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THE TROJAN BEAM

from THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM

John Wyndham

SPHERE BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

AT a very tender age my latent passion for all forms of fantasy stories, having been sparked by the Brothers Grimm and the more unusual offerings in the children's comics and later the boy's adven-ture papers, was encouraged in the early 1930s by the occasional exciting find on the shelves of the public library with Burroughs and Thorne Smith varying the staple diet of Wells and Verne.

But the decisive factor in establishing that exhila-rating 'sense of wonder' in my youthful imagi-nation was the discovery about that time of back numbers of American science fiction magazines to be bought quite cheaply in stores like Wool-worths. The happy chain of economic circum-stances by which American newstand returns, some-times sadly with the magic cover removed or mutilated, ballasted cargo ships returning to English ports and the colonies, must have been the mainspring of many an enthusiastic hobby devoted to reading, discussing, perhaps collecting and even writing, science fiction – or 'scientifiction' as Hugo Gerns-back coined the tag in his early Amazing Stories magazine.

Gernsback was a great believer in reader partici-pation; in 1936 I became a teenage member of the Science Fiction League sponsored by his *Wonder Stories* . Earlier he had run a compe-tition in its fore-runner *Air Wonder Stories* to find a suitable banner slogan, offering the prize of 'One Hundred Dollars in Gold' with true yankee bragga-dacio. Discovering the result some years later in, I think, the September 1930 issue of *Wonder Stories* seized upon from the bargain-bin of a chain store, was akin to finding a message in a bottle cast adrift by some distant Robinson Crusoe, and I well remember the surge of jingo-istic pride (an educa-tional trait well-nurtured in pre-war Britain) in noting that the winner was an English-man, John Beynon Harris.

I had not the slightest antici-pation then that I would later meet, and acknow-ledge as a good friend and mentor, this contest winner who, as John Wyndham, was to become one of the greatest English story-tellers in the idiom. The fact that he never actually got paid in gold was a disappoint-ment, he once told me, that must have accounted for the element of philo-so-phical dubiety in some of his work. Certainly his winning slogan '*Future Flying Fiction*', al-though too late to save the maga-zine from foundering on the rock of eco-nomic depression (it had already been amalga-mated with its stable-mate *Science Wonder Stories* to become just plain, if that is the right word,*Wonder Stories),* presaged the firm stamp of credi-bility combined with imagi-native flair that charac-terized JBH's writings.

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (the abundance of fore-names conve-niently supplied his various aliases) emerged in the 1950s as an important contem-porary influence on specu-lative fiction, parti-cularly in the explo-ration of the theme of realistic global catas-trophe, with books such as*The Day of the Triffids* and*The Kraken Wakes,* and enjoyed a popularity, which continued after his sad death in 1969, comparable to that of his illus-trious pre-decessor as master of the scientific romance, H. G. Wells.

However, he was to serve his writing apprentice-ship in those same pulp maga-zines of the thirties, competing success-fully with their native American contributors, and it is the purpose of this present collection to high-light the chrono-logical develop-ment of his short stories from those early beginnings to the later urbane and polished style of John Wyndham.

'The Lost Machine' was his second published story, appea-ring in Amazing Stories, and was possibly the proto-type of the sentient robot later developed by such writers as Isaac Asimov. He used a variety of plots during this early American period parti-cu-larly favour-ing time travel, and the best of these was undoubtedly 'The Man From Beyond' in which the poign-ancy of a man's reali-za-tion, caged in a zoo on Venus, that far from being aban-doned by his fellow-explorers, he is the victim of a far stranger fate, is remark-ably out-lined for its time. Some themes had dealt with war, such as 'The Trojan Beam', and he had strong views to express on its futility. Soon his own induc-tion into the Army in 1940 produced a period of crea-tive inactivity corres-ponding to World War II. He had, however, previously established him-self in England as a promi-nent science fiction writer with serials in major period-icals, subse-quently reprinted in hard covers, and he even had a detec-tive novel published. He had been well repre-sented too – 'Perfect Crea-ture' is an amu-sing example – in the various maga-zines stemming from fan activity, despite the vicissi-tudes of their pre- and imme-diate post-war publish-ing insec-urity.

But after the war and into the fifties the level of science fiction writing in general had increased consi-derably, and John rose to the challenge by selling success-fully to the American market again. In England his polished style proved popular and a predi-lection for the para-doxes of time travel as a source of private amuse-ment was perfectly exem-plified in 'Pawley's Peepholes', in which the gawp-ing tourists from the future are routed by vulgar tactics. This story was later success-fully adapted for radio and broad-cast by the B.B.C.

About this time his first post-war novel burst upon an unsus-pecting world, and by utili-zing a couple of unori-ginal ideas with his Gernsback-trained atten-tion to logically based expla-natory detail and realis-tic back-ground, together with his now strongly deve-loped narra-tive style, 'The Day of the Triffids' became one of the classics of modern specu-lative fiction, survi-ving even a mediocre movie treat-ment. It was the fore-runner of a series of equally impressive and enjoyable novels inclu-ding 'The Chrysalids' and 'The Mid-wich Cuckoos' which was success-fully filmed as 'Village of the Damned'. (A sequel 'Children of the Damned' was markedly inferior, and John was care-ful to dis-claim any responsi-bility for the writing.)

I was soon to begin an enjoy-able asso-ciation with John Wyndham that had its origins in the early days of the*New Worlds* maga-zine-publish-ing venture, and was later to result in much kindly and essen-tial assis-tance enabling me to become a specia-list dealer in the genre. This was at the Fantasy Book Centre in Blooms-bury, an area of suitably asso-ciated literary acti-vities where John lived for many years, and which provi-ded many pleasu-rable meet-ings at a renowned local coffee establish-ment, Cawardine's, where we were often joined by such person-alities as John Carnell, John Chris-topher and Arthur C. Clarke.

In between the novels two collec-tions of his now widely pub-lished short stories were issued as 'The Seeds of Time' and 'Consider Her Ways'; others are re-printed here for the first time. He was never too grand to refuse mater-ial for our own*New Worlds* and in 1958 wrote a series of four novel-ettes about the Troon family's contri-bution to space explo-ration – a kind of Forsyte saga of the solar system later collected under the title 'The Outward Urge'. His ficti-tious colla-borator 'Lucas Parkes' was a subtle ploy in the book version to explain Wyndham's appa-rent devia-tion into solid science-based fiction. The last story in this collection 'The Empti-ness of Space' was written as a kind of post-script to that series, especially for the 100th anni-versary issue of*New Worlds* .

John Wyndham's last novel was*Chocky* , published in 1968. It was an expan-sion of a short story follow-ing a theme similar to*The Chrysalids* and*The Midwich Cuckoos* . It was a theme pecu-liarly appro-priate for him in his advancing matu-rity. When, with charac-teristic reti-cence and modesty, he announced to a few of his friends that he was marry-ing his beloved Grace and moving to the country-side, we all felt that this was a well-deserved retire-ment for them both.

