I spent the next half hour in overhauling my engine and gun, for I was none too keen to leave either to the tender ministrations of the Chinese mechanics. And scarce had I bolted down the engine-cowling than I saw Kiu Lo walk on to the aerodrome. He was dressed in full flying-kit, his gauntlets in his hand. There was a confident swagger

in his walk, and as he passed my machine he stared at me coldly; but there was nothing of recognition in his face.

All morning there had been aeroplanes taking off or landing. The aerodrome had echoed to the roar of powerful engines; but it suddenly became borne in on me that a curious quietude had descended. Looking up I saw that the air was clear of machines. A large crowd of mechanics, pilots, soldiers and civilians was beginning to collect on the tarmac in front of the hangars. The pointers of the watch on the dashboard of my machine showed the time to be five minutes from noon. The stage was set, the audience gathered, and the curtain almost due to ascend.

Pulhausen came stalking towards me in full flying-kit.

“Taxi your machine out to the middle of the aerodrome,” he ordered, “and wait there for me!”

I pulled out my gauntlets, buttoned my flying-coat and, adjusting my helmet, dropped into the pilot’s seat and pressed the self-starter. The engine roared into life and thrice I ran her up to full revolutions. Then, signalling for the chocks to be whipped away from in front of the wheels of the under-carriage, I commenced to move forward towards the centre of the aerodrome.

Above the roar of the engine I heard a cheer from the hundreds of onlookers, though whether it was meant as some little encouragement or whether it was meant ironically, I did not know, nor did I greatly care. Reaching the middle of the large aerodrome, I turned into wind and shut down my engine.

Then from the hangars came another shattering roar and a black single-seater of the same type as my own glided forward from out the press of machines. It came towards me, bumping and swaying slightly, then, when within 15 yards, turned sharply into wind and came to a stop as the engine was switched off. The pilot turned his head towards me and, his goggles being raised, I recognised the features of Kiu Lo. His departure from the hangars had been the signal for a further burst of cheering from the crowd, which was swelling rapidly.

A third engine roared into life and a scarlet machine shot forward from the hangars and raced towards us. As it swung into the wind between Kiu Lo and myself I saw that it was piloted by Pulhausen. Switching off his engine he rose in his seat and motioned to me to switch off.

I did so and in the silence which followed he called in stentorian tones:

“You will each ascend to five thousand feet and at that altitude await my signal, which will be a red Verey light fired at one thousand feet above you. You will then engage each other and neither must attempt to land till a decision has been reached. Before taking off you will each fire a burst from your synchronised guns! Having done that you will follow me into the air!”

He resumed his seat, and the engine of Kiu Lo’s machine broke the silence with a shattering roar. Then came a rattle of firing as he pressed the trigger of his gun. I switched on my engine and did likewise. The noses of our machines were pointing towards the distant hills, so there was little question of our bullets doing any damage,

otherwise I have no doubt Pulhausen would have sent us to the banked-up firing-range at the far end of the aerodrome.

As I released my pressure on the trigger Pulhausen's engine roared and his scarlet machine began to move forward with ever-increasing impetus. As he took the air in a long, smooth glide, Kiu Lo and I opened up our engines and, side by side, raced in his wake. I pulled steadily on the control. The floor of the cockpit tilted, the ground dropped smoothly away from beneath me and I was in the air.

At 5,000 feet Kiu Lo and I circled. Almost half a mile separated our machines and we had drawn well away from the aerodrome. Above us, at 6,000 feet, Pulhausen was wheeling his scarlet machine and I could see him peering downwards.

Then there floated from his machine the signal of battle—a red Verey light. I crouched down in my cockpit then and, with my hand on the trigger of the synchronised gun, looked for Kiu Lo.

He was coming at me with a rush, firing as he came. I opened my throttle to its fullest extent and dived, with engine racing at full revolutions. Then, pulling hard on the control I zoomed up, kicked on full rudder and, pulling the control-stick as far over as I could, rolled on to an even keel. Kiu Lo was in front of me and below, for I had passed right under him in my dive. Shoving forward the control I pressed the trigger of the gun and dived on him, spraying the air with a stream of bullets.

With almost incredible swiftness he executed a corkscrew dive which took him momentarily out of danger and, before I could turn in his wake, he was climbing rapidly behind the tail of my machine.

As far as I could judge, neither of us had yet scored a hit. Banking steeply Kiu Lo dived on me and again I was forced to drop into a steep nose-dive with engine full on. He followed me down, clinging grimly to my tail and, as I glanced to the right, I saw the fabric of the lower plane suddenly gape open, ripped more than a foot. First blood to Kiu Lo! I yanked back the control and, as the machine zoomed up into a loop, closed down the throttle for a moment as I hung, then completed the loop in a downward rush which should have reversed our positions and brought me behind the tail of his machine. But he was not there; he had frustrated my manœuvre by swinging sharply away as I commenced the loop and was now coming at me again, firing as he came.

So far the fight had been all his and I began to sense what was in his mind. He was harrying me to the utmost, forcing me to adopt the defensive at every turn and never for an instant allowing me a thought of attack. His control of his machine was brilliant and he seemed determined to hound me into a momentary panic, which would give him the opportunity he desired.

I will say here and now that I had no compunction in killing Kiu Lo if fortune were so to favour me. It was his life or mine; but, apart from that, I knew enough about him to realise that he was a deadly enemy of England. He was an important cog in the war-machine which was being built and I more than suspected that, with the death of his father, he would be a power to be reckoned with at Zadan.

So I determined to carry the fight back to him and see how he acted under an offensive. Kicking on rudder and pushing forward the control I banked at an acute



angle and, with my hand clasped round the trigger of the synchronised gun, I tore in to meet him. I was approaching him slightly from the flank and I know I raked his fuselage with bullets. Without the slightest hesitation he brought the nose of his machine up in a steep climb, then stalled and fell away into a spin, his engine almost silent.

For a moment I thought I had got him and commenced to follow him down. But suddenly his engine roared into renewed life. He shot downwards in a steep dive, zoomed up and, executing an Immelmann turn, bore down on me, his gun vomiting blood-red flame.

I felt a searing pain on my scalp, as though a red-hot iron had pressed against it. Dimly, from behind my goggles, I saw the dashboard in front of me splinter as though riven with some invisible axe. What I did was by instinct alone and was not the outcome of any coherent thought.

My hand closed on the throttle and the roar of my engine died away. I pushed the control into neutral. The nose dropped and the machine fell into a spin. I felt deathly sick, the aftermath of that burst of bullets which had whanged into the cockpit, shaving my scalp in their passage.

I spun 2,000 feet before the mists cleared from my brain. I was aware that Kiu Lo was following me down, reserving his fire. Gripping the control I opened the throttle, kicking on rudder to counteract the spin. The engine roared and I felt the lifting grip of the air as I came out of the spin in a nose-dive. I looked round then for Kiu Lo. He was behind me, coming like a tornado, blood-red flame licking backwards from his gun muzzle.

I pulled viciously on the control-stick, jerking on full rudder. The machine swung with a jar that might well have strained every strut and flying-wire. But I kept her so, and as I completed a small circle in the air at an acute banking angle, Kiu Lo tore past me.

