

*Tales of the Strato-Shooters* By H. BEDFORD-JONES



## THE MIRACULOUS BUDDHA

**D**UANE had never heard of Korla; the name meant absolutely nothing to him. Yet he was one of Stratolines' most active and far-traveled trouble shooters. Ever since the war ended

he had been rushing from corner to corner of the globe—yes, the new air-age geography did square the world's circle—on business for Stratolines. But Korla struck no echo in his memory.

He scowled at the brief memorandum he had found on his desk:

Captain James Duane:  
Headquarters Office:

Report to me at 10:40 if willing to accept detail to handle situation at Korla.

Upshott,  
President Stratolines.

Looking up, Duane glanced about the headquarters office used by the Strata-shooters, as the corps termed itself when not on field duty. Blount sat working at the corner desk, and Duane called to him.

"Hey, Blount! Where's a place called Korla?"

Blount gave him a grin. "Same location it was two thousand years ago, maybe three. Turkestan, or Sinkiang as the Chinese call it. It's the capital of the province now, and going great guns since the peace was signed."

"Thanks." Duane scowled again at the memorandum. "Turkestan or the South Pole, I don't care which. Why in hell doesn't the Chief quit calling me Captain? That went out when the war ended."

Duane was just in bad humor, that was all, and looking for trouble. This corps of picked men were treated with deference by Stratolines. Even that enormous air-freight network covering most of the earth, handled its trouble shooters cautiously. They were all former war pilots. Further, they were sworn officers of the International Air Control, which gave them wide powers. They had to have exceptional ability in a dozen ways, for there was no telling what they might run up against. Stratolines had become practically a world power. It handled long-haul freight exclusively, but handled it everywhere, and ran into some queer things that needed

fixing. Men like Duane did the fixing, and some of them were not particular how they did it, either.

Duane, for example. He had started out married; his wife died in childbirth while he was bombing Tokio. He went to work for Stratolines a hard-boiled, unhappy man. Now, three years after the war, he had been in love again, only to be turned down rather cruelly. It hurt. It left him, as on this particular morning, looking for trouble and not giving a damn where it might turn up.

He walked into Upshott's office promptly at 10:40. The Stratolines president, who looked not unlike a bulldog, gave him a cigar and a barked greeting.

"Hiya, Jim. Know anything about Turkestan or Sinkiang?"

"Not a solitary thing, Chief."

"Good. You got a lot to learn; but ignorance is one advantage. Only an outsider can help us here. Carter and Browne have been there and know it well, and they step around the subject like a cat around a pool of water.

"Why?" demanded Duane, to the point as usual.

"Why? Because it's devilish unhealthy, that's why." Upshott chewed a cigar, unlit. "We've got a special run going—Korla, Urga, Yakutsk—as a feeder to our main Siberian lines; it's doing a tremendous business, and we're dickering now with the Soviet people, who want to take it over."

"So what?" asked Duane, biting at his cigar.

"So trouble at Korla, or somewhere near there. The trouble is named Ming Shui, which means Clear Water. She is a woman. She is the abbot of a monastery at the back door of nowhere—"

"Wait a minute," said Duane. "You're getting off the track. An abbot is a man; a monastery holds monks."

"Shut up," snapped Upshott. "This is a Buddhist monastery. Of course it doesn't

make sense! If it did, the trouble would have been adjusted before this. It's all cockeyed; that's why I'm sending you. Any arrangement is impossible; our Siberian headquarters say so flatly. Here's their report. Read it and you'll go crazy like I did. Go to Yakutsk and hop one of our ships down to Korla and do anything possible."

"When?"

"Now."

"Okay." Duane took the typed report and stood up.

"Wait, dammit." Upshott blinked up at him. "Don't get yourself killed. We need you other places."

"Thanks. I'll not. Any particular instructions?"

"Nope. The sky's the limit. Stratolines backs any play you make."

Duane said goodby and walked out. He knew nothing about the trouble or what he was to find or do. He knew this would be in the report, and that it was probably something so utterly insane that everyone had flung up their hands and quit. So it was, too.

That evening found him snugly berthed seven miles high aboard the giant six-engined Planetoid that made only one stop, at Edmonton, before Irkutsk in the heart of the booming Siberia . . . a hurtling 26-hour flight.

The post-war world, arising on the wings of invention and science and progress from the destruction and ashes of global conflict, had reached almost fantastic heights. Siberia, once a barren frozen waste, was now pouring forth wealth in metals and oil; China and central Asia were close behind. Even during the war, Russia had withdrawn from Turkestan, restoring this desert province to China by one of those great-hearted gestures which the Soviets made in so many directions.