But ironically time – always a fasci-nating subject for specu-lation by him – was running out for this typical English gentle-man. Amiable, eru-dite, astrin-gently humo-rous on occasion, he was, in the same way that the gentle Boris Karloff portrayed his film monsters, able to depict the night-mares of humanity with fright-ening realism, made the more deadly by his masterly preci-sion of detail. To his great gift for story-telling he brought a lively intellect and a fertile imagi-nation.

I am glad to be numbered among the many, many thou-sands of his readers whose 'sense of wonder' has been satis-facto-rily indulged by a writer whose gift to posterity is the compul-sive reada-bility of his stories of which this present volume is an essen-tial part.

— LESLIE FLOOD

THE TROJAN BEAM (1939)

THE IRRESISTABLE FORCE

Theofficer dropped his hand. His crew could not see his face, for he stood on the obser-vation platform with his head in a steel turret. But the hand was enough. The twin engines roared, the great tank lurched like a huge monster just awakened and began to trundle forward.

The officer, looking left and right, had the curious vision of thickets slowly moving across the country. It was strange, he thought, that with war developed as a science so many of the old tricks remained in use. How many times in the long tale of history had an army advanced under cover of bushes and branches? It was no more than a moment's specu-lation before he turned his atten-tion to keeping his machine to its place in the forma-tion.

The weather was filthy. Sleet made it difficult to see any-thing much smaller than a house at 200 yards,

and the wind which cut in through the obser-vation louvres felt like a knife sawing at his face. No doubt excellent condi-tions for an advance, in the tactical consider-ation of the author-ities, but not so good for the men who had to do the work. However, there was some conso-lation in being a tank man and not one of the infantry who would be following.

He peered ahead and swore mildly. The sleet seemed to be getting thicker. Nature was improving her screen for their attack.

In the old days, when a soldier was a warrior rather than a mechanic, generals had preferred to lose their men from wounds rather than from pneumonia. The great general,

Julius Caesar, had reasonably remarked that 'in winter all wars cease' and until quite recently the Chinese had very sensibly gone home in preference to fighting in the rain. He wished they still did, damn them.

But that custom, along with many others, had changed now. Some-where beyond the shroud of sleet there were thousands of Chinese sitting in trenches, pill-boxes and redoubts, ready to blow his and all the other Japanese tanks to bits if they could, despite any inclem-en-cies of weather.

The officer frowned. He was a loyal servant of his Emperor, of course; he would be willing to shoot any-one who suggested that he was not, but, all the same, there were moments when he privately and secretly wondered if the expense in men and money was worth the object.

His father had been in the expe-di-tion to Manchukuo and that was a defi-nite success, but his father had also been in the 1937 cam-paign which had looked like being a success in the beginning, but had drawn to such an undig-nified end for Japan in 1940. And now here was another gene-ra-tion fighting over the same ground twenty-four years later. And what if they won? Markets, they said, but could you really force the Chinese to buy things they didn't want from people they hated? He doubted it, for he had come to know their stubborn-ness well.

The tanks passed through their own lines and entered no-man's-land. The officer aban-doned his specu-lations and became intent on his job. The sleet was still thick. He could see only the first tanks to his right and left, though clearly enough to keep his posi-tion. There was no sign of life from the Chinese lines. He won-dered what that portended. It might mean that they were actually un-aware of the coming attack, but he doubted that. If it were so, it would be their first sur-prise for a very long time; there were too many damned spies about. More probably it meant that they had some new trick to play. They nearly always had.

Orders came through on the short wave for the whole line to incline 30° right. He acknow-ledged and passed it on. Presently they altered back again and the line was travel-ling due west once more. Still there was no sign from the oppo-sing lines. The heavy tanks lurched forward in a shrouded world at a steady ten miles an hour.

Until now it was a tank advance like any other save that the oppo-sition was long in coming. The officer was still at his look-out and in the process of forming a theory that the Chinese must be running short of ammu-nition and conse-quently with-holding what they had for effective short-range work, when the thing which disting-uished this ad-vance from any other occurred with-out warn-ing.

It seemed that his head was violently seized and jammed at the embra-sure in front of him. His steel helmet met the wall of the turret with a clash, instinc-tively, he put up both hands to push himself away from the wall. For a moment nothing happened, then the chin-strap gave and he staggered back violently.

Even in that moment he was aware that the move-ment of the machine had changed. Through the din of mecha-nism he could hear the men below cursing. He stepped down from his plat-form, furious at their disobe-dience. Ten miles an hour had been the order; it was the big tank's quietest travel-ling speed. By the present motion he judged it had speeded up to twenty or more.

Inside there was a state of confu-sion. The driver was still in his seat, though helmet-less. The others, also helmet-less, were at the front, tugging at something and swearing.

He put his head close to the driver's.

“Ten miles an hour!” he yelled, through the din.

His voice was loud enough for the others to hear and they turned. He had a glimpse of a confused pile beyond them. Steel helmets, bayonets, rifles and all loose things had been thrust forward into the nose as far as they would go.

“Get that stuff back,” he roared.

The men looked at him stupidly and shook their heads.

He thrust past them and seized a sub-machine gun on the top of the pile. It did not move. He tugged, but it stayed as though it had been welded to the rest. The men looked on, wide-eyed. The officer dropped his hand to his holster, but it was empty. He became aware that the driver had not obeyed, the machine was still travel-ling too fast. Catching a hold, he dragged him-self back. The driver's speedo-meter read 25 miles an hour. He cursed the man.

“It's no good,” yelled the other, “she won't stop.”

“Reverse!” bawled his commander.

The twin engines roared and then began to slow. There was an appre-ciable check in the tank's speed. The place began to fill with blue smoke and a smell of singe-ing. Suddenly the noise of the engines rose as they raced furiously and the tank lurched for-ward again. The driver throttled down; the roar of the engines dwindled and died.

“Clutches burnt out,” shouted the driver as he switched off.

The tank went on. He and his officer stared incre-du-lously at the meter showing over twenty miles an hour, and then at each other.

The officer swung back to his plat-form. He picked up the ear-pieces of his short-wave commu-ni-cator and spoke rapidly. There was no reply, the instru-ment was quite dead. He looked at the com-pass. For a moment he thought they had turned through a right angle and were going north, then he realized that it had jammed.

Through the obser-vation louvres he saw that the tanks to right and left were still more or less abreast of him; one had its turret open and a man was signal-ling with his arms. He thrust his own cover upward and stood up in the sting-ing sleet. From the other's signs and the fact that he also was bare-headed he gathered that his machine was in a similar plight. He dropped down again and wiped the sweat and snow from his face.

The tank trundled on uncontrollably towards the enemy lines.

The tank officer watched with a frown. He could do nothing but observe, and it seemed to him that by the distance they had gone they should be close upon the lines, or else they had turned while he was below. It was impossible to tell.

Suddenly he became aware of some-thing coming up on his right. As it drew nearer he could make out one of their own Japanese light tanks over-taking him at a speed eight or ten miles more than his own. The two men in it had got rid of their top shield and were hang-ing on grimly to the sides. He could see their scared and puzzled express-ions as they passed.