It was my chance. As swiftly as I could I kicked the rudder-bar straight and whipped back the control-stick to centre. The machine answered gallantly and right on the tail of Kiu Lo I started in pursuit, my gun roaring a staccato accompaniment to the pulsating thunder of the engine.

He banked, his nose downwards. But I had anticipated the move, for in very truth I was so close that it was about the only course left to him. The range was too short for me to miss and as he banked he laid his flank open to my gun.

I pressed slightly on the rudder. The machine swung and, in the act, the bullets from my synchronised gun ripped through his fuselage from behind the cockpit to the engine-cowling.

I laughed aloud in the very delirium of that moment and pulled on the control. The nose of my machine rose and the spraying bullets tore into his engine, then whined harmlessly through the air above him. I had a vision of him lying sprawl across his controls. A tongue of flame leap backwards from his engine. My line of vision was momentarily intercepted by the lower plane of my machine; but, as I banked, I saw Kiu

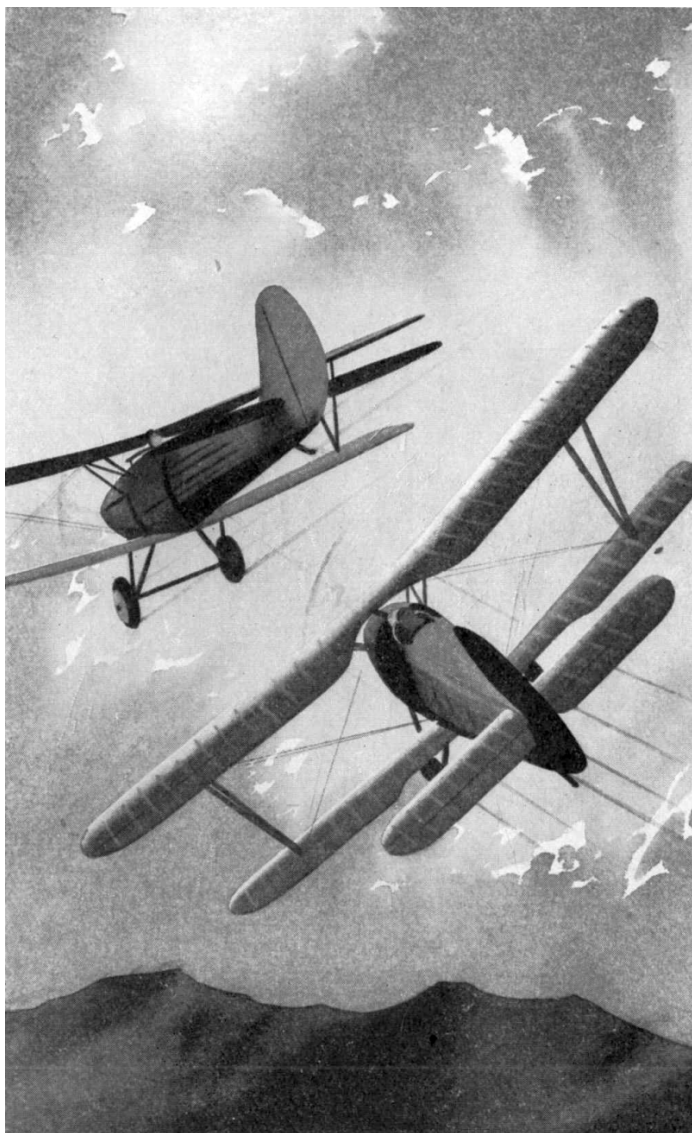
Lo hurtling earthwards, his aeroplane engulfed in a shroud of flame and black, eddying smoke.

Reaction set in at that moment and I had only one desire, and that was to land. Five miles or more away I saw the aerodrome of Zadan. But, although I knew it was hopeless, there still remained a duty to be done with regard to Kiu Lo. He could not be alive, but I could not leave him without satisfying myself that he was in no need of mortal aid.

So I went down towards where his machine lay, a flaming mass, in a narrow rugged valley. It was impossible to land without wrecking the under-carriage. At 20 feet I throttled down the engine, glided a moment, then pulled the control over and pressed on the rudder-bar. The aeroplane banked, hung an instant, then side-slipped towards the ground. I braced myself for the crash, which came a moment later as the wings hit the ground. But as they buckled they served to break the full violence of the impact, and beyond a jar which racked my body I came off none the worse.

Scrambling out of the cockpit I dropped to the ground and ran to where the remains of Kiu Lo's machine were smouldering and burning amongst the rocks. I looked up as Pulhausen roared overhead at less than 50 feet. I had forgotten his existence in the events of the past quarter of an hour. He was peering downwards and, after circling once, he made off in the direction of Zadan.

And towards Zadan I wearily bent my steps some few minutes later. Kiu Lo was dead. Over the charred remnants of his machine I had commended his soul to his Maker—for that was all that man could now do for him.



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THE RANGE WAS TOO SHORT FOR ME TO MISS

## CHAPTER XII

### DANGER

BEFORE I was half-way to the aerodrome I encountered a small party of mechanics who had been despatched by Pulhausen to the scene of my landing. With them was Montpellier. The mechanics were Chinese, and one of them, whom I took to be in charge of the party, questioned me sullenly as to the whereabouts of the machines.

Having directed him as best I could I walked on towards Zadan with Montpellier by my side. The latter congratulated me quietly on having been successful and upon my thus becoming a member of the Scarlet Squadron.

I murmured my thanks and we walked on for some little time in silence. I was aware that he was studying me covertly, and suddenly he said, his eyes to the ground:

“Do you then, m’sieur, so hate the Entente?”

I looked at him sharply. He lifted his eyes and met my gaze fairly and squarely. This man had shown me nothing but friendliness since I arrived at Zadan. He was of a type which I had met before—met on the French aerodromes behind the lines in France—a type imbued with an intense love of France and for the French flag, a type of very gallant gentleman.

I answered his question with another.

“Must one hate the Entente to take service here, then?”

“You know one must, m’sieur!” he replied, “for when the yellow hordes have swept over Britain and her Empire where then, m’sieur, will stand La France?”

He was giving me a lead if I would but take it.

“But the ultimate end can little affect adventurers such as we are, m’sieur!” I replied.

“That is true!” he said, quietly; but I felt somehow that he was sorely disappointed.

We walked on in silence and I turned over in my mind the words of my companion. He could not have spoken plainer; and I, who had every reason to be suspicious of ulterior motives, could not find it in my heart to be suspicious of him. Despite the service he had taken with Pulhausen he had made it evident that the spark of patriotism was alive within him still.

“Montpellier,” I said suddenly, “why do you let me see that you are not heart and soul in this movement against Britain?”

He stopped short and swung round on me.

“For this reason, m’sieur!” he said abruptly; and taking from his pocket a small card he handed it to me.

On it was the replica of a black flying beetle and scrawled in pencil the words:

“Von Mauser is not a man without a country!”

I stared at it in silence, for I was utterly astonished.

“But I do not understand!” I said slowly.

“Listen, m’sieur! On your honour, are those words true?”

“Yes!” I answered promptly.

He nodded, then went on:

“I was of the French Flying Corps, m’sieur, but when the war ended I left France, drifting from country to country in search of adventure. At Sianfu some months ago I fell in with certain Europeans and took service with them. I did not know, m’sieur, the full extent of their aims. I learned that only at Zadan and I determined to desert. But I knew I trod on dangerous ground in trying to leave their service. I had seen men shot at Zadan for less than that, m’sieur. So I waited, laying my plans to escape, for I would be no party to an attack on those who stood by us in France—I mean the English, m’sieur! You understand?”

