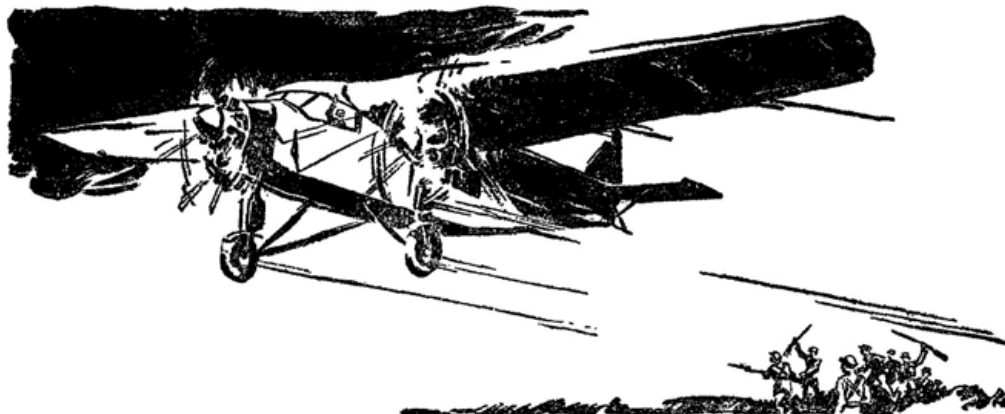


Short Stories, May 25, 1932

*Gambling with death in  
collecting fines for a Chinese governor.*



# THE BLUE BEETLE

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

*Author of "The Devil's Hatrack"—in which the two American adventurers of this story start their devious careers in Chinese politics.*

I

A FOKKER two-seater, painted a brilliant emerald green, thrummed over the hills enclosing the city of Suifu and its hundred-odd thousand people, circled above the Yangtse waters, and then dropped and ran to rest on the parade ground just outside the city walls—scattering, in the process, the officers' training corps which was there learning the rudiments of war.

O'Neill threw back his helmet, abandoned the controls, and swung one leg over the edge of the cockpit, with a cheerful grin at his companion.

"Compliments of General O'Neill to General Burket, and would the general care to land?"

Bert Burket heaved up his brawny frame, cast a glance at the agitated scene, and reached for his automatic pistol.

"Not by a damned sight," he observed. "Not just yet, at all events! Watch your step."

The scattered youth of Suifu were reforming. Called by gongs and bugles that clashed on the air, troops were coming on the double from every direction. For a moment things looked bad. Then a group of officers broke through and came running to the plane, on whose wings were the golden characters giving the name of Field-Marshal Wang, governor of Szechuan. One of them called

excitedly, O'Neill waved his hand and swung down to earth, meeting them with a gay salute and addressing them in the peculiar Szechuan dialect—he had spent his boyhood in this section of China and spoke its tongue fluently.

"Greeting, gentlemen! General O'Neill and General Burket, foreign advisors of the governor, on a special mission to General Cheng. Kindly have our plane protected."

One of the astonished group saluted, shook hands, spoke a few words of halting English, then beckoned the nearest party of soldiers.

"Twelve men on guard over the jade dragon. If anyone attempts to touch the *lung yu*, shoot him. Orderly, bring up my car for the honorable visitors!"

He introduced himself as Colonel Li, chief of staff to the local governor, and shook hands all over again. General Cheng, he explained, had established his headquarters at a former temple on one of the surrounding hills. Although the summer was still far away, Suifu was sickly hot and was filled with some sort of plague. This was naturally no affair of Cheng's, since several foreign missionaries were in the city and it was their business to fight plague.

Sunset was approaching as the antiquated flivver of Colonel Li chugged up a steep hillside road and came out on a wide paved terrace, where a

ruined temple had been converted into a commodious, if rather gimcrack, sort of palace. Gone were the dust and squalor of the overflowing city. Built, like most river towns of China, on the peninsula between the Yangtse and its even mightier tributary, the Min, Suifu glittered like a great solid triangle below.

FROM this outspread view, the transition was abrupt to the inner hall of the gaudy buildings here on the terrace, where General Cheng received his two visitors. Unlike the spindly, opium-sodden rulers of the lower country, this bandit chief who governed at the head of the great river-gorges looked what he was—a sturdy hill-man, broad-faced, heavy-eyed, with few graces. He could speak nothing but his own dialect. He was simple, primitive, brutally efficient, and regarded the emissaries from his nominal overlord with plain, open suspicion. None the less, he showed some courtesy.