While they pulled ahead he noticed that the sleet was thinner and visi-bility a little better. He could see a road crossing their path, then the yellow-brown earth of a ploughed field and then some-thing which might be water. He looked harder. Soon there was no doubt. It was a river and he could disting-uish some kind of build-ing on the opposite bank. There was no doubt that they had been pulled well off their course.

The men in the light tank had seen it, too. When they were half-way across the ploughed field he saw them jump out and roll over in the loam. They picked them-selves up quickly to dodge the follow-ing heavy tanks. Their machine dashed on and disappeared over the river bank.

The officer bent down. He gave rapid orders to his men to open the doors and abandon the machine. They lost no time in obeying. Look-ing back, he could see the string of muddy figures picking them-selves up and gazing after him.

He himself waited; it was still possible that the machine might stop, but he opened the obser-vation cover and made ready. Half-way across the ploughed field he pressed the button of the emer-gency fuse, and jumped.

He staggered up, plastered with mud and heed-less of the other run-away tanks, to watch his own. He hoped despe-rately that he had judged the time well enough to save it from falling into enemy hands. He watched it reach the built-up river bank and begin to climb. Then as it topped the rise and tilted, pre-para-tory to diving into the water, it seemed to fly apart from a flame which abruptly shot up amid-ships. The sound of the ex-plo-sion came back to him with a rum-bling boom.

He sighed relievedly, and then turned to meet the Chinese soldiers who were advancing from cover, grinning and holding short swords.

THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF THE 'WAKAMATSU'

George Saltry would have liked to smile, but he had spent a number of years of his life in learning dissimu-lation. One did not smile when engaged in offi-cial deal-ings with men of high rank; it imme-diately roused all their suspi-cions and lessened their confi-dence. A facade of unrelieved stem dignity was required, even though every-one knew it was only a facade. Particularly, one did not smile at Japa-nese head-quarters.

So it came about that George, as he waited in an ante-room for admis-sion to the presence of an impor-tant man, main-tained an expres-sion as unin-form-ative as that of the Japanese officers around him. But he was not un-aware of the thoughts passing behind their motion-less faces. He could feel their

hosti-lity and he knew its causes — first, that he was a man with-out offi-cial rank and yet apparently un-ashamed of the fact; secondly, that he was a Euro-pean, and for all Euro-peans they felt a contempt mingled with mis-trust.

In the half-hour he waited no one spoke. The Japa-nese scarcely moved. They sat gazing steadily before them as if in con-tem-pla-tion. It was, he thought, appro-priate, for where the Emperor is both military and divine, his officers must be his priests.

At the other end, a door flanked by two sentries with fixed bayonets opened enough to admit a head. A secretary hurried across and exchanged a few low-toned words. He turned and came back. With a perfunctory bow, he informed George that the General was ready to see him.

George was aware of the close scrutiny of three staff officers to whom he paid no atten-tion. Before the General's desk he bowed slightly and waited.

General Kashai-hoto was a short man begin-ning to go bald. He lifted a round face deco-rated with a thin, dark drooping mous-tache and studied the Euro-pean face before him with a pair of bright, intelli-gent eyes. George, return-ing the gaze, could see behind the General's eyes a sugges-tion of reluc-tance and faint distaste, but he was used to that and no longer allowed it to disturb him.

He knew that the military man dislikes the spy and the informer, but that he must use him. He knew, more-over, that that dislike arises from the uncer-tainty of the spy's status as much as from uncer-tainty of his loyalty. A secret agent to do good work must be partly in the confi-dence of his employ-ers and more in that of the other side, but, it is to the interest of the employers to keep that confi-dence down to the mini-mum.

In a war between nations of the same stock, where a man of one nationality may pass as one of the other, it is not too difficult to find reliable agents, but in a racial war where each man of the alien race is an obvious suspect to the other side it is more difficult. One must either depend on the unsatis-factory method of bribing members of the enemy race and bribing them heavily, or one must employ the services of a third party whose interests are commer-cial only. It was as such an agent that George Saltry was employed at present. As a member of a neutral race his appearance did not iden-tify him with either cause. There were English-men helping the Japanese and there were English-men helping the Chinese. He could, if circum-spect, pass in either country as a friend.

General Kashaihoto deplored this necessity for using foreign agents; one could appeal to nothing but their acquisi-tive-ness and one was never quite sure whether the enemy might not have made a higher bid. However, this man Saltry had a use-ful record and on this occa-sion it was not necessary to confide impor-tant secrets — merely a few occurrences which were being with-held from general public know-ledge. He said severely:

“You should have reported yesterday.”

“Yes,” George agreed.

“Why did you not?”

“Because my house was watched. It is an un-neces-sary risk to have me report here at all,” he added shortly.

The General frowned. It was not a tone he liked or expected. He looked harder at the young man, but

George Saltry knew better than to have his gaze borne down. He waited.

One of the*aides* brought a note and the situ-ation was relieved. The General read it, gave instruct-ions and then turned back to George.

“The Chinese have been using a new weapon,” he said.

“So I understand,” George nodded.

“You understand? And where did you hear it from?” demanded the General.

George shrugged his shoulders.

“These things leak out. It is my job to hear about them.”

The General frowned. It was true that such was an agent's job, but one preferred it to be prac-tised on one side only.

“What have you heard?” he said.

George admitted to know-ing no details. He had heard only rumours, but the kind of rumours which obviously had something behind them. He had tried to learn more but with-out success. The General looked more pleased.

“You had heard nothing from the other side?” he asked.

George shook his head.

“No,” he said truth-fully. “That has been puzzling me. If it really is impor-tant, the secret was unusually well kept.”

“It's important, all right,” he was assured.

General Kashai-hoto described several of the occa-sions when the weapon had been employed.

The first recorded instance had been during a tank attack at the beginning of December. Ten heavy tanks and about a score of smaller ones had inex-plic-ably gone out of control. All of them had deviated precisely the same degree of the south of their planned course and made for a river. Sub-sequently, the Chinese had pulled them out of the river and were now using them — all save one which was intelli-gently destroyed by its commander — against their former owners.

On another occasion an infantry attack had been completely dis-orga-nized. The one or two survivors had told an extraordinary tale. Their rifles and bayo-nets had been suddenly wrenched from their hands, and their steel helmets from their heads. The helmets had rolled away ahead just as though the level ground were sloping down-hill. The rifles had clattered a few feet and then come to rest. When they picked them up they had to hold them back as against a strong pull. It was impossible to aim them or wield them for bayonet work. In the face of a counter-attack the men could not resist, and the pull was too strong for them to bring them back, so they had to be aban-doned.

“What weapons did the Chinese carry in the counter-attack?” George wanted to know.

But the General could not tell him that. Those who had been close enough to see had not been those who returned.