“Yes.”

“One night a hangar was blown up—a hangar containing a giant bomber, m’sieur! At the scene of the outrage was left just such a card as you hold in your hand. Another night important papers were stolen and again a card was left. I knew then that here was one working for England; but still I meant to escape. But one night a card was thrust into my hand as I stood watching a night flight on the aerodrome. I did not see from whence it came, m’sieur, but on it was the beetle and the word ‘Wait!’ ”

He paused for a moment, then continued.

“I asked myself: how did this mysterious one know what was in my thoughts? But I decided to stay, for I was—what you say—curious. Also I was curious about another thing. I saw this Pulhausen was ill at ease about the presence at Zadan of this unknown. But I saw also that Pulhausen was becoming daily more arrogant in his treatment of the Chinese and I wished to see what the end would be. A break is coming, m’sieur! *N’importe!* The night before you came to Zadan I received the card you now hold. What it meant I knew not. It was in my cigarette case, but how it got there I know not! I thought and thought and decided to talk with you! Can you explain, m’sieur?”

Now it might have been that all this was an elaborate and ingenious trap laid for me by either Bolponi or Pulhausen. But I dismissed that as impossible. True, with a certain amount of Davies’ cards, they could have worked some such trap, but the idea was negated by Pulhausen’s treatment of me and by the very sincerity of Montpellier. I decided to take Montpellier into my confidence to an extent.

“It seems that this Flying Beetle wishes us for some reason, to work together, m’sieur!” I said. “Why he should do so I cannot tell. But, as he says, I am not a man without a country and, like you, I am not heart and soul in this movement against England! We will remain passive, m’sieur, and see what eventuates. The day may come when this mysterious Flying Beetle will make known his identity to us!”

And with that I changed the subject abruptly.

“This break between the Chinese and Pulhausen,” I said; “what of that, m’sieur?”

“It is coming,” replied Montpellier, as we walked on. “There was a scene so ugly when Pulhausen landed after the fight. The Chinese pilots of the Scarlet Squadron—three, m’sieur—threatened Pulhausen!”

“Oh, and what did Pulhausen do?” I inquired curiously.

“Had them arrested, m’sieur, and it seemed as though the Chinese rank and file were about to come to the assistance of them and defy Pulhausen!”

“But they did not?”

“*Mais non*, for that Pulhausen smiled his cold smile and with his revolver in his hand invited the *canaille* to attempt to rescue! But it is a volcano, m’sieur, that feeling which has come between the white and the yellow! At any moment it will break out and”—he shrugged his shoulder, “*nous verrons ce que nous verrons!*”

“And do you think that Pulhausen can handle any outbreak?”

“*Certainement*. But there are others at that Sianfu from whence you have come who will ask Pulhausen how these things have come about! Of a truth, m’sieur, Pulhausen will find that they will not be pleased with such—what you say—internal strife!”

Our steps had by this time brought us to the head of the pass which guarded the aerodrome of Zadan. The two Chinese soldiers on duty stared at me surlily and scarce were we out of earshot after they had let us pass than one murmured some almost inaudible remark to his companion anent the foreign devil.

If I had doubted Montpellier’s sincerity I could not have doubted it then, for he swung on his heel and strode back to the sentry who had spoken.

“What say you, you insolent dog?” he demanded. “Repeat the words that I may hear! You spoke of my companion!”

But the sentry did not repeat the words. Instead he shifted uneasily from foot to foot and avoided Montpellier’s eye.

“I am of a mind to have you relieved of your duty and escorted to the guard-room, you yellow pig!” snapped Montpellier, then turning on his heel he rejoined me and we continued on down the trail which led to the hangars.

“It must not be,” he said naïvely, “that one allows the dogs to become insolent now that trouble is in the air. To do so would be a weakness so deplorable!”

He was right in that. If trouble was brewing, then an attitude of reconciliation on the part of the Europeans of Zadan might easily be misconstrued as emanating from apprehension.

Reaching the hangars a Chinese orderly approached me and informed me that Pulhausen required my presence in the flight office. Leaving Montpellier I followed the orderly to the hut where I had been questioned the day before by Bolponi and Pulhausen.

The door was closed when I got there, and as I raised my hand to knock on the panels there came from inside the room the booming tones of Bolponi.

“You have gone too far, Pulhausen! *Nom d’un nom!* but if this gets to the ears of Ho Sin at Sianfu——”

I knocked sharply, for I was in no mind to be accused of eavesdropping. Bolponi's voice ceased with an almost ludicrous abruptness and there came the voice of Pulhausen:

“Enter!”

I obeyed, closing the door behind me. Pulhausen was seated at the table; Bolponi was lounging by the window.

The latter had his hands stuffed into his trouser pockets and was attempting to effect a composure which was belied by his flushed face and angry eyes. He favoured me with a glare, then turned and stared out of the window.

“I congratulate you, Von Mauser,” said Pulhausen drily, “on your victory! I am happy to learn that my opinion of both Kiu Lo and yourself has not proved erroneous!”

I did not reply. Bolponi sauntered towards the door and, opening it, left the room as though he had no interest in what Pulhausen had to say to me.

Waiting till the door had closed, Pulhausen continued:

“From henceforth you are a pilot of the Scarlet Squadron! You have won—as the quaint English say—your spurs! You will find, laid out in your room, the uniform of the squadron, which you will continue to wear until”—he paused, his eyes on my face, then resumed slowly—“until a doubt arises in my mind as to your proficiency or your nerve! You will take all orders from me and from no one else!”

He paused, fidgeted a moment with the papers in front of him, then continued:

“I may say that I was considerably surprised to see you land after you had shot Kiu Lo down in flames! Why did you do it?”

“Because there was some little chance that he was not dead!” I replied.

“There was no chance!” said Pulhausen harshly, “and such acts of gallantry”—the latter word came with a sneer—“are not permitted in the Scarlet Squadron!”

I did not know what to reply to that, for in the *rôle* of Von Mauser, it was not policy to appear too squeamish or to possess ultra-chivalrous leanings. I mumbled something to the effect that if I had offended I had done so unwittingly. An aeroplane taking off roared low over the building, completely drowning my voice, and Pulhausen did not ask me to repeat what I had said.

“The Scarlet Squadron is now composed of nine European pilots and three Chinese pilots,” he continued. “You have, I presume, had experience in formation flying? I \_\_\_\_\_”

He broke off as the door was thrown violently open and a man dashed into the room. I recognised him as one of the men who had sat at the table on the *daïs* the previous evening. He wore the scarlet flying-kit of Pulhausen's squadron.

“Sen Fu has escaped!” he gasped. “He has taken the air——”

Pulhausen leapt to his feet. His face was livid.

“What?” he shouted, and without waiting for an answer he dashed for the door, the messenger at his heels.

I followed, for that something was radically amiss I could see at a glance.

Outside on the aerodrome excited, chattering groups were straining their eyes towards a faint speck, high up in the sky and travelling in an east-south-easterly direction.

Montpellier detached himself from a group of pilots and joined me.