“You are my honorable guests and shall have a room here,” he said. “Perhaps tonight after dinner, I may hear your errand. General O’Neill, you speak our tongue well.”

“I lived as a boy in Chengtu, where my father was in business,” said O’Neill.

“You have written authority from Governor Wang?”

O’Neill produced the document, and a secretary read it aloud. As it was unusually comprehensive in scope, the reading produced a great effect. Then the two visitors, with their scanty luggage, were taken to the rooms prepared for them. Colonel Li undertook to supply two generals’ uniforms in an hour’s time—not guaranteeing the fit, however.

Left alone, Burket met the twinkling eyes of O’Neill with a laugh.

“In the lion’s den, eh?” he observed, and lit a cigarette. “I can imagine his face when he finds that we’ve come to assert Wang’s authority and fine him fifty thousand China dollars for defying his boss!”

“Of which we collect half, don’t forget.”

“If, as and when paid, sure.” Burket made a wry grimace. “The more I think about that chap Wang, the more I admire him! He gives us a plane, makes us generals with wide powers, and turns us loose to collect from his recalcitrant sub-bandits and bring them to terms. He’s rid of us, and the odds are a thousand to one that we get scrapped en route.”

O’Neill regarded him blandly, incisive, alert features half inquiring.

“Is that a bet, Bert?”

“Not on your life.” Burket grinned. “I don’t bet with you. So long. Going to shave.”

O’Neill smoked reflectively, while Burket whistled from the other room. These two American adventurers knew they were playing with death, but had undertaken to play Wang’s game, nevertheless.

It was true that in General Cheng they had a hard nut to crack. Each ruler of a Chinese city is actually independent, his authority absolute. His own troops obey him, not some higher power. He works his own racket for all it is worth, and woe to any theoretical superior who steps in for a share of the graft. In setting his two “foreign advisors” to exert his authority over outlying Szechuan, the wily Wang was gambling little, could lose nothing, and might win much if they survived. If not, that was their bad luck.

DARKNESS fell swiftly. A slave-woman entered and began filling oil lamps and lighting them. O’Neill watched her as she moved about, stolid, heavy-footed, sunken-eyed. Suddenly he was astonished as she came close to light the table-lamp beside him, and he heard her speak in Mandarin, which few people hereabouts could understand.

“Other messengers have come here,” she said softly, “and foreign devils also. It is Pu-lo who deals with the foreign devils, being one himself. If you are given the blue beetle, that means your death this night. Many have received it, none has carried it away.”

O’Neill rose to question her, but she only gave him a stolid look, turned her back, and left the room. The warning was given, and that was enough. Presently Burket came in, struggling into a dean shirt. O’Neill told him of the woman, and he whistled softly.

“Spoke Mandarin, did she? That means she came from somewhere downriver. Hm! A friendly soul, no doubt. Took a chance on warning us—of what? Some white man named Pu-lo, and a blue beetle? Sounds like comic opera, old chap.”

“Life usually does, when it’s just beyond our focus,” said O’Neill. “Well, if we know what’s coming, the answer is simple. Beat ‘em to it! We’re not here under any flag of truce, remember. We’re here to do a certain job, and risk our necks doing

it.”

“That’s the talk!” Burket beamed at him. “Now I know where to start—”

A sharply authoritative knocking came at the door. O’Neill opened, to show two laden Chinese servants and a heavy-set, pockmarked man in uniform with immense mustaches, a white man, who bowed to them and introduced himself with an air of the greatest cordiality.

“Gentlemen!” he exclaimed in French. “Allow me. I am Colonel Varashefski, in command of the bodyguard of General Cheng. Learning of your arrival, I hastened to greet you. I bring gifts from the general, and materials for a drink—eh?”

He shook hands warmly and beckoned in the two Chinese. One of these bore a heavily loaded tray with bottles and glasses, which was set on the table. The other handed two boxes to the Russian, who extended one to O’Neill, the other to Burket, with a magnificent gesture.