Another disaster, the General went on, had been the fate of the cruiser *Waka-matsu* . The *Waka-matsu* had been on patrol in the Hsing-hwa Sound in the province of Fu-Kien. She was cruising at about ten knots some three miles off shore but in sheltered waters on a perfectly calm day when she suddenly began to make great lee-way on the shore side.

Course was altered at once and speed increased, but the drift shore-ward continued. More speed made little difference. The magnetic compass was jammed, the entire elec-trical system of the ship includ-ing the wire-less was out of order. Before long she was pointed out to sea with her engines going full ahead, but even her whole power was not enough to break the hold of what-ever was pulling, she was still going astern at a rate of some-thing between a quarter and a half knot.

Once the hold seemed to be broken. The *Wakamatsu* shuddered all through and leaped forward, but the force gripped again almost imme-diately and continued to hold. The commander ordered a bombard-ment of the shore astern. This was accom-plished with diffi-culty, for the pull on the shells was immense, making them extremely diffi-cult to handle; but with-out result, The pull on the cruiser conti-nued. As she neared the shore her propellers were smashed on sub-merged rocks, and imme-diately orders were given to scuttle her rather than surrender.

There were, the General implied, more instances that he could give, but he did not proceed with them. Instead, he looked up at the young man sharply.

“Well, what do you make of it?” he said, watching him closely.

“Sounds to me like some direct-ional magnetic force,” George told him. “But what I should like to know is what happened to the shells the *Waka-matsu* fired. If it is magnetic, each of them should have made a direct hit.”

The General approved. “That's observant of you,” he said. “We also think it is mag-netic, but we fancy it is capable of being reduced to a narrow field. If that is so, the trajec-tory of the shells would carry them out of the field a moment after they left the muzzles — it would, in fact, have practi-cally no effect at all on them at muzzle velocity. In any case, the observers on the ship did not notice a deflec-tion of aim.”

“I see,” said George thought-fully. “Yes, a narrow beam would explain that. It sounds,” he added, “as though you are up against some-thing pretty difficult to tackle.”

The General did not seem unduly depressed. He replied with a touch of fata-lism:

“All new weapons are diffi-cult to tackle — at first. But there's always a way. More-over, this thing is clearly of limited and pri-marily defen-sive use. How-ever, we must learn its power and its limita-tions before we can consider methods of defence.”

“And it is my job to find out for you, I suppose?”

General Kashai-hoto nodded and fixed George with his bright eyes again.

“That is so, Mr. Saltry. We want to know as much as you can find out, and as soon as possible.”

“All right. You shall,” said George.

THE BEAM PROJECTOR

George Saltry, agent for Top-Notch Tinned Foods, disappeared from Shanghai on one of his periodic trips. He was generally under-stood to be negotia-ting new agencies in the Philip-pines or Celebes. He had been seen off on the Shanghai-Hong-Kong boat and his name was on the passenger list of another from Hong-Kong to Manila. In fact, there was actually a passenger who responded to that name and looked passably like the George Saltry who had left Shanghai.

Meanwhile a spectacled and earnest young medical mission-ary was travel-ling north by train through Kwang-Tung province. His name was George White, and he was conducting a tour of personal inspection on behalf of the Charleston and Savannah Oriental Endeavour League. He was untidy, a little bewildered, a little short-sighted and he talked with the soft, pleasant speech of South Carolina. In his pocket was an American passport and he carried nothing which would connect him with Mr. Saltry of London.

George rather enjoyed the personality of Mr. White save when it led him into tech-nical discus-sions of social wel-fare with other phi-lan-thropic exiles.

After a five-hundred-mile journey, he left the train at Chang-sha. A few hours later he sat in a plane headed north-west, looking over the waters of the Tung-ting-hu which appeared more like an inland sea than a lake. A few hours more, and he was able to see the rushing yellow waters of the great Yangtze. Shortly before night fell, they landed at the great flying-field of Kwei-chow in Hu-Peh.

The next morning Mr. George White made appli-cation in proper form to the mili-tary gover-nor for per-mission to travel in Hu-Peh. The Governor considered a personal inter-view desirable and Mr. White presented him-self. The former waited until the door had closed behind his secre-tary before he remarked:

“How do you do, George?”

He rose, came round the desk and extended his hand. George took it. He replied in English and his voice had lost its southern accent.

“How are you, Li? You're looking well.”

Pang Li was a few years older than he, but they had been con-tem-porary at Oxford. Facing him now, George thought, not for the first time, how much better the Chinese was suited by his long silk coat than by a mili-tary uni-form, or by the suits he had worn in England.

Pang Li waved his visitor to a chair with a decanter and cigarettes on a small table beside it. He himself returned to his seat behind the desk.

“We have been expecting you before this,” he said. The tone was one of inquiry. George answered as to a question.

“And I expected to be here sooner, Li. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to be a bit worried at their not sending me.”

The Chinese looked across the desk seriously.

"They are losing faith in you?"

"I don't know. I don't think they have a great deal to lose. But I am still very use-ful to them. However, I suppose it is natural for them to put it to their most reliable men first."

Pang Li nodded. "I expect you are right. You are not the first to come after it, George. There have been several in the last week or two."

"After what?" George inquired, innocently.

"My dear George" — Li smiled — "there is only one thing to bring you all this way at this time."

"They didn't get it?"

"No. They got bullets."

There was a pause. George broke it by asking:

"What is this thing Li? A magnetic force?"

The Chinese nodded again.

"That is so. It is a controlled magnetic beam. An amazing discovery. Wu-Chin-tan, who used to be Professor of Physics at Chang-Chow, worked it out, and Ho Tang-hsi applied it."

"Entirely a Chinese discovery?" said George.

A faint shadow of impa-tience showed for a moment on Pang Li's face and then vanished.

"Unlikely as it may seem — a Chinese discovery," he said.

George flushed at the tone.

"I didn't mean that, Li."

Li looked at him.

"You implied it, my friend. Confess that to your-self. You Euro-peans and Ameri-cans are always sur-prised when a discovery of prac-tical use is made in the East. You feel that mech-anical invent-ion is the mono-poly of the West — and yet we have made many dis-coveries in the past, gun-powder and the compass among them. This magnetic beam is our dis-covery, and, at present our exclu-sive know-ledge."

"It seems to me that it is of limited use in war," George told him, "that is, unless you can reverse it and repel to an equal extent. It will mean a greater use of non-ferrous metals by an enemy, of course, but what else?"

"It cannot be used repul-sively," Pang Li admitted. "Perhaps you are right in think-ing it a minor and not

a great weapon. If it could be made repellant it would indeed be more use-ful. But you take a short view in think-ing of it only as a weapon. When this war is over and the Japa-nese barba-rians are driven back to their islands the true value of the beam will be seen all over the world, Wu-Chin-tan's name will be more famous than that of Edison."

"How?" George wanted to know.

Pang Li shrugged.