“The trouble,” he said in an even voice, “it comes sooner than I thought! I envy not Pulhausen!”

“But what has happened?” I demanded. “What is wrong?”

“Sen Fu, one of the Chinese pilots of the Scarlet Squadron, has escaped from the room in which Pulhausen had him confined! He reached his machine and is now on the way to Sianfu and—Ho Sin!”

“And what of that?”

“He will take the news of the death of Cheng Lo and of Kiu Lo! Pulhausen has gone too far. . . .”

The words of Bolponi. I glanced round in search of Pulhausen. He was standing alone on the tarmac gazing in the direction of the vanishing machine. Around him, eyeing him covertly, were Chinese pilots and mechanics. As I watched I saw more than one surreptitious nudge followed by a grin.

“What do you think will happen, Montpellier?” I asked quietly.

Montpellier turned and surveyed me with astonishment.

“You are from Sianfu and you ask me what will happen?” he replied. “M’sieur, will not Ho Sin come here to investigate for himself this matter and this unrest? You know, do you not, how insistent he is that white and yellow be treated alike? You also know, do you not, his decree that Mandarin blood is sacred and must not be shed by the white man?”

“And that Power which has drawn China into the plotting against the British Empire agrees with him!” I said, drawing a bow at venture.

“Assuredly they do, m’sieur! They will agree to anything if only China will support them! Pulhausen will be punished. . . . I think they will kill him to—what you say—propitiate Ho Sin!”

“By ‘they’ you mean the heads of the movement against England?”

“*Mais oui!* Who else, m’sieur, but Levine, Muressor and Zoroff! You see, m’sieur, they will come and Pulhausen, he knows it!”

I turned again to look at Pulhausen. He was walking towards the hut, his face grim, and seemingly unconscious of the staring, grinning Chinese who stood watching him.



## CHAPTER XIII

### WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT

It was late afternoon when next I saw Pulhausen. Montpellier and I were pacing the tarmac in front of the hangars. I was wearing the uniform of the Scarlet Squadron and felt more spruce than I had felt for many a day. The aeroplanes had, for the most part, been wheeled back into their hangars. Dusk was falling and the shades of the coming night were creeping in over the aerodrome. Flying was over for the day.

Pulhausen came upon us from behind, and so silent was his approach that neither of us was aware of it until his harsh voice brought us to an abrupt halt and caused us to wheel round.

“I wish you to accompany me,” he said.

That was all, and he strode onwards towards the flight office without so much as a backward glance.

Montpellier and I exchanged glances, then followed in his wake. Since noon there had been tension in the air. The Chinese had kept aloof from the European element and both factions seemed to be waiting for the threatened storm to break.

At the door of the flight office Pulhausen waited for Montpellier and me. He was pale and there was a grimness in his tightly-compressed lips. His eyes were cold and hard, utterly lacking in any emotion.

As we reached him he threw open the door for us to enter first, then as we crossed the threshold he stepped into the room after us and locked the door behind him.

The room was unlighted, and in the greying dusk I saw the gross form of Bolponi seated at the table. He turned his heavy-jowled face towards us in evident surprise and half started from his seat as the key clicked in the lock.

“You are alone then, Bolponi?”

Pulhausen’s voice was quiet, almost casual.

“Yes, alone, Pulhausen!”

“And you sit in the growing darkness; the darkness which heralds the coming of the night!”

Bolponi pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

“What do you mean?” he demanded hoarsely.

“Is it not symbolical, Bolponi,” continued Pulhausen, evenly. “The creeping shadows herald the approach of night and give warning that the day is all but dead! And sometimes the creeping shadows take possession of the soul and give warning that the web of life is all but spun!”

“I do not understand you, Pulhausen!” shouted Bolponi, his hand moving towards his pocket.

“You do not understand?” Pulhausen’s voice was harsh. “You, who have betrayed me like the dog you are!”

With an oath Bolponi whipped his hand into rapid action. But the gun which he would have drawn stayed in his pocket and he froze into immobility for Pulhausen had him covered.

“You betrayed me, you cur!” went on the latter savagely. “It was you who freed Sen Fu and advised him to flee to Ho Sin at Sianfu with news of what had happened here at Zadan! For that I am going to kill you, Bolponi, you cursed traitor!”

“You dare not!” shouted Bolponi; “You dare not lay a hand on me! Ho Sin will hang you if you kill me!”

Pulhausen laughed harshly.

“Do not delude yourself, you fool! Ho Sin will not trouble himself about your fat carcase! But he will hang *me* for the deaths of Cheng Lo and Kiu Lo. Had you not despatched Sen Fu to Sianfu, you dog, I would, in my own good time, have acquainted Ho Sin with the news that Cheng Lo and his son were dead. But that news would have been in such a form that Ho Sin could not have laid their deaths at my door! I have worked, I have planned, Bolponi, and by that act of yours you have brought my dreams to naught! I know what sentence Ho Sin will pass on me now that he knows the truth. I shall die! But I shall have the comfort of knowing that my betrayer is also dead!

“You are going to murder me!” shrieked Bolponi, quivering with mingled passion and fright.

“I am not going to murder you, you fool!” snapped Pulhausen, “Go for your gun, Bolponi and die on your feet like a man!”

With that he threw his automatic up in the air. At the same moment Bolponi’s hand leapt to his pocket and he whipped out his gun. Pulhausen caught his automatic as it fell, grasping it by the butt. The two guns roared simultaneously, splitting the deepening twilight with two jets of blood-red flame. An acrid smell of burning powder filled the room and the swirling smoke obscured my vision. But as the smoke wreathed and slowly drifted upwards I saw that Pulhausen was still on his feet. Bolponi was clutching at the table with one hand, his face a ghastly white in the dusk. Then slowly he loosened his grip on the table, his knees bent beneath him and he slithered to the floor.

Pulhausen stood grim and erect, his automatic still in his hand. He seemed as though he were turned to stone, so motionless was he. And thus he stood for a full minute whilst Montpellier and I stood quietly by.

Then, slipping his gun into his pocket, he turned to us.

“You may go!” he said curtly. “I asked you here to witness what I was about to do! It will be said of Pulhausen that he shot Bolponi in cold blood! That is not the case, for the advantage lay with Bolponi in the end! Is that not so?”

Curious as it may seem there was almost a pleading note in his voice as he uttered this last sentence. He seemed somehow very lonely standing there, and I think Montpellier sensed it too, for he replied:

“*Mais oui*, m’sieur, the advantage lay with him!”

Pulhausen made no response. He crossed to the door and, unlocking it, allowed us to pass out. He did not accompany us but remained in the room, closing the door when we had crossed the threshold.

“What think you of that, m’sieur?” enquired Montpellier, quietly, when we were some distance from the hut.

“He took upon himself the *rôle* of judge and executioner!” I replied, but, casting back in my thoughts, I knew that I had foreseen trouble coming between those two.

“He did, m’sieur,” replied Montpellier, “but he was betrayed by Bolponi!”

“When rogues fall out . . .” I murmured, but with a quick gesture Montpellier laid his hand on my arm.

“*Mais non*,” he said, impulsively, “let us not talk of the—what—you say—the ethics of the case. Let us think of Pulhausen—that he was betrayed, by one of his own colour, to the yellow men!”

I slipped my arm through his and said:

“You are generous, Montpellier, but you can hold no brief for Pulhausen!”