Turkestan, under the wise guidance of the new China, was waxing rich and great. Swept bare for centuries by jangling armies, now she enjoyed all the blessings that had come to a world where war was done forever. Great water and power systems, a flood of new population, an outpouring of economic wealth, marked her advent in this air-age. Korla, once a miserable huddle of mud houses, was now a city of half a million. Within her borders, however, the new still elbowed the old; Tibet, across her southern frontier, still blocked progress.

THE ancient Buddhist monasteries that had studded the wastes of the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts were still existent, although the deserts were becoming fertile gardens. Duane, poring over the typed report in his snug berth, was quick to perceive the astonishing situation which he—and Stratolines—now faced.

Bounding the great Tarim Basin, formerly all desert, were the Tien Shan or Celestial Mountains. In their heart, still almost unknown territory, was the Eternal Peace Monastery, of which Ming Shui was the abbot or ruler. She was a woman. She was also an incarnation of the Living Buddha. She had enormous influence, and the monastery controlled mineral deposits being opened up by the new government—deposits of such incalculable wealth that she was a personage of real importance.

Duane still did not see how a woman could hold such a position, nor did he care a hang. The fact was sufficient. But now arose something composed not of facts but of foggy superstition. Ming Shui was willing to play ball provided her ends were served. She declared—and the Turkestan government took its orders from her—that air traffic over the Celestial Mountains must cease because it frightened the spirits away.

Stratolines was working under an expired franchise from the Turkestan government, and was seeking a new twenty-year franchise. Ming Shui was willing that it be granted, provided Stratolines placed in the Eternal Peace Monastery—within ninety days—the famous Buddha of Miracles. Otherwise, not. Stratolines, and its airfields under construction at a cost of a hundred millions, could clear out and stay out.

The catch lay in this Buddha of Miracles; there was no such thing. It was, supposedly, a miraculous image of Buddha that talked and performed miracles. It was a legend, and nothing else. And yet, on this perfectly fantastic basis, Stratolines stood to lose not only fat profits but huge construction works. For the government calmly backed up Ming Shui. Duane realized what it all meant, and cursed savagely. No wonder.

“Either this dame is sincere, and a superstitious fool, or else she wants a fat slice of graft,” said he. Studying the report, he concluded that she was sincere, and a staggering conclusion it was. However, his first job was to get into contact with her and decide for himself; then he could go to work.

The Planetoid settled down at Irkutsk, and an hour later Duane was heading south in one of the ships on the Korla run. He landed in Korla at dawn; no one met him, he was entirely on his own, and he went straight to the Yakub Beg Hotel, an enormous modern structure run by the government.

He bathed, shaved, left his room—and came slap upon two figures struggling in the corridor by an open room door. The man was cursing and fighting wildly, the woman was trying to control him. White-faced, she looked at Duane and cried out.

“Help me—help me! He has fever—”

Duane pitched in, got the delirious man

back into the room, threw him on the bed and held him there—then recognized him. It was Lawton, vice-president of Stratolines in charge of construction, an engineering genius.

“What the devil’s all this?” he cried out, amazed. “Bob Lawton, here?”

“Shut up. Hold him till I get this medicine into him,” said the woman. Duane obeyed. Lawton swallowed the dose, coughed, and weakly subsided on the bed.

“Thanks,” said the woman. “Who are you? Do you know my brother?”

Duane identified himself. Agnes Lawton slid into a chair and stared at him.

“I’m Bob’s assistant,” she said. “He’s in charge of the Stratolines development here—millions poured into it for nothing. He has a touch of fever and tried to kill himself. Everything’s gone to pot here. It means his reputation and everything else.”

DUANE liked her cool, level eyes, her capable air. Blueprints on the wall showed the enormous construction under way for Stratolines; they ran for miles along the flat desert surface. Any freight terminus large enough to handle the giant Planetoid transports, with sheds, shops, hangars and connecting rail terminals, formed a city in itself. And this work, employing men by thousands, was checked by the superstitious whim of a barbaric old woman in a monastery.

A nurse showed up, taking charge of the patient, who was conscious now. Duane sat beside him, talking to Lawton like a Dutch uncle, and after talking sense into him, took Agnes Lawton into the next room.

“I’m here to clean up this mess,” he said. “I want your help. Turn over the job to one of your assistants and get ready to buckle down to work. I need a helicopter and a guide to fly it. I’ll be back for lunch

and you be ready to talk with me then.”

Miss Lawton put him in touch with a brisk young Chinese named Wang, who had a helicopter and who knew the Celestial Mountains. Wang showed up, and with him Duane went over to the government buildings. The city was a welter of Chinese, Turkoman, Russian and American business men, oil men, merchants, with a smattering of Anglo-Indians. But, by nine o'clock, formalities were completed and Duane was on his way to the new passenger field at the edge of Korla.