"Who can tell?" he replied. "But I can suggest just one application of it which will alter trans-port in many countries. The beam is highly efficient — that is to say it requires a small consumption of fuel for the power it produces —also, for lower power it can be made very compact. I fore-see that if iron sections were set in the roads at, say, 100 yards inter-vals, a vehicle gene-rating the beam would be able to pull itself along by means of them with great eco-nomy. All the power at present lost in trans-mission would be gained and the beam would be far cheaper to gene-rate than the present rotary motion. I can think, too, of many ways in which it could be used to simplify haulage and hand-ling of goods. There are appli-ca-tions, too, to the docking of ships, and the handling of aero-planes on the ground. But those are matters for the techni-cians. I know only that where a cheap source of power is available it will in some way or other be used."

"I see." George was less interested in the future develop-ments of the beam than in its present use. He turned the con-ver-sa-tion back. "You know why I am here, Li. What do you want me to tell them?"

"How much did they ask you to find out?"

"Everything, naturally."

"They would like to make beam pro-jec-tors for them-selves if they could?"

"Of course."

Pang Li appeared to consider.

"I will show you one in action," he said, and struck a gong to summon his secre-tary.

The machine was not impres-sive. To begin with, there was little to see. The gene-ra-tor was enclosed in a cubical brass box some twenty inches high. This was clamped by braces, which seemed of absurdly dispro-por-tion-ate strength, to a wall of concrete six feet thick.

"The pull on the machine is of course equal to the pull on the object," Pang Li explained, "and the moving of heavy objects there-fore necessi-tates a firm anchorage. The beam," he added, "passes through the wall which is thus made to serve the double purpose of holding back the machine and of protec-ting it."

Together they walked fifty yards or more at right angles to the beam's path. The Chinese carried a control box with wires reach-ing back to the gene-rator. They stopped and he pointed to a heap of scrap iron a quarter of a mile away over the barren ground.

"Watch," he said.

He tipped over a switch and advanced a rheostat slightly. In the distance, the pile of scrap stirred

slightly, and a faint squeak of rusty pieces rubbing together floated across the open ground.

"A little more power," said Pang Li, turning the knob.

The heap seemed to flatten out. The lighter pieces, old cans and rusty mud-guards began to roll towards the wall. Li gave still more power, and now all the pieces were in motion, scurrying and tumbling over the ground for all the world as if they were blown by a gale. Suddenly, half-way to the gene-rator, they were stopped.

"Now," said Li. "Full power."

He turned the control as he spoke. Instant-aneously the scrap iron leapt for-ward. It flew as though it had been fired from a gun. It hit the wall with a shattering crash and remained glued to the concrete face.

The two walked back.

"Try to pull it away," Li suggested.

George laid hold of an old cooking pot and put his full weight behind the tug he gave. It wrenched his arm, but the pot did not move.

"Stand back," Li directed.

He did so, and as the Chinese flicked back the switch all the suspended pieces fell into a loose heap at the foot of the wall.

George contemplated the heap for a few minutes in silence, then he asked.

"What is the power of a generator this size?"

"It depends on the spread," Li told him. "At an angle of 20° full strength it will exert a pull of between thirty an forty tons at a range of a mile. At 10° the pull is increased to nearly sixty tons at the same range. It is quite a small machine for experi-mental purposes. A 1,000-ton, 20°, one-mile machine can be housed in a four-foot cube, a ten-thousand-ton machine in about six foot.'

"I see," said George, thought-fully. As they walked back to Pan Li's office, he added. "What's the point of showing me all this, Li? What is up that wide and elegant sleeve of yours?"

The Chinese smiled.

"Did you not come here to learn about it?"

"That's what the Japs sent me for, but I scarcely expected to be shown the thing straight off."

Pang Li smiled again.

"I don't think you are much wiser for having seen it at work," he remarked.

Back in the office, George sat down and lit a cigarette while Pang Li went to a large wall safe. He returned to his desk with a shallow round case, smaller than a tooth-powder tin and enamelled black.

"This, George, will make you one of the most estim-able spies in the Japa-nese service," he said.

"How nice for me," said George. "What is it?"

"The thing which at least seven spies have lost their lives trying to get. Plans of the magnetic gene-rator."

"In that?" said George suspiciously.

"Yes. Several types, in fact, inclu-ding the pattern for aerial defence. They are all beauti-fully photo-graphed on a piece of 8-millimetre film."

"How nice," said George again. He looked curiously at the little box and then back to Li's face. "And when they've built them, and find they won't work, what do you suppose happens to me?" he inquired.

"But they will work. These are perfectly genuine-working drawings."

There was a pause.

"All right. I'll buy it. What's the game?"

"Game, George?"

"Game. Do you mean to say you're giving them your weapon?"

"You yourself said it was of limited use."

"Yes, but — hang it, you just told me you had shot seven spies who were after it."

"It makes for veri-simili-tude. They might have thought it surprising and a little suspi-cious if the very first spy had been successful."

"*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*," murmured George. "But I don't see how—?"

"That is a language I do not know," said Li.

"Troy, the Wooden Horse and all that," George explained.

"Yes, the Wooden Horse." Li spoke reflectively.

"All the same, I don't see—" George began again.

"It is not necessary for you to see. All you have to do is to deliver the plans and say how diffi-cult they were to obtain. A really heavy expense account should prove most convinc-ing.'

"All right. But I have your word, Li, that these are the genuine thing?"

"You have." He handed across the little box of film and watched George put it away care-fully in an inside pocket.

"This," said the latter, as he rose to go, "is one of the most remarkable things which has ever happened to me. I wish I could see what's behind it."

Pang Li smiled.

“While you were on this job, George, you have also heard a rumour which should be of some interest to the barba-rian Japa-nese. It is that the Chinese are building some very long-range bombers. They hope to have at least a hundred ready by the end of the summer or the beginning of the autumn.'

“Indeed. Capable of carrying out raids on Osaka or even Tokyo, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” said Li.

George extended his hand and wished his friend good-bye.

“I don't know what your scheme is, but I wish you luck. It is time the dead-lock was broken.”

“We shall break it,” Pang Li said with conviction. “The stars in their courses fight for China.”

WINGS OF DEATH

It was mid-August 1965 when the untidy and still slightly bewildered Mr. George White re-appeared in Kwei-Chow. It was under-stood that in the six months of his absence he had covered Hu-Peh pretty thoroughly from the medical missionary angle and had selected several sites where a represent-ative of the Charleston and Savannah Oriental Endeavour League might give valu-able service. He had come to discuss their possible establish-ment with the military governor and the civil author-ities.

Pang Li greeted him warmly.

“They tell me you are in high favour at Shanghai Military Head-quarters,” he observed.

“Thanks to you, Li,” George grinned, “I have a reputation second practically to none there at present. I under-stand that I have been commended to the Emperor himself in dispatches, by number if not by name. Every-one was pretty keen to know how it was done, but I was subtly reticent about that, and hinted that the sources must be kept secret for future use. That tip about the new bombers helped, too. It was confirmed soon after-wards from other sources.”

“I had an idea it would be,” Pang Li said softly.

“All the same,” George went on, “I'm hanged if I see what your game is. You got my message that they already had thousands of the gene-rators under construc-tion?'