He did not speak for some time, but when he did there was a quiver of emotion in his voice.

“Pulhausen is a man who owes allegiance to no flag and has no love of country in his soul! He would not else be here, m’sieur. But who knows that in his own country he has not tasted of the bitter things of life—perhaps some great injustice. Judge not that ye be not judged!”

Montpellier, I salute you! salute the kindly generous soul, so loth to see evil, so quick to see good. I smiled at your words then, my friend, but within a few short hours I was to think of them again. . . .

The night passed uneventfully and, although the trend of events made me expect some word from Davies, he remained silent. There was one aspect of the whole affair which was giving me food for serious thought. With the coming of Ho Sin my deception would be discovered unless, of course, weightier events ousted it completely from the mind of Pulhausen or any directly concerned.

The suspicious Bolponi was dead, which was something in my favour, for had he been alive he would almost certainly have questioned Ho Sin concerning the pilot whom I had dispossessed and who was supposed to be detained for some reason or other at Sianfu.

The death of Bolponi had been received with mingled feelings by the men. The European element cared little, it seemed, for the man had not been popular. The Chinese made no secret of the fact that the majority of them thought Pulhausen had killed one who would be a fatal witness against him when Ho Sin came to Zadan. For they never doubted but that Ho Sin would come, and with him, maybe, Levine, Muressor and Zoroff, the men who had entered into an alliance with the Chinese against the might of Britain.

I was early as it was, for flying orders posted the previous evening had called for a formation flight of the Scarlet Squadron two hours after dawn.

“What do you think will be the attitude of the European pilots of Pulhausen’s squadron if Ho Sin attempts to hang Pulhausen?” I asked Montpellier as he and I walked towards the hangars in the cold greyness of the early morning.

“I think they will stand by Pulhausen!” replied Montpellier. “He has chosen his pilots well. They are not bad men, m’sieur, but just adventurers like you and me!”

“What will you do should a definite break come?” I demanded.

“M’sieur,” he replied, simply, “my duty lies with Pulhausen. I am his second in command; I am Deputy Squadron Leader of the Scarlet Squadron, and to me, m’sieur, it savours somewhat of an honour!”

Thus then, for the first time did I learn Montpellier’s official status in the Scarlet Squadron. Mechanics were wheeling the machines out of the hangar and as we reached it we were joined in ones and twos by the remaining six European pilots. Sen Fu, one of the Chinese pilots, was at Sianfu and his two companions were still under arrest. So, with Pulhausen, we numbered now but nine pilots.

It was the duty of each pilot of the Scarlet Squadron to look personally to the tuning and priming of his engine.

“That is your machine, m’sieur,” said Montpellier, indicating one of the scarlet aeroplanes, and, as I was engaged in running up the engine, Pulhausen appeared in full flying-kit.

He stood for a moment watching us, then turned to his own machine and looked carefully to his engine. Suddenly he held up his hand and the roar of the engines died away as each pilot switched off.

“We will fly in V-formation with nine machines!” he said, harshly. “Montpellier, you will take up the position on the right, immediately behind me. You, Von Mauser, on the left!”

He gave each pilot his respective position, then went on:

“It is my intention that the squadron carries out firing practice in the hills! Each pilot will carry two thousand rounds of ammunition!”

The taking on board of the ammunition took little more than twenty minutes. Even then we were not ready to take off, for Pulhausen beckoned to Montpellier and held him for a few moments in rapid conversation. Montpellier then made off towards the living quarters and Pulhausen turned to us.

“As manœuvres may be of a protracted length this morning,” he said harshly, “each pilot will see that he has on board as much spare petrol as he can conveniently carry!”

That something was in the wind was evident and the Chinese mechanics knew it for they stood in a group staring sullenly at Pulhausen and conversing in low tones amongst themselves.

Montpellier returned carrying a square tin case and this he stowed away beneath the seat of his cockpit. We were ready then. Pulhausen climbed into his machine and signalled to us to prepare to take off. His engine roared into life, he shot forward and

took the air in a steep upward climb. Montpellier and I took off together, following in his wake. The other machines followed us and at one hundred feet we had taken up formation and were climbing steadily.

Pulhausen swung the formation in a wide circle over Zadan. Looking down I saw the long line of hangars and the huddled buildings of the village a mile away, then we swung towards the north-east and, within a few minutes, Zadan was far behind.

For an hour we flew, heading towards the Gobi Desert, and eating up space at the rate of one hundred and twenty miles an hour. The sun had burst through a bank of cloud and it shone on the glittering fuselages of the scarlet machines, lending them a wondrous beauty. I could see the back of Pulhausen's head above the rear of his cockpit. He was flying steadily, looking to neither right nor left. Our height was twelve thousand feet. Then, when nearly one hundred and fifty miles separated us from Zadan, he dropped the nose of his machine and we dived down towards the grey wastes of the Gobi Desert.

At one thousand feet Pulhausen gave the signal to break formation and land. He had chosen a stretch of sandy ground, comparatively smooth, and the squadron made the landing without mishap.

Pulhausen clambered from his cockpit and dropped to the ground. Waiting till we had followed suit he said harshly,

"Gentlemen of the Scarlet Squadron, the time has now come when I must ask you to arrive at a decision. Will you follow me in the future as you have followed me in the past, or will you follow Ho Sin, Levine, Muressor and Zoroff to whom to-day my life is forfeited? I do not attempt to influence you in any way whatsoever. It is no intention of mine to flee from the wrath of Ho Sin and those behind him, but before I move I wish to know how many of my squadron are loyal to me. I will give you five minutes to come to your decision!"

With that he turned and walked away, his head bent and his hands plunged in the pockets of his flying-coat.

"Well, what say you, comrades?" cried Montpellier, turning on us. "Pulhausen has not pleaded with us. We know that he is an adventurer even as ourselves. He has played for the big stakes and has—what—you say—overstepped the bounds of discretion. *Voilà!* He has made the so big mistake in killing Cheng Lo and his son and he will receive no mercy from Ho Sin. Shall we then take service with the stronger party—the yellow ones—or shall we take service with our leader, Pulhausen?"

"What are *you* going to do, Montpellier?" enquired a short, stocky fellow with twinkling blue eyes and the fair hair which betokened Saxon blood in his veins.

"I am for Pulhausen!" replied Montpellier. "I owe the allegiance to no man. I took service at Sianfu to see sport, to see adventure, not to run here and there at the order of the yellow man!"

"Oh, *vive la France!*" grunted someone, and there was a rumble of good-natured laughter.

"Well, I'm with you, Montpellier!" said the blue-eyed fellow. "I've got no great liking for Pulhausen, but I've got less for the heathen Chinese!"

“I’m with him too!” grunted another fellow. “He said his say and gave us the choice!” He cocked an eye towards where Pulhausen was pacing up and down some distance away. “I also think that we’ll get a squarer deal from Pulhausen than from the Chinks!”

“And you?”

Montpellier turned to me.

“Oh, count me in!” I said, for I failed to see what other course was open to me. Davies had told me to obey all orders implicitly. I had received no hint from him as to the course I should adopt if the camp was split into two factions; but it seemed that, of the two, the power of Pulhausen was infinitely the less and therefore he was the less dangerous to Britain.