Here in Turkestan the air was policed as rigidly as in New York. Not a plane could take off without permission of the Air Control; but Duane's savage energy brushed aside all obstacles. By ten o'clock, Wang's little helicopter was in the air and on its way.

Until yesterday this journey to the Eternal Peace Monastery would have required weeks, with the help of camels and motor cars and guards. Now it was a matter of forty minutes. The jagged, snow-tipped crags of the Celestial Mountains opened out. Those recesses hidden for uncounted ages were laid bare, and the golden roof of the monastery appeared on its sheer hillside of naked granite.

Wang, who had no reverence for monasteries, set down his helicopter in the courtyard. The monks did not like this, but little cared Duane. He had Wang to interpret, and after some parley the two visitors were taken into a room where Ming Shui sat behind a lacquer screen and talked with them.

Inside of five minutes Duane knew the worst. This invisible speaker who was revered as a living god and had the cracked voice of an old woman, was on the level. She scorned bribes. She wanted the Buddha of Miracles. She demanded that the fabulous image be brought from the

Mountains of the Moon and placed in this monastery. Mind you, there was no sense to it. There was no such Buddha; it was a figment of superstition. But she demanded it.

“All right,” said Duane. “Tell her it'll take a bit of time. Tell her she must prepare a place here to receive the image. A room thirty feet square, with no roof, so when the Buddha comes from the moon he can be landed safely.”

Wang chattered away and the cracked voice chattered back. Ming Shui agreed to make the place ready and asked if Duane could guarantee delivery.

“Tell her yes,” said Duane. “Tell her any damned thing you like, Wang. But I want some guarantee from her that if she gets the Buddha, Stratolines gets the franchise.”

This was ironed out. Tea swimming with rancid butter was served, and the visitors took their leave. Duane wanted to get back for lunch and damned ceremony.

“It's a complete mess,” he told Agnes Lawton over the luncheon table. “This old hag wants a miracle-working image that doesn't exist. She's important enough so this blasted Turkestan government backs her up and stops all progress. If she gets what she wants—will she play ball? I've decided she will. I think she's on the level. No one could be that big a fool and not be on the level.”

The cool eyes of Agnes Lawton twinkled at him.

“Are you going to supply what she wants, Mr. Duane?”

“I am,” he snapped.

“Then perhaps she's not so big a fool as appears.”

He grunted. “Huh! Hadn't thought of that.” It was a startling thought. A waiter brought a radiophone and connected it; there was a call from New York.

“Well?” demanded Duane, when the

answer came.

"Parks at headquarters laboratories, Mr. Duane. Did you put in a call for me?"

"Yes," snapped Duane. "I need you here quick. Drop everything else."

"Okay," said Parks. "I'll be there tomorrow night."

"Bring your best technician and all the electronics gadgets you can pack."

He hung up and looked at Miss Lawton. She was good to look at.

"You're actually attempting this impossible rubbish?" she said.

He nodded. "Nothing's impossible. Your brother is famous for his work with plastics; now, you go to bat for him. Make me a plastic bronze Buddha ten feet high."

"Make it?" she repeated, startled.

"Make it. Regardless of expense. Commandeer anything you need in the way of help, materials, money, brains. Get whatever you want, here at Korla, but do it."

"Very well," she said slowly. "But I'd like to point out one thing to you. This, Ming Shui is, as you say, on the level. That doesn't mean everyone else is—say, in the government. I'm thinking of General Li Hung, the governor himself."

"Thanks," said Duane, "I was thinking of that myself; glad you put the finger on him. Guess I'll have a talk with your brother, Miss Lawton, while you get to work."

Agnes Lawton disappeared that afternoon. Duane sat beside the bed of her brother and talked with him at length, regardless of weakness and fever. If delirium had brought this man to the verge of suicide, there must be a reason more vital than mere defeat and discouraged effort.

The sick man, bitterly ashamed of his own weakness, spoke freely. Things had gone from bad to worse, with the construction here at Korla. The first

estimates of cost had been doubled and trebled. Stratolines had poured out money like water, to no avail. The new base promised to be the finest in Asia; but it would be worthless without the new franchise. Behind Ming Shui was the governor, General Li Hung.

"Can't make him out," said Lawton. "He's no grafter. He's shrewd, cultured, one of the best men in today's China; but he's against us. Why? No reason."

Duane went away thoughtfully. At five that afternoon, he secured a private interview with General Li Hung; he talked with the brilliant, able governor for an hour and came away baffled. General Li would say only that he backed Ming Shui's wisdom, blandly waving aside any hint of bribes or personal ambitions.

Next afternoon Agnes Lawton came to him with a report.

"I can do what you want," she said calmly.

"Oh, the Buddha?"