“A small token of the general’s friendliness to the envoys from Chengtu,” he exclaimed, and dismissing the two servants, went to the tray. “Ah! This is the time of day for a proper drink, my friends! Shall I do the honors? If I may—”

Talking volubly, he prepared the drinks, while the two visitors opened the boxes. That of Burket disclosed a magnificent Webley pistol, heavily mounted with gold and exquisitely chased. O’Neill opened his own gift, to stare down at the cotton-bedded jewel there exposed, a mist of old memories flooding through his brain.

His father had owned this jewel years ago, after the Revolution first broke and the Manchu princes sold their precious things. By devious ways of loot it had been passed from hand to hand, and now came back to him. He missed the keen, sardonic glance of the Russian, found Burket at his elbow, staring at it with a sharply-caught breath.

“The blue beetle!”

O’Neill smiled, took out the jewel, laid it on the table, with a slight shake of his head. Even did one not know what it was, the sheer beauty of it was indeed breathtaking. A beetle in truth, less than two inches in length, the under-part was massy gold, wrought with almost microscopic perfection into a masterpiece of the goldsmith’s craft. The folded wings and upper portion were a rich blue, in the finest of Limoges enamel; the chased golden head was set with two blazing rubies for eyes, and the wings and body held over fifty diamonds, large and

small. O’Neill pressed a spring, and the wings flew open, to reveal the face of a tiny watch.

“That,” said Colonel Varashefski impressively, “is one of Cheng’s greatest treasures. I congratulate you, General O’Neill, upon such a possession. It shows his great regard for you.”

“I have seen it before,” said O’Neill. “It was a present to the Emperor Chien-lung, in 1780, from Louis XVI of France. What’s this? Oh, the drinks! By all means.”

He took the glass the Russian handed him. Varashefski lifted his own.

“To the future, messieurs!” he exclaimed, his voice purring a little. “To the blue beetle or watch or whatever it is, and a health all around!”

O’ NEILL touched glasses with him, turned to clink his own against that of his friend. But Burket clinked too hard, and the edge of his glass burst into a semicircle of flinders that flew into the liquor. O’Neill laughed, and swallowed his own drink.

“Hang it!” exclaimed Burket. “No, don’t bother, Colonel. I’ll take a straight dram, thanks. Here’s another glass.”

He obtained another from the dresser, poured a straight drink, and drained it. Then he looked at the Russian, who seemed unaccountably disturbed.

“Are you called Pu-lo by the natives?” he asked directly. The pockmarked colonel nodded and smiled.

“My name is Paul, you know,” he said in response. “You must let me mix you a drink, my dear sir. I am rather expert at it. Do you know, I envy you that Webley? It’s a beautiful weapon, one of a pair that the general values highly. Whatever your mission is, gentlemen, you may account it already a success. I have never known Cheng to give such evident tokens of his high regard. He must be in good humor today.”

Turning to the tray, Varashefski began to mix another drink. O’Neill put the blue beetle on the table and dropped into a chair. He held out his hand to Burket.

“A cigarette, Bert? Thanks.”

He closed his eyes for an instant. Then he produced matches, tried to strike one, failed, took another, lit it, held it before the cigarette-end. The flame and the cigarette could not connect. His fingers were shaking.

“Damned queer matches!” he muttered thickly

as the match went out. He fumbled for another. Burket was staring down at him with eyes suddenly flaming hot. Varashefski turned, holding up the drink he had just mixed, and extended it jovially.

"Here, General! A long life and a merry one!"

Burket took the glass, but set it down on the table. He looked at the Russian. His eyes blazed, his lips were drawn back in a grimace that showed his white teeth. Without a word, he drove in his left to the Russian's belt, and crossed over his right—a tremendous smash square to the jaw.

This blow knocked Varashefski back across the bed and left him senseless.

Burket whirled about. O'Neill was trying to reach his feet, was clawing at the air, unable to get his balance. Burket caught him as he staggered.

"Drugged!" came O'Neill's voice. "Poison—quickly—help me, Bert—"

Burket dragged him to the washbasin in the corner.

## II

**B**URKET usually spoke in a lazy drawl, and in appearance was deceptively languid. Yet, once he got into action, he had a knack of accomplishing the most amazing things in rapid-fire order.