“Then is it agreed, comrades, that we stand by our leader against the yellow men?” demanded Montpellier.

“Yes!” growled one of the men who had not yet spoken, and the others mumbled their agreement. “We shall not be safe ourselves if Pulhausen is hanged, for we are his men—his squadron! We have taken orders from none but him. He refused to allow any to interfere with us and I say Ho Sin will not trust us. It will be a knife in the back, or a bullet in the dark. You saw how Kiu Lo tried to poison Von Mauser here. That’s typical of the methods of these cursed Chinese. I don’t trust Pulhausen too far but, by hokey! I don’t trust Ho Sin at all!”

This speech brought forth a unanimous murmur of acquiescence. How far the decision of these men to support their leader was based on loyalty to him or how far it was based on a desire to trust one who had not failed them rather than trust that unknown quantity, Ho Sin, I do not know.

“Well?”

Pulhausen had rejoined us and the word came from him, calmly and utterly without emotion.

“We are with you, Pulhausen!” replied Montpellier.

“All of you?”

“*Mais oui!* You have asked us to choose between you and Ho Sin. We have chosen for you!”

Pulhausen nodded, then his lips twisted into a faint smile.

“I thank you!” he said. “Now listen well to me. You men took service in the Scarlet Squadron and, as you know, I promised that the day would come when you would not go unrewarded. By that act of treachery of Bolponi’s I have received a set-back which, in the end, may cost me my life. But your loyalty to me will *not* go unrewarded, for I gave you my word on that!”

He gestured to Montpellier, and the Frenchman walked quickly to his machine, returning with the tin box which he had stowed under the seat before we started. He laid it on the ground and, stooping, Pulhausen unlocked it, then threw back the lid, disclosing wad upon wad of foreign currency.

“Fifteen thousand pounds for each man of my squadron!” said Pulhausen quietly. “Taken from the safe of Zadan aerodrome!”

The pilots stared in silent, incredulous astonishment. Pulhausen waited a moment, then cried in ringing tones:

“Am I not a fit leader for such adventurers as you? What think you will Ho Sin and Zoroff say when they peer into the empty safe? And who would dare to call it theft? Whence came this money? Was it not from the coffers of Cheng Lo and other Mandarins now dead, hounded to their deaths by Ho Sin, who sprang from the very gutters? Is not this money also from the pockets of that down-trodden people who are ruled by Levine, Muressor and Zoroff? Then who, I ask, has a better right to it than we have, for it cannot return whence it came?”

“You’re right, Pulhausen!” shouted one of the men. “Let us who have it keep it!” and the others shouted their assent.

“Then let every man come forward and receive his share!” said Pulhausen. “There remains just this to do, my comrades, then we will take the air on one long last flight! One last flight together, comrades, and when the sun sinks red in the west to-night the Scarlet Squadron will be no more!”

“What do you mean, m’sieur?”

It was Montpellier who spoke, staring intently at Pulhausen.

“I mean this, Montpellier,” replied Pulhausen, sharply. “To-day Ho Sin comes to Zadan. I will not flee from him and thus be branded a coward. But if I return to Zadan then most assuredly shall I die, for I have earned death at his hands. Ho Sin is not a fool. He will know what is in my mind and he will fear attack from me in the air. He will not leave Sianfu without an escort of fighting ’planes, for, as I say, he is shrewd and not a fool. I will encounter him in the air and one of us will die! It is the only way, for if he is permitted to land on Zadan then I must either flee or die under torture, and I am determined to do neither!”

He paused a moment, then resumed harshly.

“I ask no man here to accompany me unless he wishes to do so. You have expressed your loyalty to me and I know I need fear no treachery at your hands. That is enough for me; but none the less, I think you will accompany me on this last flight! I think that, because I have chosen you carefully and I know you are—men!”

He was amazing in his knowledge of human nature, was Pulhausen. There was not a man there who would have had the moral courage to refuse to fly with him after the words which he had just spoken. Yet I wish to be just to those comrades of mine—for comrades they were during the short time I was a member of the squadron. To this day I do not think that one of them shirked the issue. They did not lack for courage, and in the cold, courageous soul of Pulhausen they had found the qualities of leadership which they looked to find.

Pulhausen allowed them no time for the discussion of his words and again in that he showed himself a master-tactician.

“Let each man step forward,” he said, “for we have little time.” And as each man obeyed he handed him a thick wad of the currency notes.

I stowed mine away in my breast-pocket, wondering at the strange freak of fortune which had placed me in possession of fifteen thousand pounds.

When each man had received his share Pulhausen locked the box and handed it to Montpellier, who took it and stowed it away in Pulhausen's machine.

"And now, gentlemen!" cried Pulhausen. "Who flies with me against Ho Sin?"

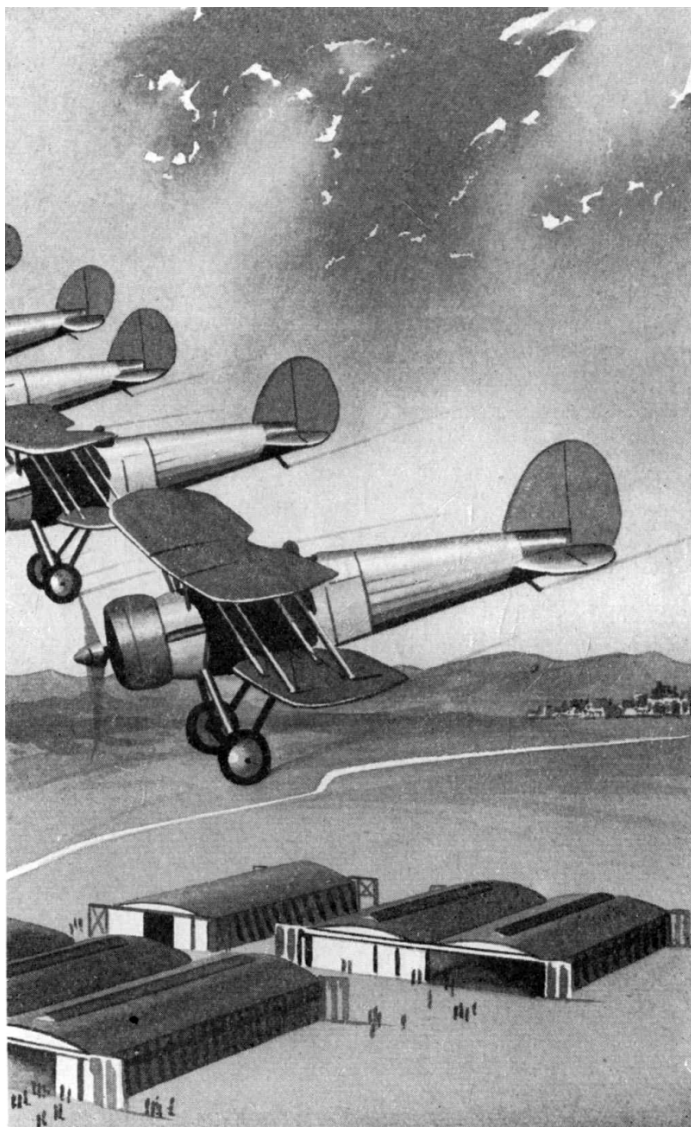
Not one refused, although Pulhausen waited full a minute.