"Yes. It will require every resource I can command. This plastic figure can be supplied in a little over two weeks. The total cost will run close to two hundred thousand dollars; but the value of the finished article will be scarcely fifty dollars. Is this madness worth while?"

"Certainly. Go to it," said Duane. "Parks is en route from New York and will get in tonight. I'll turn him over to you tomorrow; he'll work with you. Well, I saw General Li last night and had a talk with him."

"What did you discover?"

"That he's on the level. I can't savvy it at all."

"Perhaps the fault is yours," she said quietly. "Often we go looking for some deep, dark secret, when all the time it's in plain sight."

"Meaning what?"

"I'm not sure. But in spite of all his

culture, education, ability, he's still a Chinese. And at heart every Chinese is superstitious. A quality so simple that it may be the reason why he stands with Ming Shui."

Duane's eyes widened a trifle.

"Upon my word, you're an angel of light!" he exclaimed. She laughed and went her way, leaving him thoughtful.

Parks got in late that night, and Duane spent four hours with him. Parks was a wizard with electronics. He had an absolute mastery of the radionic marvels that had resulted from the war. High frequencies, ultrasonic vibrations, the thousand and one applications of these wonders to everyday life, all were just so much hamburger to Parks. He listened to Duane and nodded.

"I can do what you want," he said. "Mind, it's not easy; it'll cost like hell. But it can be done. If the image of Buddha is ready in two weeks, I'll guarantee to have it in shape in another week. I'll have to work on it with Miss Lawton, of course."

"Go to it," said Duane.

During the next few days he was very busy arranging for that Buddha to get from the moon to the earth. The ordinary bronze Buddha could never make it because of his weight; but one of light plastic would be very different, though looking the same. With the help of Wang, Duane got his plans laid, ordered the necessary helicopter, and made an eventful second trip with Wang to the Heavenly Peace Monastery.

And just here, destiny lammed him under the jaw.

**W**INGING out above the mountains, they picked up the golden roof of the monastery and hovered. Work was going on at one side of the courtyard; the chamber for the reception of the Buddha was building—roofless walls of thirty feet on each side, as Duane had prescribed. To

Wang, who was a highly intelligent young man, he pointed it out.

"It'll be your job to land the Buddha there," he said, "when it's ready. The larger helicopter can just make it, eh?"

"Easily," said Wang, his slant eyes sparkling. "Oh, we can keep the helicopter a foot from the ground and land the Buddha. I heard one was being made."

"What else did you hear?" demanded Duane sourly, as they settled.

Wang grinned: "Much. There are strong rumors of miracles. It will be great fun to see these dirty monks when it happens!"

"How do you know so much?" snapped Duane.

"I am a student of electronics," said Wang, chuckling. "In fact, Mr. Parks is employing me on his work."

Duane grunted in surprise, but made no comment. He opened the cab door as it came down to the ground, and stepped out. Half a dozen red-robed monks appeared and closed around him. One, to his astonishment, addressed him in English.

"Come. Ming Shui is awaiting you. I will interpret."

Duane stared at the man; his yellow features were impassive, but he had pale angry eyes that held a strange light. The monks hustled Duane across the courtyard and in at the monastery entrance. He spoke to the self-appointed interpreter but had no answer; and, perplexed, found himself taken to the same room where he had previously spoken with Ming Shui.

The same screen was in place; the same cracked woman's voice came from behind it. The group of monks seated themselves in a line, rosaries in hand. The interpreter spoke, and Ming Shui made reply; the monk turned to Duane, his pale eyes flashing.

"She says you will remain here as an earnest that the Buddha will arrive."

"Remain here?" Duane was startled. "I'll do nothing of the sort."

"You have no choice," said the other impassively. "A room is prepared for you; accept the situation, I advise you—"

With an angry oath, Duane leaped up and strode out of the room. No one else moved. He was not hindered, though he saw plenty of monks and workmen as he came into the courtyard. He halted, incredulous, and furious—Wang and the helicopter were gone. As he stood staring, the interpreter, with the pale eyes appeared and came to him, smiling thinly.

"Well, Mr. Duane, you see how it is," he said in suave tones. "Shall I show you to your room? We might reach an understanding."

Swiftly, instantly, Duane took acute warning and mastered himself. For some reason unknown, he was trapped—and here was the secret of this entire mystifying Turkestan imbroglio, here in this man. He felt it, and reacted promptly upon it.

"Very well," he rejoined, choking down his anger. "Since there's no help for it, go ahead. And just who are you?"

"My name is, or was, Tuyok Nokhoi. It may be familiar to you. This way, please.

Duane followed Tuyok without reply; but now alarm seized him. The mask was off, with a vengeance! Little as he knew this country, that name was indeed familiar; all Asia had rung with it in the last days of the war, and since.