In the present instance his movements were incredibly swift. When he had succeeded in emptying O'Neill's stomach, he darted back to the bed, took the Russian's head between his knees, and forced down the unconscious man's throat the drink that Varashefski had prepared for him. This had the effect of bringing the man back to his senses.

Burket wrenched his arms behind his back, lashed them with the cords from the boxes, and stuffed a towel into his mouth. The eyes of Varashefski glared up at him, distended horribly, and Burket uttered a grim laugh.

"Take your own dose, my friend!" he said, and went back to O'Neill.

Burket was brutal but efficient. When his ministrations were finished, O'Neill was limp as a rag, and unconscious. Burket carried him to the bed—for the two rooms were furnished in European style, no doubt from loot—and laid him there, then examined the Russian, whom he found relapsing into unconsciousness. He incontinently tumbled Varashefski to the floor and then turned to

O'Neill again.

The drug or poison had acted with extreme rapidity. Burket determined that it had affected the heart and brain, stimulating the one and throwing the other quite off balance. He found much the same symptoms with Varashefski, and not caring a jot whether the Russian lived or died, paid no more heed to him. O'Neill was entirely out, but his pulse was becoming more regular and the sharp anxiety of Burket lessened and was directed elsewhere.

Frisking his captive, he found another Webley, whose cartridges he transferred to his own gold-adorned weapon. He pocketed this, together with the blue beetle, then lit a cigarette and began to pace up and down the room, his brow corrugated. He was entirely thrown on his own resources now, and since it must be nearly dinner-time, had to face a new contingency.

"Hit first and hardest!" he muttered. "But how and where? If that slave woman hadn't tipped us off, we'd both be done for now. Not the first time either, according to her. This Russian devil is an old hand at the game. Hm! Friend Cheng has us slated for the morgue, no mistake about that. It'd be folly to wait for him to get in more of his dirty work—"

He turned, picked up the body of the Russian, and laid it on the bed, removing the gag and bonds. With a shrug, he drew up a blanket over Varashefski and O'Neill, took a fresh cigarette, resumed his uneasy pacing. O'Neill's respiration was good; all he needed was time.

**A**BRISK knock at the door. Burket opened, to find Colonel Li, the chief of staff, arrived with a soldier who carried the uniforms. Burket took them at the door, beckoned Li inside, sent off the soldier. He closed the door, to find Li staring at the figures on the bed.

"What is this, General Burket? They are ill?"

Burket eyed him harshly. Colonel Li was slender, trim, capable; how much did he know?

"Your Russian friend Pu-lo tried to poison us," he said abruptly. "I made him drink his own dose. Unluckily, my friend became ill. I desire to have this Russian shot, later."

"With pleasure." Colonel Li's eyes gleamed. "That is to say, if General Cheng approves the order. Since this foreign devil is his favorite officer—"

Burket got out O'Neill's letter of authority and

showed it to the chief of staff, whose gaze widened with astonishment. Then, taking the uniform designed for O'Neill, Burket thrust it at the other.

"Here. You are promoted. Get into this uniform; you are a general from this moment."

"What?" The chief of staff eyed him uncertainly. "You are in earnest? General Cheng will not approve—"

"I am going to get his approval as soon as I get into this uniform myself," said Burket. "You will await me here."

That Colonel Li was delighted, was quite evident. In the bandit armies of China, rank is a matter of assumption and offhand appointment. It was obvious that Li disliked the Russian heartily; as he dressed in his uniform of rank, which fitted fairly well, Burket chuckled to himself.

Then he halted abruptly, half-dressed, and shot a look at the chief of staff, who had not yet begun to change his clothes. If the Russian had succeeded in his deviltry, then—

"Wait!" he exclaimed. "Li, I've changed my mind. Go to the general now, at once. Say to him that General O'Neill and I are both ill and unable to attend dinner. Tell him that this Russian is drunk and lying on the bed."

"What?" The oblique eyes dwelt upon him sharply. "In that case he will come to see for himself."

"Entirely possible," said Burket. "Do you wish to be charged with complicity in the attempt to assassinate us? If not, then obey my orders. Do not return here for ten minutes or so."

Colonel Li regarded him for a long moment of hesitation, but Burket spoke with authority, and the mention of assassination startled him with its implications. He saluted in silence, turned to the door, and departed. His manner had impressed Burket, who frowned after him.