"Then listen," he went on. "Whatever the issue of the fight, it will not be possible for any one of us to land on Zadan. If Ho Sin is shot down the Chinese will kill us when we land. If Ho Sin is victorious then it will be a case of '*sauve qui peut!*' Fill up your tanks, see to your guns and whether the fight goes with us or against us those of you who are still alive will make for India or where you will! The roar of our guns will be the swan-song of the Scarlet Squadron! And now let us shake hands like men and say farewell!"

He came forward, his hand outthrust. I was the last one with whom he shook and, looking into my eyes, he said,

"Farewell, Von Mauser, and if the bullets of Ho Sin's scouts are more fortunate than those of Kiu Lo's then maybe when death comes you will find some little consolation in the fact that you have died in goodly company!"





*Facing page [201](#).*

LOOKING DOWN I SAW THE LONG LINE OF HANGARS AND THE HUDDLED BUILDINGS OF  
THE VILLAGE A MILE AWAY

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE SQUADRON'S LAST FLIGHT

WE took the air a few minutes later, heading towards Zadan and climbing as we went. The last flight of the Scarlet Squadron! Pulhausen's words to me were running through my mind and, amidst the pulsating thunder of the powerful engines, I wondered grimly how many of the gallant machines would be lying a mass of tangled wreckage in some rugged valley or on some wind-swept plain before the day was done.

My thoughts went back to the first time I met Pulhausen—in the inn at Suchow. I had realised then that his was a dominant personality, a great potential force for either good or evil. And he had turned out to be no more than a thief and murderer. Yet was he? Montpellier had said: "Judge not that ye be not judged!"

Pulhausen was an enigma, cold, merciless; yet there had been moments when something human and almost wistful had crept into his voice and eyes. Had the bufferings of the world, some bitter experience, so warped him that he was now only an autocratic leader of a body of adventurers, a willing ally of the yellow man until his own perverseness had severed that alliance?

And thus my thoughts ran on, the roar of the engines but a tuneful rhythm which facilitated thought. At a height of ten thousand feet we passed over Zadan village and a minute later were wheeling over the aerodrome.

I saw Pulhausen peering downwards, but there seemed no signs of unwonted activity on the aerodrome. Keeping formation we circled lower and lower till we roared over the hangars at less than a thousand feet.

I saw the figures of men gathered on the tarmac in front of the hangars, looking up at us. I suppose they thought we were going to land, but, circling once, we swept towards the south-east. Pulhausen was evidently satisfied that Ho Sin had not yet landed.

Leaving the aerodrome behind we climbed rapidly and twenty minutes later I saw a white Verey light float downwards from Pulhausen's cockpit. In response to the signal we closed up till wing-tip was almost touching wing-tip. I peered ahead, then was conscious of a tingling of my blood.

Far away, but growing larger every moment, were small specks in the sky— aeroplanes flying at an altitude no greater than ours. Pulhausen wheeled and our propellers thrashed the air as we climbed steeply. We flattened out at seven thousand feet and Pulhausen swung the squadron towards the approaching machines. They were close enough now to enable me to pick them out in every detail. There were twenty single-seater scouts flying in a parallelogram formation. In the centre of the formation was a huge, twin-engined bomber. It was Ho Sin coming to Zadan.

We tore towards them, one thousand feet above their formation. Watching Pulhausen, I saw his hand flash up. Obediently I passed on the signal; then, like a solid wedge we roared down on them, our synchronised guns belching flame. Right inside

the formation went Pulhausen, with Montpellier and me behind him. I had a dim vision of the scouts wheeling frenziedly, their guns leaping into life. Then we were through and zooming upwards in their rear.

Looking downwards I saw two machines spinning towards the earth in flames. The bomber was gliding downwards, her retreat covered by a solid phalanx of twelve scouts. The remaining six were coming at us with guns aflame and engines roaring at full revolutions.

Again Pulhausen wheeled and tore downwards, his gun spraying a deadly stream of bullets. And again the formation accompanied him, keeping up an incessant, deadly fire. One machine loomed so close to me that for a moment I thought we were going to crash—propeller-boss against propeller-boss. I yanked hard on the control and zoomed upwards. As I looked downwards I caught a glimpse of the other machine spinning towards the ground; then for the next five minutes I had no thought for anything but the fight. Two scouts came at me, tearing in one on either flank. I dived, then pulling hard on the control, executed a half-loop and roll which brought me out above them. But they came at me again, evidently determined to settle at least one of the Scarlet Squadron. I have but jumbled recollections of the next few minutes. I dived, twisted, threw the machine about in every stunt I had ever learned. But still those two hung on to me. My fuselage was ripped and one stay-wire was whipping outwards in the wind. Then opportunity offered when one of them dived on me and tore past so close that our wing-tips almost touched. I followed at his tail and I knew my every bullet found a billet in cockpit, engine and dashboard. He slumped forward over his controls and went earthwards in a spin.

But I was lucky not to have followed him the next moment. His companion came up at me from below with such a zoom that for a few seconds he hung on his propeller, his gun letting loose a hail of lead which tore through the rear of the fuselage. Then he fell off into a tail slide. I shoved down the nose of my machine and turned to dive on him. But a red streak shot past me, belching death from its flaming gun muzzle. It was Montpellier—and he made no mistake. What havoc his bullets wrought on that unfortunate machine I do not know, but it rushed earthwards with engine racing and the pilot limp on the floor of the cockpit.

I had then some little breathing space in which to look about me and see how went this aerial battle. Of the twenty scouts only eight remained in the air. The bomber was a mile away surrounded by four of that eight, who were engaged with two scarlet machines.

Three other scarlet machines, including my own, were in the air. We had, therefore, lost three. I wondered, as I shoved forward my control, if Pulhausen was amongst the missing. The next moment I was engaged with one of the scouts who had manoeuvred into position behind me. My first warning of his coming was a burst of bullets which tore upwards through the floor of the cockpit within a few inches of the main control and rudder-bar. I pulled over the control and, kicking on full rudder, side-slipped. Then, throwing the control-stick forward I tore downwards. I yanked back the control and the machine soared upwards in a zoom which took me above him, and the next instant I

had the nose down again and was tearing at him, the synchronised gun pointing straight towards his top plane.

The machines of the Scarlet Squadron were infinitely faster than the scouts. Therein lay a great advantage to us for they were also much more susceptible to the controls.

The scout turned away in a tearing nose-dive but he had not the speed to take him out of the line of fire. The flame from my gun licked back till the heat almost scorched my face in that wild dive. I pulled out flat at eight hundred feet, but the scout went hurtling onwards and, as I looked downwards, I saw it dissolve into a mass of wreckage on the ground. Whether the controls had ceased to function or whether the pilot was dead whilst in the air I do not know. The machine hit the earth with its propeller racing, and just what had happened must be a matter for conjecture.

The bomber was as low as two thousand feet now. One of her scouts had disappeared and around her there remained but two scarlet machines and three scouts. They were diving and twisting, whilst from the bomber I saw spurts of flame above the forward and rear gun-mountings.

I was twelve hundred feet below and half a mile or more away. Swinging the nose of the machine towards the scene I pulled slightly on the control and climbed rapidly. With her scouts engaged I saw no reason why I should not be able to take a hand in this phase of the fight with good effect. I marvelled how the bomber had lived through our first hail of bullets. I was to learn later that her engine and controls were encased in bullet-proof steel.