The Chinese nodded. He could have added that he knew that they were going to be put into use in the Japanese lines on the 22nd of August. The plan, he under-stood, was to use them in large numbers and disor-ga-nize the Chinese forces completely. The value of sur-prise was not to be thrown away as it had so often been before by inade-quate supplies of a new weapon. But he did not mention it now. Pang Li seldom gave infor-mation with-out a purpose.

“And it doesn't worry you, Li? I still can't see what you are getting at.”

The other spoke reflectively:

"It takes a long silk and much patience to embroider a dragon," he said.

"All right, I suppose that is as polite a way of saying 'mind your own business' as any other."

"Can you give me figures of the production?" Pang Li asked.

George shook his head.

"I tried hard to get reliable figures, but those I got were wildly different. Guesses, I should say. However, you can take it that it is on a pretty big scale."

"All types?"

"Yes. The small and the large. I under-stand that large ones are to be mounted and are already mounted out-side the principal harbours as protection against sub-marines. The idea is either to drag them ashore or to immobi-lize them between two beams and shell them."

"And for aerial defence?"

"They are putting up immense genera-tors at a distance from the cities. I gather that they see the danger that they might bring planes and bombs down on the gene-ra-tors them-selves, so they have adopted a different principle. A very narrow, but intensely power-ful beam is generated and is made to swing back and forth across the sky. It is far stronger than would be necessary to bring down any plane. The scheme in this case is that the beam passing over the machine will exert a sudden pull which will either wrench the engine and other metal parts free or break off the wings by the pull on the body. By the time it begins to fall the beam will have swung on so that the plane and bombs will drop vertically and not along the path of the beam.'

Pang Li heard him out patiently.

"They are great imitators, like monkeys. They do not originate. That is the method designed by Ho Tang-hsi."

"It sounds pretty good to me," George said. "With a few dozen of those sweeping the sky you'd not have a hope in hell of getting past, not even in the strato-sphere."

"Not even well beyond the strato-sphere, if they are using the power Ho Tang-hsi advocated," Pang Li ammended placidly.

George scratched his head.

"Well, it beats me."

Half an hour later, as the English-man was leaving, the Chinese suggested:

"It is perhaps not wise for you to come here too often, but I should esteem it an honour if you would call and take tea with me at four o'clock on the afternoon of the 21st."

There was a note in his voice which caught George's attention, and told him that it was no casual invitation.

"I will come, Li," he assured him.

"Taking tea" it appeared was a euphe-mism, or at least a screen for when the delicately-flavoured, straw-coloured drink had been finished George found himself following his host out of the house. A small yellow aero-plane with official ideographs on the under-side of its wings waited in a field nearby. Its engine was already turning over. The two climbed aboard. The plane took off and turned to the west.

After less than an hour's flight they descended a few miles behind the lines and trans-ferred to a waiting car. At a regimental head-quarters, Li excused himself, leaving his friend for entertainment by the Chinese officers. Three hours elapsed and it was already dark before Pang Li returned with apolo-gies for the delay. George noticed that he had exchanged his silk robe for a more practical khaki uniform.

"Perhaps I can, in part, make up for my neglect of you by showing you some-thing of interest," he said.

A car with an official flag carried them towards the lines. Progress was slow on account of laden lorries going up and empties returning. The terminus for road travel lay in a wood. They got out and the car turned round and went back. In the dim light, George could make out several lorries unloading and their cargoes being transferred to the backs of donkeys and mules. In company with a string of the pack animals, he and Pang Li went forward on foot.

In temporarily-roofed sections of the support trenches were scenes of great activity. Cases were being broken open and their contents deftly handled. George stared at the operations with great bewilderment. He watched a man take a long slim cylinder and attach across it at right angles a frame of split bamboo covered with cotton. A couple of fly-nuts, rapidly spun on, fastened it securely and he passed it on to the next man. Farther on, there were men attaching larger frameworks to heavier cylinders.

"What's it all about? Building model aero-planes?" George asked, for the completed assemblies suggested nothing more than that.

"In a way, yes," said Pang Li. "But they are veno-mous little things. That, for instance," he pointed to one of the heavier type, "is filled with high-explosive."

"Oh, is it?" said George, eyeing the cylinder with increased respect. "And these?" he pointed to the lighter kind.

"Lewisite," said Pang Li.

"I see. I thought you disagreed with the use of gas?" he added.

"I do," Pang Li told him. "But then I also dis-agree with the use of war. We are a civil-ized people, we do not honour the mili-tary man, for us he is little better than a butcher. But unfortu-nately war is thrust upon us by barba-rous mili-tarists — the words are synony-mous — and we must tempo-rarily sink our-selves to their level for our defence. That applies also to the use of gas. It was foolish of them to use it. They did so, of course, under the impression that we had no factories which could produce it."

George bent down and tested the weight of one of the cylinders. He looked up.

"The wing area is very small for that," he said. "Besides, how are you going to drive them?" To himself he went further and charac-terized the devices as childish.

"We are not," said Pang Li gently. "They are." And he pointed towards the east.

They made their way up a communi-cation trench where a chain of men were passing the completed winged cylinders from hand to hand. In the front line they encountered an officer directing the distri-bu-tion. Pang Li stopped to exchange a few words with him and then led on. Against the parapet side of the trench the winged cylinders were upended in a row.

“There'd be a pretty sort of mess in here if a shell came over,” George suggested.

Pang Li shrugged. “One must run risks, even in war,” he observed.

They fed in a spacious dug-out. A bunk was after-wards found for George and he turned in. An hour before dawn an orderly roused him and he hurried out to find Pang Li waiting.

The Chinese greeted him and they drank tea.

“For a man whose busi-ness in life is the gratifi-cation of curiosity, you have been very patient,” Pang Li said with a smile. “I am now at liberty to end what for you must have been a most trying period.”

“Somewhat baffling,” George agreed. “For one thing I have not the least idea why I am here at all.”

“It is because, my dear George, today the dead-lock is to be broken, and you are in a great degree respon-sible for its breakage.”

“Interesting, though hardly illumi-nating,” George returned.

“Come. I will explain.”

Pang Li led the way into the front-line trench. George noticed that the winged cylinders which had been so noticeable the night before had now vanished.

“Where are they?” he asked.

Pang Li pointed to the parapet.

“Over there. The Japanese barba-rians plan to attack half an hour after dawn — that is 5.30,” he said. Their tactic is first to turn on magnetic beams all along the front. When this has disorganized us they will put up a barrage and advance behind it. Their men will be equipped with non-ferrous weapons — a kind of short sword of hardened bronze, I am told — which they will be able to wield freely while the magnetic beam makes our steel weapons unmanage-able. Thus they plan to break the dead-lock at last.”

“And I am responsible, so far as I helped them to get the plans of the beam gene-rators?”

“Exactly.”

“Now suppose you tell me what is really going to happen.”

“No, I'll let you see that for yourself.” He looked at his watch. “It is after five already. Time we were going.”