"Hm! You're an honest beggar, you don't know what's up, and you certainly weren't in on the plot to wipe us out. Hang it! If O'Neill were only here, he'd know what to do in a flash, but I'll have to muddle through somehow. Can't let him down now."

He understood perfectly that his own life and that of O'Neill hung upon the next few moments. He himself could not operate the Fokker; he was no airman. Even reaching the parade ground where the Fokker reposed, was out of the question. Finding his plot only half successful, Cheng was capable of

shooting the surviving guest out of hand.

WITH Varashefski to do his murdering in genteel fashion, Cheng had been able to meet all comers. Like his entire race, he evaded a present peril by embracing the most insane course—careless if it involved another peril on the morrow, not on this day. Typically Chinese, dependent on the Russian and ready to shift all blame to his shoulders if anything went wrong, Cheng was entirely without scruple or conscience.

"And, since there's no running away, I'll have to sit into the game," reflected Burket. "Cheng will be awaiting word from the Russian, naturally. In a matter of killing white men, he would trust nobody else. Hm! I'd give a good deal if I had O'Neill's brains—but no chance, so here goes."

He turned out all except one light, which illuminated the larger room dimly; and as he did so, heard heavy steps in the hall outside. He darted behind the door. It was hurriedly flung open against him, effectually hiding him. A man strode into the room, alone.

"Pu-lo!" sounded the heavy, angry voice of Cheng. "Where are you? Answer me!"

Burket waited. The heavy tread crossed the room. Swinging the door quietly, shutting it without a sound, Burket saw General Cheng standing beside the bed, staring at the two blanket-covered figures. The general had removed his tunic and was in shirt and trousers. He leaned forward, drawing back the blanket. An angry exclamation burst from him.

"You drunken fool, what have you done? Where is the other foreign devil?"

"Here," said Burket, striding rapidly across the room.

General Cheng whirled around, but already Burket was close to him, so close that the gold-mounted pistol crashed against his skull as Burket struck. The burly hillman wavered, shook his head like a bull, opened his mouth to shout—and Burket's left, already swinging up, smashed up his jaw and toppled him backward. It was a cruel blow, and Burket, with a low oath, sucked at his knuckles as he looked down at the inanimate, collapsed ruler of Suifu.

"I might have known it would take a thunderbolt to put out a big ox like you!" he muttered angrily. "Well, you wanted it and you've got it; thanks be that you didn't let out a yell!"

He treated the general as he had done Varashefski, trussing and gagging him, then rolling his bulky frame under the bed and letting a blanket hang to the floor to hide him. This done, he went to the side of O'Neill, found him breathing evenly, his pulse nearly normal, and flung a glance at the Russian. Startled, he leaned over, touched the pockmarked cheek. It was cold.

"Whew!" Burket straightened up with a low whistle. This was more than he had bargained for; he had supposed some sort of opiate was used. Instead, a swift and deadly poison. There was no doubt whatever now about the intentions of Varashefski.

**B**URKET relit the lamps. Covering the figure of O'Neill, he lifted the body of the Russian from the bed and placed it in a chair near the door. He had barely finished when a soft knock sounded, and he opened to admit Colonel Li.

The latter came into the room, saw the body of Varashefski, and stiffened. He flung a sharp look around, then met the steady regard of Burket.

"Where is General Cheng?"

"Under arrest," said Burket coolly. "For the attempt to poison us, for insulting messages sent to his excellency Governor Wang, and on various other charges. Has he any assistant in Suifu?"

"No," answered Li slowly. "No. I act as his assistant—"

"Then act," broke in Burket. "Summon his chief secretary here, with his official seal. Appoint another officer, one whom you can trust, to command the bodyguard. I imagine that Pu-lo was not well-liked?"

"He was not," said Colonel Li, looking a trifle dazed. "Where is Cheng?"

"Safe," returned Burket grimly. "Carry out your orders and return with the secretary. Bring a couple of men to carry out this Russian. Tell them that General Cheng visited him with speedy justice because he attempted the life of the envoys from the governor."