I circled widely, coming to meet her as she approached me, for I knew that thus would I be able to find her most vulnerable spot. The tail, both above and below, would be protected by guns in the rear cockpit. But the gun which fired downwards from a platform in the bottom of the rear cockpit could not be brought to bear at any acute angle against a machine approaching towards the nose of the bomber. To attempt such firing would be to risk shooting away part of the bomber's under-carriage.

So manœuvring into position, I pressed the trigger of the synchronised gun. The gun roared into action and I knew my bullets were whanging into the bottom of the fuselage in the neighbourhood of the pilot's cockpit. But I could not keep the nose of my machine up for more than a few short seconds at a time before dropping into a tail slide. This latter necessitated a quick forward movement of the control to keep the machine from stalling; a turn on the downward dive, then a zoom up with engine racing at full revolutions. A short burst of bullets again before the machine slid backwards on her tail, then down, turn, and up again.

I executed this manœuvre three times. The fourth time I saw a helmeted figure leaning over the side of the pilot's cockpit. I know he was firing wildly with a revolver, for I saw the jets of flame against the black fuselage of the machine. But accurate shooting was impossible, for the bomber was lurching heavily. My hand closed on the trigger of the gun then froze into immobility. The huge nose of the bomber dropped. At the same instant I fell back into a tail slide. With a haste which almost amounted to panic I whipped forward the control and kicked on full rudder. For I knew what had happened. The bomber was crashing and unless I managed to get clear it would come hurtling down on me.

The next few seconds seemed age-long. Then I ventured a quick glance upwards. I was clear. The bomber was falling earthwards, its starboard propeller thrashing the air and causing the heavy bulk of the machine to revolve heavily, sickeningly, the box-tail describing wide spirals in the air.

Of the scouts none remained in the air and, diving earthwards, were three scarlet machines—all that was left of Pulhausen's squadron.

I saw one of them land, groggily on a rocky plateau which fringed a rugged valley. Throttling down my engine I circled downwards. A few minutes later I was on the ground, and as I clambered out of the cockpit the other two machines landed almost simultaneously.

The pilots clambered out of the cockpits, but the pilot of the machine which had landed first sat motionless in his seat. I ran towards him and, swinging myself up to the cockpit, placed my arm around his shoulders. With frenzied fingers I fumbled at the fastenings of his helmet; for this was Montpellier, and I feared the worst.

I got his helmet off and he turned his face towards me. He was deathly pale, but his eyes still held some hint of the laughter which was in his very soul.

"Thank you, m'sieur," he whispered. "It was a fight so—so *magnifique!*"

I tried to raise him in his seat but he shook his head.

"I am dying—m'sieur!" he whispered haltingly. "Shot—in here."

He raised a shaking hand to the breast of his flying-coat, then groped towards me with his hand. I took it in my own and he went on, his voice so low that I had to bend my head to catch the words.

"Farewell, my friend! I—I am glad that—in the end—we turned against the—yellow men. I see clear now, m'sieur—Pulhausen, he is not the bad one—he—he——"

His head fell forward on his chest and reverently I laid him back in the seat of the cockpit. Thus died Montpellier—a gallant gentleman of France.

I dropped to the ground and, turning, found myself face to face with Pulhausen.

"Montpellier is dead?" he said, quietly.

"Yes!" I replied. "His last words were of you!"

"Of me, Von Mauser?"

"Yes. He always had some faith in you! He said you were not wholly bad!"

I made no effort to disguise the bitterness in my voice.

Pulhausen stood silent. He was very pale and when he spoke there was a quiver of emotion in his voice.

"He said that, Von Mauser?"

I nodded, and after a moment's silence Pulhausen went on slowly:

"I wish that at the end he had known the truth!"

Something in his words caused me to look at him sharply. He smiled then, but it was not the old mirthless smile which I had come to know so well. Placing his hand on my shoulder he said quietly:

“You wonder what I mean! Can you then not guess the truth?”

“No!” I cried, for I would not give heed to the thought which flashed into my brain.

“Can you not, Beverley?” he said, and, at the mention of my name, I put that wild thought of mine into words.

“You are Davies?” I cried, “The Flying Beetle?”

He nodded.

“Yes, I am Davies, the Flying Beetle!”

“But—but——!”

I gaped at him foolishly, a thousand questions in my mind, but, by their very numbers, tying my tongue.

“Some day I will explain it all more fully,” he said. “When I left Suchow many months ago, I reached Zadan unobserved. I could learn nothing and so I decided to adopt the *rôle* of an adventurer seeking to sell his good right arm to the highest bidder. As Pulhausen I was taken to Sianfu and there interviewed by Ho Sin, Levine, Muressor and Zoroff. I was given the task of forming an invincible squadron. I suggested it to them, and they eagerly adopted the suggestion. I dared not for an instant cease to play the part I had adopted, Beverley! Not even with you—it was too dangerous!”

“But why did you not get word through to headquarters?”

“It was almost impossible and certainly too risky. Bolponi censored every letter, every message which left Zadan. He was in possession of certain British Secret Service codes, and was head of the espionage service employed by Ho Sin. I worked night and day to establish my position at Zadan, and I picked my squadron with a view to an eventual break with the Chinese and with the Power which brought them into this plotting against Britain. I chose men who, I thought, would stand by me and I did not choose amiss!”

He paused, then went on.

“I had to exterminate the heads of this movement, Beverley, for had they lived they would have plotted again. Hence Kiu Lo, Cheng Lo, Bolponi, and to-day, Ho Sin! You gave me yeoman service when you brought down Kiu Lo, but Bolponi forced the issue by freeing Sen Fu.”

“But are not Levine, Muressor and Zoroff still alive?”

“No, they were passengers in the bomber, as I knew they would be! It would have been useless Ho Sin coming to Zadan alone to punish me for the deaths of Cheng Lo and his son. The real power is vested in Zoroff and Levine. Ho Sin could not have ordered me to be punished unless the men I have mentioned were in complete agreement with him. I knew Sen Fu would bring them without delay!”

“Then all are dead?”

“Yes, Beverley, all are dead and the movement will now collapse. The men at Zadan will desert in a body, for I took all the funds away and they cannot be paid. They are leaderless and penniless, and the explosion which was to have shattered the British Empire has turned out to be but a damp squib!”

“And what now?” I asked wonderingly. Many things were clear to me in that moment.

“We leave for India at once. By the edge of a plateau near Zadan I have placed petrol and eight bombs. We will fly there, refill with petrol, overhaul our machines then all that there remains to be done is to blow up the hangars of Zadan and then—home!”

And this we did. The third pilot, the remaining survivor of the Scarlet Squadron, bade us adieu at the plateau. He had with him fifteen thousand pounds, and he was well content, for he had also the scarlet machine which Davies told him he might keep.

My fifteen thousand pounds was later handed to the British Government to be disposed of as they saw fit.

Dusk had deepened into night when Davies and I passed over the grey hangars of Zadan. We dropped our bombs and, as we headed towards the south-west, I turned in my seat and looked back. The hangars were blazing furiously, the flames licking high into the air. It was indeed a fitting funeral pyre for the Scarlet Squadron!

THE END

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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *The Scarlet Squadron* by George Ernest Rochester]