Tuyok Nokhoi, Tuyok the Hound, had been the puppet Mongolian ruler under Japanese dominion, renowned for his cruelties and his abilities. When the little brown barbarians were smashed out of Asia, Tuyok had vanished from sight. No search, no vengeance, no justice had reached him; his disappearance was complete. He was supposed to have been killed in the savage fighting that swept Mongolia.

Well, here he was; and his open avowal of his name boded Duane no good.

THEY came into a room, after climbing many stairs, high on the south face of the building; half a dozen floors above the rocks, thought Duane. It was a sunny, large room, comfortably furnished. The window was heavily barred, the massive door fastened on the outside; it was a prison.

Tuyok sat cross-legged on the floor; he had not taken his hands from beneath his red lama's robe, significantly. Duane, who carried no arms, dropped on a big stuffed leather seat and looked at the lean, impassive yellow face.

"Well?" he asked.

"You are not to be harmed, if you accept the situation," said Tuyok. "I am taking certain measures. You have interfered with my plans."

"Too bad," said Duane.

"For you, yes. Ming Shui is a superstitious old fool, like the others here. I do not propose to see you step in, work the miracle that she wants, and spoil my work. I am aware of what you and Miss Lawton are about, you see."

"Let's get it straight," said Duane calmly. "Are you behind all the trouble we've had here in Turkestan?"

"I," said Tuyok, "am out to make some money, Mr. Duane. I do not want Stratolines in this country of Sinkiang. I control the government and the monasteries."

"You? How?"

"By superstition." A sardonic grin crossed the yellow face. "I am a holy man from Tibet, a reincarnation of Buddha; I have lived seven hundred years. I have great powers. I make these Chinese and Tungans and Mongolians obey me; if they disobey me, they go mad."

"Oh!" said Duane. He felt his senses swimming; he summoned up all his will

power to meet those strange eyes. "Hypnotic force, eh? Well, you can't hypnotize me."

"I'm aware of that. You want to live, Mr. Duane? Very well. Do my bidding, and I shall spare your life. Refuse, and you shall die in this room."

Duane fought for self-control; he needed all his wits now. Everything had opened up with a vengeance! He discounted entirely the promise to spare him. Tuyok the Hound would never let him reach the world again to tell what he knew.

"Naturally, I want to live," he said quietly.

"Then write out a letter in your own hand to the president of Stratolines, saying that you find it impossible to arrange matters here, and advising that, since a new franchise will not be granted by the government, Stratolines accept any settlement that may be proposed."

Duane had no objections. Such a letter would be regarded with derision, especially in view of his disappearance, but Tuyok was far from realizing this.

"Then a settlement is to be proposed?" he questioned.

Tuyok smiled in his thin way. "It is. Another air line will buy Stratolines out—cheap. The profits will run into millions, largely to my benefit."

"Very well. Give me pen, ink, paper, and dictate the letter."

"A pencil will do. You'll find all you need in that leather chest by the window."

A Chinese trunk of red leather was there. Duane opened it, found writing materials, and took the letter dictated by Tuyok. It went on to mention that he had gone on a hunting trip and would return later.

The Mongol stood, took his hands from under his robe, and showed a pistol in one.

"I admire your discretion, Mr. Duane," he said, taking the letter. "You see, I was

educated in America; you were wise not to try any tricks in this writing. It will be countersigned by Mr. Lawton and his sister, and sent in. Good day."

He stepped swiftly out of the room; the lock clicked.

FOR two days, Duane remained a close prisoner. He saw only the Mongol who brought his food twice a day; but from his barred window he had a glorious view of the mountains, which was poor compensation. He tried the bars of his window. They were new and solid; but the rubble of the wall was poor stuff. Not that it would do him any good to break out, at this height from the ground.

Early on the third morning Tuyok the Hound reappeared, accompanied by two other red-robed lamas. He seemed highly affable.

"A little surprise for you, Mr. Duane," he said. "Lift up the rug from the floor." Wondering, Duane complied, and laid bare an iron ring. At Tuyok's order he lifted on the ring; a foot-square section rose from the floor, to show him the room below. He looked down, and a sharp cry broke from him. Standing in that room, gazing up at him, was Agnes Lawton.

The two lamas came forward. The little trap-door fell into place. A padlock was attached to it, a heavy padlock.

"You see, I too am a wizard of the air," said Tuyok, chuckling. "You are safe; she is safe; the work is ended. Perhaps I shall have need of you both, later. Meantime, you remain as hostages. See that you are docile, Mr. Duane—or she will suffer with you. Good day."

He swept out with his two companions.

Far from relapsing into docile despair or acceptance, Jim Duane suddenly wakened to savage energy. That Agnes Lawton had been brought here by plane, he could well understand; that she stood in

acute peril, was only too certain.