As they left, non-commissioned officers were inspecting their men and giving orders. Helmets, rifles and all other articles of steel or iron were being placed on the parapet side of the duckboards which floored the trench. The men were laying them down obe-diently, but with a puzzled look on their faces.

Pang Li led the way by a series of twisting trenches to a well-masked concrete pill-box. The frontal embra-sure was clear, for the two machine-guns had been dismounted and laid against the foot of the front wall. George, looking out, had his first comprehensive view of the scene. An early mist hung over the featureless no-man's-land, still masking the Japanese lines. Closer, he could see the Chinese front trench. It had an odd appearance now.

A slightly-inclined bank had been thrown up beyond the parapet and along this on the inner side so that it must be invisible from the east was a narrow strip of grey-white running parallel with the trench as far as he could see. Until he turned field-glasses on it he did not realize that it was made by the wings of thousands of the cylinders he had seen the night before. Through the glasses he could see, too, that the barbed wire beyond had been flattened down.

Pang Li looked at his watch. It was 5.20. Then he glanced up at the clouds, noticing their slow move-ment towards the other side with satis-fac-tion.

"Light south-westerly wind," he murmured.

"You're in luck," George said.

"It prevails at this time. The chances were fifty to one that any wind there was would be south-west or west." Li told him.

The world seemed strangely quiet. Some-where just behind them a lark rose with a song. An air of serenity held the scarred land in front.

"5.25," said Pang Li.

He took off his steel helmet and laid it care-fully on the floor. Then he settled himself at the embra-sure with George beside him.

"Now watch," he said. "In a few minutes our Trojan horse will give its first kick."

They looked out in a tense silence.

There was no warning. The whole thing happened at once. In the pill-box Pang Li's steel helmet slid across the floor, one of the dis-mounted machine-guns twisted and thudded against the wall. George, scarcely daring to blink, was watching the grey-white line. It jerked suddenly and slid forward, the minia-ture planes scraped and then rose a few feet as they streaked forward.

For some moments they were to be seen like a swarm of great locusts on a raid then, with the long-slender gas cylinders pulling ahead of the others, they were gone into the mist. Behind them the loosened wire turned over and began to roll to the east, a barbed and murderous moving hedge.

It was a matter of seconds, but seconds which hung sus-pended, while the watchers held their breath. Abruptly the machine-gun on the floor twisted again and thudded once more.

Then the peace of the new day was shattered. First came a few faint booms, then a roar of deton-ation which made the ground tremble and surged back in waves with crashing concus-sion out of the hanging mist.

A stir ran through the Chinese trenches. Men were pick-ing up their helmets and rifles and fixing their gas-masks. Two minutes later they were over the top and running forward into no-man's-land with bayonets ready. Behind, the Chinese artillery thundered into action.

Pang Li sighed and laid down his field-glasses. He turned to George.

“Well?” he said.

“Yes,” said George. “I should think that about breaks the dead-lock.” They turned and left the pill-box together.

FIRE FROM HEAVEN

There is no doubt, historically speaking, about the turning point of the last Sino-Japanese war. The Chinese line was pushed forward on August 22, 1965, and on succeeding days for distances varying from twenty to forty miles. Not until the Chinese commu-nications became a problem were the Japanese able to make a stand. And from that time the conflict bore a different aspect. The attack was with the Chinese, and their enemies were reduced to purely defen-sive action.

But the war was not over. Chinese morale, raised to great heights by the prospect of sweeping their enemies back to the sea, suffered a reaction as the Japanese reorganized and dug them-selves in. Within a month there was another dead-lock. And if the Chinese spirit was better than before, their commanders were uneasily aware that fresh reinforce-ments were on the way from Nagasaki to stiffen the Japanese line.

George White came again to see his friend Pang Li at Kwei-Chow late in October 1965. He found the Chinese in better spirits than he had expected. For him-self he had begun to think that the weary, dragging war would never end. But Pang Li seemed untouched by dis-courage-ment. He talked a little about the attack of August the 22nd.

“If they had made their advance then, I think it would have been the end,” he said. “It was the little ‘model aero-planes’ as you called them which saved the day. The gas cylinders being lighter hit a little ahead, then the high explosives smashed every-thing to bits. The disorganization absolutely over-whelmed them and our barrage did the rest. It was a rout.”

“All the generators were smashed?” George asked.

“Every one of them by the first H.E. cylinder that the magnetic beam brought in. It was entirely unexpected and they could not switch off in time.”

“They certainly used plenty of power,” George said. “I could even feel the drag of it on my boots. But I don't suppose any-one will be using magnetic beams in the line again. Not this war, at any rate.”

“No,” Li agreed. “I don't think so.”

“Well, what now?” said George, after a pause. “You didn't bring me here for nothing, Li.”

The Chinese scribbled for a moment on a piece of blotting paper before he looked up. Then:

“Our long-distance bombers are ready. One hundred and fifty of them,” he said.

“I thought you told me a hundred.”

“Did I? Now I tell you a hundred and fifty.”

“Well?”

“They plan a raid on many Japanese cities on the night of November the 14th.”

“Indeed. What's the idea?” — “That of most raids. To drop bombs.”

“No, I mean, why should you tell me this? You mean me to pass it on?”

“Certainly.”

“But — I don't see. Do you seriously mean to raid?”

“Why not?”

“Why not! My God, didn't I tell you that they've put up great magnetic beam generators all over the place? They'll not use them in the front line again, but that doesn't mean that they've given them up alto-gether, far from it. You may have pulled their legs good and proper with the ordi-nary gene-ra-tors but you gave them the perfect defence against air-craft. I tell you with a system such as they've got it's millions to one against a single plane getting through. And you can't play the same trick again. The swinging beam defeats that. It just wrenches them apart in mid-air and the pieces drop. They can't go straight along the beam, like the cylinders.”

Pang Li smiled.

“It is kind of you, George, to tell me this. But I assure you it is perfectly well known to me already. And in spite of your warnings it will be done.”

“It's sheer murder to send men on such a job.”

“All war is murder, George.”

“But, look here, you really want me to tell them this?”

“I do. The night is November the 14th. You do not know what time. But you under-stand that the intention of the fleet is to fly in several parts. Some will concentrate on Nagasaki and the other cities of Kyushu, others on Hikoku, but the main part will attack the big cities of Honshu. You have not, unfortunately, been able to discover the tactical dispositions and courses of the raiders. You know, in

fact, very few details, but you have confirmed the report from two independent reliable sources and from another less reliable."

Pang Li paused. He regarded the other steadily. "We are relying on you, George. They must have this infor-mation. It is of the greatest impor-tance. And the date must be right. Confirm that."

"I will," George assured him. "The 14th of November. That is a Sunday."

"It is. And if you are wise you will choose on that parti-cular Sunday to be any-where but in Japan?"