Colonel Li looked him in the eyes for a moment, then grinned. This aroused his Chinese sense of humor—an extremely lively faculty, best reached by a touch of the macabre. He drew himself up, saluted stiffly, and marched from the room. Bert Burket drew a deep breath.

"So that's that! O'Neill, it's a pity you're not aware of what's going on. You couldn't do a better

job of it yourself, you wild Irishman!"

He finished dressing, adjusted his general's stars, and settled down with a cigarette by the table. A tramp of feet sounded in the hall outside. The door opened to admit two soldiers and a sergeant, who saluted and then withdrew with the body of Varashefski.

"We don't know where we're going, but we're on our way," hummed Burket. Glancing at his watch, he was astonished to find the hour early enough. It seemed that half the night must have passed, but in reality little time had elapsed. Then Colonel Li appeared. With him was a slender little man wearing huge spectacles, and carrying a writing-case.

"The secretary, eh? Good. Sit there," and Burket pointed to the table. While the secretary was getting out brushes and paper, and moistening his ink, Burket turned for a word with Li. "You've appointed a new commander?"

"Not yet. I have no authority."

"You'll get it. Meanwhile, call in a couple of orderlies, and order dinner served to us here. Send out word that General Cheng will remain with us."

Puzzled, Colonel Li glanced about the room again, then saluted and departed. The secretary looked up.

"His excellency the general is here?"

"None of your business," said Burket. He spread out on the table the authority given by Governor Wang. "First, write out a notice that we have appointed Colonel Li to the rank of general, by virtue of this authority; approve it with the seal of General Cheng. Write out a second notice, stating that General Li will administer the government here in Suifu during the absence of Cheng, and seal this paper also."

The secretary fiddled with his fingers, great agitation evident in his manner.

"Honorable sir," he said, "this unworthy slave regrets that he is unable to do as you request, without the direct orders of General Cheng. The seal is sacred—"

Colonel Li appeared in the doorway, and Burket swung around.

"General, will you kindly take this secretary out and shoot him? Then summon another."

"With pleasure," and the colonel advanced. The secretary sprang to his feet.

"No, no!" he cried, terrified. "I will do it, I will do it! It is evident that your authority is great—"

"Do it and don't talk," snapped Burket.

THE unfortunate man sank down, seized his brushes, and began to trace rapid characters. The two documents were quickly written. Producing a small seal of jade, he applied vermilion to it, and sealed the papers. Burket leaned forward and brushed his own name and that of O'Neill, then pressed his thumb into the vermilion and applied the mark. He handed both papers to Colonel Li.

The latter read them with obvious amazement. His startled eyes lifted, met the steady, watchful gaze of Burket, and a sudden glint leaped in them.

"Excellency," he said, "these should be posted at the gate of the yamen in the city."

Burket nodded. "Go and do it," he said, and smiled. "Undoubtedly you will have certain arrangements of your own to make, also. Assign two orderlies to wait outside in the corridor, in case I need them. Further, have the guard relieved by officers whom you can trust."

A significant smile touched the lips of General Li, and with a salute, he strode out. Burket turned to the secretary, and offered him a cigarette.

"You are an efficient man," he said amiably. "I shall recommend that you retain the office of chief secretary under the new governor."

"This humble slave thanks you, great ancestor," murmured the man, a flash of joy in his eyes. "There is to be a new governor, then?"

"There is," said Burket. "General Cheng has gone away. Where and how, I cannot now inform you. It will appear in due course. Leave your writing materials here, as I may need them."

The secretary departed. Two servants appeared with trays; and Burket sighed in comfortable relaxation at the prospect of dinner. He keenly disapproved of action on an empty stomach.

### III

HIS meal finished, Burket went to the bed and examined O'Neill. The latter appeared unchanged, as though sunk in coma. To arouse him now would do little good and might endanger him. Burket turned away, frowning, anxious, wildly uneasy, but helpless.

Turning out the lamps, leaving one burning low, he caught up his cigarettes, pocketed the gold-mounted pistol, and left the room.

"They'll never look under the bed for Cheng, if they do come nosing in!" he reflected, and sighted the two slouching orderlies in the corridor. Telling them to remain on watch, he strode off, conscious of his new general's uniform.

The palace, if the structure might be so dignified, was well lighted, lamps burning in every hall and in the larger rooms. Burket encountered no one until he came to the entrance, where an officer and half a dozen guards stood talking. They greeted him with a salute, and he walked past unhindered, out to the terrace of the former temple.