Duane fairly wore himself out that day—tinkering uselessly with the padlock, trying to signal by tapping the floor, even calling from his window, which had bars but no glass. All was vain. He spent the next day working at the rubble of the wall, around the window bars; here he accomplished a little. He had nothing to work with, except his belt buckle; the metal tongue made a pitiful tool, but achieved a faint progress.

He kept at it, day after day. He was unshaven, unwashed; his bleeding fingers made the work bitter hard, but at least it was something to do. And he gained headway around the window bars. The Mongols who brought his food never looked at anything. It was taken for granted that he was helpless. He strained his eyes watching for planes, for a helicopter, but none came.

He knew that Wang would not have abandoned him willingly, but after all Wang was no person to depend on in this pinch. Probably the pilot, too, was in prison, he thought.

Now began a labor grim and great, labor by day and night, with every thought and energy concentrated upon the one end. The window was his sole hope; the massive door was solid, and whenever it was opened, Mongols waited outside while his food was brought in. Tuyok came no more. The padlocked trap-door was never opened again.

He burrowed at the rubble around the bars. Day succeeded day; he burrowed with belt-buckle, with fingertips, with coins, with anything that would scratch. Deeper grew the holes; a night came at last when he tried one bar and felt it give slightly—with full effort he could tear it free. He concentrated now upon the others, with feverish intensity.

Also, from one end of the tattered rug, he unrove a weft of cotton which gave him a long but flimsy cord. To this he tied a scrap of paper and the pencil, first writing the one question: Are you well? He lowered it, in the sunset light, from his window, greatly fearing lest it be noted from somewhere on the ground below; he jiggled it in the air, called down—and all in vain. Either Agnes Lawton did not see it, or she was no longer in the room below. He gave up at last, and utilized the pencil as a digging tool, ultimately shattering it to flinders against the rubble.

Hostages! He knew what that meant. For himself it did not matter; but the thought of Agnes Lawton at the mercy of Tuyok the Hound was maddening. And that man would have no mercy.

Duane lost track of the days. From his window he could see red-robed monks, or visitors to the monastery with ponies and carts; twice he saw cars or trucks down below. Of nights it was different; he could hear things. The long, raucous-voiced twenty-foot trumpets were blown, or huge gongs sent brazen vibrations through the air to carry the sound of chanting voices. At night the place was alive, but moribund by day.

He kept on doggedly with the labor. One end of a second bar was cleared, and he went at a crossbar. With those three gone, he could get out—out above the gaping void, if that would do him any good! No one, without plenty of rope, could escape this way. Still, Jim Duane knew what he was about. That glimpse into the room below had maddened him, but had also inspired him.

The moment came, toward noon, when it was finished; a stout heave, and those bars would come away. He sank down on his pallet and dropped his bearded, haggard features in his hands, relaxing. A little dirt

smear around his work, and it would keep till night.

He slept most of the afternoon. Toward sunset came his supper—one Mongol bringing in the food, while two others waited outside in the passage. The empty bowls from his morning meal were taken, the full ones were left; the door clanged shut.

He sprang up, darted to the window, and caught hold of a bar, putting all his weight into the wrench. A heave—another—at the third, one end came loose, the other was bent and forced out of the rubble. A weapon at need! The second came away. So did the third, with red sunset light flooding over the mountain gorge below.

Duane gobbled his food, forcing himself to wait for full dark. He attacked the tattered blankets of his bed. The thin, stout iron bar, nearly two feet long, was too good; he ripped the blankets into strips. Time and again he had called to mind that glimpse of Agnes Lawton in the room below, estimating the distance from floor to floor. In the last, gray daylight, he knotted the strips of blanket; he had enough. About a remaining bar in the window he made one end fast, and let the makeshift rope drop out.

Clouds were piled into the sky. The stars peeped forth and then were veiled; the blackness was intense. Duane tucked the iron bar securely under his shirt, pulled the leather trunk under the window, and went at the job of getting through the opening. It was a stiff task, but he made it, inch by inch, gripping the remaining bar and wool rope. When he let himself go, his clutching hands were smashed cruelly against the stones—but he was free, dangling over the void—free!

Now he was gambling everything on what would meet him. Unless a window were there, he was lost. He got the rope

between his legs and let himself down, carefully, hand over hand. His feet scraped the wall—came suddenly upon emptiness. A window! But not like his own. Not a barred window; the opening was glassed in. The room showed no light. Was it empty?

From somewhere far below drifted up chanting voices and the brazen reverberant clash of gongs. Hand over hand; it was beside him now, he could get his boots against the glass! Arms straining, he let himself dangle out, then came in, kicking with both feet. His boots shattered the glass. He heard a faint frightened cry, and never had a human voice seemed so sweet. Another swing, and his feet and legs were in through the opening.