The devastation which over-whelmed Japan on the night of November 14th, 1965, is now history, and nowhere else in written history is there a catas-trophe to compare with it. The sun of the 14th set upon a proud, confi-dent, ambi-tious country: the sun of the 15th rose upon a land of ashes, deso-lation and despair. Beside that cata-clysm, the havoc of even the worst earth-quakes with their terrible death roll was as nothing.

It was some days before the rest of the world learned the reason for the sudden stoppage of all commu-ni-cation with Japan, and longer still before rumour was confirmed by know-ledge that her power and almost her whole civiliza-tion had been swept away in a single night.

Almost the first result of the definite news was that the Japa-nese armies in the field wilted and wavered. With their sources of supply cut off, it became impossible even within a few days for them to hold their posi-tions. A retreat was called, but the armies were getting out of hand; it became a rout. Supplies, guns and machinery were abandoned. The intensely-trained army degene-rated into a rabble pouring back across the country, each man for himself in a flight which only the sea could stop. The Chinese armies swept forward to recapture their land almost with-out resis-tance, jubi-lant and savage in their pursuit, pushing far ahead of their command, scarcely more disci-plined than the fleeing Japanese ahead of them.

In the confu-sion and constantly changing positions of various head-quarters which strove to keep in some kind of touch with their commands, it was difficult to trace any units. It took George White more than a week of chaotic travel by any means of transport which happened to be available to catch up with his friend Pang Li. He found him at last in a village on the border of the Che-Kiang whence he was directing the attack on Hangchow, where a Japanese remnant was making a last desperate stand with its back to the sea. George found himself a welcome visitor. Pang Li beamed upon it.

"It's all over, bar the shouting, as your phrase puts it," he said.

"There's no doubt about that," George agreed. "But, in Heaven's name, what did it? It's beyond believing that one raid, how-ever big, can have laid Japan flat on her back."

"Raid?" said Pang Li. "Oh, yes, the raid." He smiled.

"What do you mean?" said George suspi-ciously. "That was the night you planned to raid."

The Chinese made a deprecating motion.

"I must confess, George, to mis-leading you! We did not raid, we could not have done so at that distance if we had wanted to."

"But your new long-distance bombers—?"

"I am afraid they were a myth."

George put his hand to his forehead.

"But — but — for goodness sake, what did you do then, Li?"

The Chinese smiled more broadly at his bewilderment.

"It was necessary to do very little. Our Trojan Horse kicked again and did the rest."

"The magnetic beam?"

"Yes, the beam."

"But I don't see — Won't you explain, Li?"

Pang Li nodded. "I think you deserve it," he said. "I will tell you."

"Soon after dark on the 14th many sea-planes went up from ships which we managed to get into the North Pacific and some even in the Sea of Japan. The planes were specially adapted. They carried no bombs. Instead, they were fitted with power-ful ampli-fiers and loud-speakers. By the use of the ampli-fiers it was possible for two or three planes to sound like a whole fleet. Also, it was very diffi-cult for anyone listening to gauge their distance. In pairs and trios, these planes approached the Japanese coasts at various points."

"The garrisons, thanks to your information, were on the alert and picked them up on their sound-locators. They got their beam gene-rators going and began to wave them about the sky. Our planes kept low for safety and mani-pu-lated their ampli-fiers to give confusing effects of approaching and departing while doing their best to mislead the direc-tional sound-detectors. How far they succeeded in mis-leading the men on the ground, we cannot tell, of course, but they succeeded in their object of bringing the beams into use. I imagine that all the anti-aircraft magnetic beams in Japan were swinging back and forth at full power that night. Unfortunately, some of our planes ventured too close and were brought down by them."

He paused.

"Well?" George encouraged him.

Pang Li said, unexpectedly: "Do you know any-thing about meteorites, George?"

"Not much."

"Well, there are three kinds, and that kind known as side-rites are alloys of iron and nickel. When a meteorite hits, it hits remarkably hard. When a big one fell in Siberia in 1908 it knocked the trees flat over an area half as big as your Yorkshire. That's a pretty good con-cussion. They also liberate some heat. A gram of dynamite lets off 1,000 calories, but a good large meteorite lets off 450,000 calories for every gram of its weight. So you see the kind of thing one might possibly collect by raking round the heavens with an intensely power-ful magnetic beam."

George blinked.

“Might,” he said. “Might! Why I should say it's millions to one against your happening to touch one.”

Pang Li shook his head.

“On the contrary, it would be much more remark-able if you did not pick up several thousands. But it is also true that most of them would be burned away long before they could reach the ground.”

“So what?” inquired George. “It doesn't seem to help much.”

“True. The same thought occurred to the venerable Wu Chin-tan. He had to consider, there-fore, where the best meteors were to be found, for it was his con-ten-tion that if there were a really con-sider-able magnetic distur-bance many meteorites which would normally swing clear of the Earth might be brought down, and possibly there would be some large ones among them.”

“Now there is a famous swarm of meteor-ites known as the Leonids which gives one of the most brilliant and densest showers of ‘shooting stars’. They are probably the remains of a disintegrated comet, and their path inter-sects with that of the Earth every thirty-three years. They came in 1932 and they were due to come again on the nights of November the 13th, 14th and 15th, 1965. It was on this meteor swarm that Wu Chin-tan put his hopes. And we worked to create the biggest magnetic disturbance ever known, at the time when Earth should be in the densest part of the swarm.”

“Frankly, the results surprised us. Even Wu Chin-tan him-self did not expect a celes-tial bom-bard-ment on such a scale. The poor old man is rather worried now for fear of what he has let loose. It is, of course, utterly impossible to compute the amount of meteorites which fell on and around Japan that night, but large and small together there must have been many millions. And the impact of some seems to have started volcanic activity. How much of the damage is really due to the resulting earthquakes and eruptions we can't yet tell. It is there that luck was with us, for we had not fore-seen that part of the catas-trophe.”

George was silent for a time.

Pictures rose before him.

Beautiful countrysides, where happy and indus-trious people made use of every foot of ground, living on in their own cultural tradition, still almost untouched by the century of frenzied Western-ization in the cities. They had had nothing to do with this war, it was the imported machinery and the big business houses which demanded markets.

This was the year 1965 for the West and for the cities of Japan, but in the country places they kept to the old ways, for them it was the year 2625 of their own culture. He saw Japan in the spring, smothered in cherry-blossom: he saw it now, blasted and blackened, towns and villages flattened out by con-cussion, cities burning unchecked.

“It is the people who have suffered more than the leaders,” he said.

“In war,” said Pang Li, “it is always the people who suffer — never the leaders. And Japan's leaders have been no more than monkeys, imitating you Western barbarians. In the old days when the Japanese fought they fought for life or honour; now they fight for cash-registers and business-men. In analysis, it is you who have destroyed Japan, not we. You have been doing it for a hundred years.”

But George scarcely followed him, his mind was still on the final disaster.

"It must have been like a biblical judge-ment. They called down fire from heaven upon them-selves," he said.

"Others will do the same," Pang Li said. "But not China. Did I not tell you that the stars in their courses fight for China?"

BOOK INFORMATION

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