Smoking, walking up and down, he looked from the hillside over the city and river where the lights twinkled yellow under the white stars, and the faint breeze lifted the odor of the garbage-strewn water below the city, in a raw, pungent breath. There was a distant pop-popping as though many river-craft were setting forth to run the gorges below, and their crews were setting off bunches of firecrackers, as is the custom, to frighten away the river devils. For Suifu is at the head of the Yangtse gorges, and therein are many devils, especially at night.

Then Burket halted abruptly, listening. No, those were not firecrackers after all! Here came a louder, more sustained crepitation—the stuttering mad voice of a machine-gun let loose, burst after burst, drowning out the fainter explosions of rifles. Then everything fell quiet again. But, as he stood looking out over the river, Burket was suddenly conscious of what he had done this night.

Had he been so cursed clever, after all? A trim, capable, alert man was General Li; but he was a son of T'ang, a child of this Szechuan race whence had sprung the ancient dynasties of China. And beneath his slim alertness was the possibility of a cold and savage cruelty. Burket shivered a little, as he remembered the glint in those oblique eyes, and the smiling eagerness with which Li had departed to the city.

"It doesn't take much to be a kingmaker in this cursed country," he thought with a tang of uneasiness stirring in him, "One bandit's as good as another. And for all his hardheaded brutality, Cheng was certainly an upstanding man—"

His thought veered suddenly. From the city came a confusion of noise, a dim brazen clamor, another burst of shots; then a sudden ruddy tongue of flame leaped from one of the far-flung huddles of buildings that stretched outside the walls, up and down the river. Burket flung away his cigarette. He

was aware, abruptly, of noise and confusion closer at hand. From the buildings here on the terrace came shrill voices, a growing tumult. An officer came up to him, panting, with a sharp salute.

"Excellency! Colonel Li—I should say, General Li—placed me in command of the guard here. There is some resistance to the orders, and many of Cheng's men will side against us. We have not enough men to carry them out—"

"What orders?" demanded the American, in the deadly grip of premonition.

"To turn over Cheng's wives and concubines to the troops, slay his children, and—"

"You will obey me, and I'll be responsible," broke in Burket. "Place a guard over the women and children. Shoot any man who touches them or tries to plunder. You understand?"

"At once, Excellency."

THE officer, by his insignia a colonel, darted away, his shrill voice rising. Burket, cursing the suddenly wakened savage he had created a general, went back into the building and sought his own rooms again. The orderlies were still at the door. He entered, inspected O'Neill, and drew a breath of relief.

O'Neill was sleeping soundly, was perspiring freely. By morning, or long before, he would be himself again. Burket refused to waken him now—yet found himself in a frightful quandary.

His chosen tool, probably nursing many an old grudge against General Cheng, had proved to be a bloodthirsty tiger. Down in the city, wither he had gone to assert his authority, were fire and riot and massacre. Burket knew quite clearly that he could not take things over himself; beyond certain limits, the Chinese would never obey him. Besides, he now depended upon Li for his getaway with O'Neill.

He was still thinking of this, furiously but vainly seeking some way out, when a knock came, and his friend the colonel entered.

"Excellency, all is now quiet here; the guards are as you ordered. I have just received a flash signal from the city. Some of the regiments have refused to obey General Li. There is fighting, the situation is serious, and no one knows where General Cheng has gone."

"Very well," Burket had it now, all of a sudden. "Prepare a sedan chair and an escort to take my sick friend, here, to the barracks near the parade

ground, outside the walls. I shall send him off, and perhaps follow him myself, later on."

The officer withdrew.

Burket, all eagerness, took a pencil-stub from his pocket, seized a sheet of paper, and wrote O'Neill a brief note, ordering him to stay with his escort whatever happened. Folding this, he pinned the paper to O'Neill's jacket. Presently men appeared with a stretcher, and O'Neill gave no sign of wakening.

Burket found himself alone.

He was gambling now, and knew it. Gambling on a dozen things; chiefly, that O'Neill would be able to handle the Fokker on awakening. Treachery to Li, who trusted him? Perhaps. Burket thrust this accusation away sternly, at thought of those women and children. He had made his plan, and he would stick to it. A gamble, and nothing else!