Exhausted, cut in a dozen places, but still intact, he fell to the floor of the room. A match was scratched and sprang alight; in the yellow flame he saw the face of Agnes Lawton and she saw him. He was too spent to find words, but lay gasping. Another match, and flame rose from a candle.

Duane roused, to find her swiftly bandaging a ragged cut in his arm.

"It was a long job, but I got here," he said. "Words are silly things, aren't they?"

"Sometimes. I was never so glad to see anyone!"

"You didn't know I had tried to reach you with a message? No, of course. Never mind. Are you all right? Unhurt?"

"Quite," she said. "But a prisoner. They let me out each day for an airing."

"No such luck here." Duane rose stiffly. "We've got a lot of time to make up for; let's talk as we go. I suppose your door is locked."

**I**T WAS. He went to work on it with the iron bar, which made an excellent jimmy, but the door did not yield readily. As he worked, they both talked. Her brother was in a hospital at Irkutsk. She

had been decoyed, under pretense that Duane wanted her, to a helicopter that had brought her here; Tuyok Nokhoi himself had piloted it.

"From what he said," she concluded, "he knew nothing about Mr. Parks being in Korla. He thought I was in full charge of making the Buddha, and evidently intended to halt that work."

"So? And he didn't know about Parks, eh?" said Duane thoughtfully. "What about the air-base construction?"

"I think that has stopped entirely," she replied. "You're supposed to be away on a hunting trip—"

The lock of the door smashed out under Duane's weight.

"All right; forget everything else. Our job is to get out of here," he said, and turned to her, looking into her cool, level eyes. "No use asking if you're game for it; I see you are. Take the candle and follow me. This old rabbit-warren is probably deserted and dark. Down at ground level we'll find risk enough. Ready?"

She brushed the hair out of her eyes and seized the candle. "Let's go!"

Iron bar in hand, Duane stepped out into the dark passage and they were off.

Some twenty minutes later, an unfortunate Mogul in red robe and hat, who guarded a passage on the ground floor, heard footsteps. He paid little attention, beyond a growled command for silence. He was intent upon the scene at the far end of the passage, dimly visible from his post.

The entire community was gathered there, in the huge communal chamber dominated by a gigantic bronze statue of Buddha. Through thick incense, studded by the occasional clangor of gongs and drums, pierced chanting voices; at intervals they dropped, and the cracked tones of an old woman rose shrilly, or the deeply vibrant accents of the holy man from Tibet. He who had been Tuyok Nokhoi. Ceremonies

were going on that would last far into the night.

The Mongol guard in the passage was aware of two dim figures where no figures should be. A shout broke from him—unluckily, just as the chanting voices were at their loudest, drowning his alarm—and plucking a long knife from under his robe, he hurled himself straight at the two figures. He had no chance to shout again; for the iron bar in Duane's hand smashed hat and head.

Now there was fast work in the dim passage. Through the open doorway of a reception room was rolled the Mongol's body; the hat and red robe were clapped on by Duane. He caught the hand of Agnes Lawton and led her down a transverse corridor, away from the chanting and the incense. A light appeared ahead; a thunder of gongs from the ceremonies filled the air.

"I know where we are!" said Duane, at his companion's ear: "That's the side entrance from the courtyard—good! Now, wait here. Looks like a guard near the light. Stay put!"

Too bad that Mongol had carried no pistol! But the iron bar would serve. He strode forward. A lamp burned in a wall-nook. Duane came to abrupt halt, flattening himself against the wall, immobile in the shadows.

Not one guard, but two! They stood together, yelping at one another through the deafening din of gongs; one was pointing excitedly. Now Duane perceived that the door stood wide open, and a sudden blaze of light caught his eye from outside—it looked like a falling star-shell, illumining the courtyard. But he dared not pay any attention to it now—one of those two guards had turned, had picked up his skirted robe, and was coming slap for him at a run.

The other stood in the open doorway, back turned, watching something outside—

the strange brilliant light, no doubt.

Duane had not an instant to think. The Mongol running at him was upon him; if the man got past, he must discover Agnes Lawton. On the thought, Duane stuck out his foot. The lama tripped over it, a yell burst from him, and he pitched forward, only to roll over like a cat and come erect. His arm moved. Duane, leaping for him, was aware of a stunning crash—the monk had flung a heavy bronze knife, whose hilt struck him between the eyes.

Blinded, stunned as he was, Duane kept going and hurled himself into the man. His iron bar lashed out and elicited a howl of pain. Duane struck again. The redrobe relaxed and lay motionless. Duane fell against the wall, recovered, wiped the blood from his eyes and peered at the second guard. That man stood in the doorway, unmoving; he had heard nothing. His whole attention was fastened upon something outside.

Feeling himself on the point of collapse, dizzy from that cruel crack on the forehead, Duane staggered forward. The sound of the gongs died away; he heard the voice of Agnes Lawton, from behind. The guard heard it also, and whipped around. A cry broke from him. His hand whipped up a pistol. . . .

Before he could use it, the iron bar crushed his skull and knocked him out through the doorway into the night.

Duane stooped, groped for the fallen pistol, and his fingers found it. He came erect, swaying; the door-frame supported him. Agnes Lawton was at his side, catching his arm. With her, he staggered out upon the darkness, and the open air revived him, steadied him. He looked about for the strange brilliant light, but there was none. All was pitch black.

"What happened? Are you hurt?" sounded her anxious voice.

Bareheaded now, Duane impatiently threw off the hindering red robe. He toppled, and she barely saved him from going over. With a low groan, he sank down on the stones.

"Got a nasty crack over the eyes," he made reply. "Easy, now. Let me rest a minute. Something's going on out here. See anything?"

"Not a thing," she said. "There's a glow of light over at one side—where they've been erecting those walls—"

"Yes, for the Buddha. Wait, now." Duane felt his hurt forehead. No inner damage, apparently, but there was a long cut and the blood filled his eyes. He wiped it away, and looked. Light, sure enough; a faint light. He tried to move, and could not.

"Give me a hand up—that's the girl. Thanks." Unsteadily, he gained his feet, with her help, and jammed the pistol into his pocket. Together they started across the courtyard. He was intent upon getting entirely out of the place.

But, it seemed from nowhere, a finger-ray of light struck them. A glad cry sounded. To his amazement, he heard the voice of Parks. Figures approached. Here was Wang, babbling at him in delighted greeting—and Parks, steady old Parks, wringing his hands and giving Agnes Lawton an excited hug.

"What is it—what is it? Am I out of my head?" demanded Duane.

"Not quite, old chap!" said Parks, laughing. "We've got your Buddha here—got him planted and working. We didn't know what was up, but Wang suspected. He helped me finish the job—I had your orders, and headquarters said to obey you at all costs. So we did."

"Good lord!" gasped Duane. "Yes, yes—Tuyok didn't know about you—here, look out, look out—there's hell to pay back there!"

A chorus of yells split the night behind them. He staggered forward, Parks helping him. Directly in front of them, just back of the opening into the roofless walls, towered something. A light flashed, a deep voice boomed out—Parks spoke hurriedly.

‘The electronic system’s at work, hooked up to the power of the helicopter. That’s the electric eye greeting you—wait and we’ll switch on the lights—hurry, Wang!’

A soft, subdued glow leaped up. There stood the Buddha of bronze plastic, and the light lit up the courtyard. Duane halted, just inside the entrance, beside the Buddha. He shoved the others on, and turned as a vibrant shout of anger lifted. He knew that voice, and fumbled for the pistol in his pocket.

It was like a dream—the thick stream of figures pouring from the monastery, the tall lean shape leading them. Tuyok the Hound brought out a pistol as he ran forward, and a new yell of fury escaped him as the towering shape of the Buddha appeared.

Duane, without an atom of emotion, took careful aim and pressed the trigger. Tuyok leaped in air, came another step, another—and then crumpled up and fell face down on the stones. He had come just within the range of the electric eye, with his final step.

The glowing Buddha lifted an arm, a majestic booming voice came from his lips in a Mongol greeting, then he sat silent, smiling, motionless.

A deathly hush fell upon those red-robed monks crowding behind Tuyok.

They thronged together, staring. One stepped forward gingerly and said something. As though in response, the radionics worked anew; the arm of the Buddha moved in blessing, and the glow of light died into a gentle softness that lit only the smiling, serene face.

The monks, as one man, fell in prostration. Through their ranks came an old, gaudily attired shape. The cracked voice of Ming Shui made itself heard thinly. She advanced to the figure of Tuyok—and crossed the electronic beam. Again, in booming salute, the Buddha spoke and the lights gained in strength. With a howl, old Ming Shui toppled forward on her knees.

**D**UANE felt Parks pull him back, behind the Buddha.

‘Take over—take over, Parks,’ he said. ‘Get Wang to interpret—catch ‘em while it’s hot! Where’s Agnes Lawton?’

‘Here,’ she answered, and her hand found his.

‘Go on,’ said Duane. ‘Go on, and leave us alone, feller. It’s all over—’

And so it was, as Stratolines later learned. All over except one thing, that is; but you have undoubtedly guessed that already. And if you ever meet Mrs. Jim Duane, you will know why her husband looks, and is, the happiest man in the world.

And today, the miraculous Buddha of the Monastery of Eternal Peace is the most famous place of pilgrimage in all eastern Asia. As it should be.