Burket was well aware that he might have accompanied O'Neill to the parade ground barracks, but mere escape was not his objective. He was savagely determined to fulfill their errand here before departure. Nothing less would satisfy him, would justify all he had done.

A sudden thought struck him. He remembered the type of man with whom he dealt—ignorant, primitive as any hillman, brutally strong of character. Reaching under the bed, he dragged out his prisoner by the ankles, and the eyes of Cheng glared up at him. Burket deliberately removed the gag, then dropped into a chair and took a cigarette. He did not speak the Szechuan dialect well, but could make himself understood. From his pocket he took the blue beetle, and held the shimmering thing in his fingers.

"Cheng, you have given this to others, and killed them," he said. "They did not know its magical powers, but we knew them. You did not know that it had belonged to the great Chien-lung, but we knew it. And now, this blue beetle has destroyed you. This time, it fell into the right hands. Varashefski is dead. We have arrested you, made Colonel Li a general, and given him Suifu to govern. Think that over. It doesn't pay to defy Governor Wang, eh?"

CHENG looked up at him, anger dying from his bruised face. With the stolid passivity of the Chinese peasant, he accepted the fate that had come upon him.

Hurrying footsteps, a sharp knock at the door.



Burket sprang to it, and opened to show the colonel in command of the bodyguard.

"Excellency! A messenger just got here—"

"Softly," said Burket, with a gesture of caution. The other lowered his voice.

"General Li was killed in the fighting. The city is in confusion—"

"Good! Come in." Burket held open the door, brought the man forward to where he could see Cheng, smiled grimly at his start of surprise. "General Cheng! You see this man? To him you owe the safety of your children and wives; when Li ordered them killed, he saved them." Then catching the astonished man by the arm, he drew him back to the door again and spoke rapidly.

"Cheng is under arrest for his defiance of Governor Wang. Did Li leave here in his own car?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"General Cheng has a car of his own, no doubt?"

"Yes. It is here—"

"Then get it out, make it ready. You will drive it. No other escort. You will now be in high favor with him, you understand? Send his secretary to this room. Go!"

Slamming the door, he returned to Cheng, cut the cords binding him, and picked up his gold-adorned pistol as his benumbed prisoner lay rubbing wrists and ankles.

"Cheng, you have just one chance," he said harshly. "I know well that you keep your money close at hand. Your secretary will be here in a moment. When he comes, dictate a notice stating that you are reinstated in command by authority of the governor. Dictate a letter of apology to Governor Wang, and sign it. Then send your secretary for money. You are fined fifty thousand China dollars for your insolence to the governor. You can pay it in cash or banknotes, as you like. When it is brought to this room, I will then accompany you to the city in your car, and you will have the chance to restore order and supersede Li's

orders. Yes or no?"

A flash of savage eagerness came into the broad, powerful features. Cheng came to his feet.

"Yes!" he croaked. "Yes! I will accept, excellency—"

"And don't forget I'll put a bullet into you if you change your mind," said Burket, with a jerk of the pistol. "There's liquor on the table. Have a drink."

#### IV

THE documents were written, signed, sealed. The money was brought—two suitcases stuffed with specie, banknotes, currency of all kinds and descriptions. And this had taken time. Burket called in the two orderlies and dispatched the suitcases to the waiting car. Pistol in hand, he took Cheng's arm; but his precautions were needless. Cheng was thinking only of getting to the city below.

From the terrace they could see the flames mounting from one of the suburbs. With the colonel at the wheel, the car dipped down the rough descent. Burket leaned forward and spoke to the officer.

"Let General Cheng out close to the south gate, then go on to the parade ground."

"Let me out?" repeated Cheng, puzzled. "Alone? On foot?"

"And lucky to be alive," said Burket.

Twenty minutes later, the propeller of the Fokker swung and the engine roared, O'Neill, weak but perfectly able to control the plane, taxied out for a clear sweep across the parade ground. As the plane swung around, Burket leaned forward and dropped a small, heavy object into O'Neill's lap. It was the blue beetle.

"For luck!" he shouted.

O'Neill laughed, and next moment they were sweeping forward, bounding, lifting into the star-flecked sky.