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THE THUNDER BIRD

It Was Appropriately
Named

By CLARISSA MACKIE

Dick Forsyth paced the eastern floor of the Chinese hotel which was his prison cell. Three weeks had passed since he and his little party of friends had been captured by the hostile natives. To his bitter amazement the others, Blakely, Dorr and Remington, had managed to escape from their hut on that first night of imprisonment, and he had not been taken into their confidence. He had been left behind.

What had become of his servants? He was almost certain that they had lost their lives in his behalf. It was growing twilight, and he heard the conglomerate noises of the village dying down into silence. Two men were talking beneath his window. He knew enough of the Chinese language to gather words here and there and to piece them together into some sort of comprehensive fabric. It was a welcome diversion for him in his loneliness.

In substance this is what Dick Forsyth heard: "Every night it appears in the west and hovers over our village. It pre-announces disaster for us," said one gloomily.

"It is an evil bird conjured by the foreign devil," returned the other.

"I never saw a bird like it. It flew straight out of the setting sun, and its color changed from red to gray, and it vanished in the clouds, and while it flew there came down a strange roaring sound like the beat of thunder."

"The thunder bird is larger than an eagle," said the first man.

"It is larger than the house we lean against," muttered the other.

Dick Forsyth, idly skeptical and a little contemptuous of the credulity of the superstitious Chinese, looked out



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of the window into the flaming sunset. He had noticed many of the people gathered on a little mound near the temple, and he gathered that they were watching for the thunder bird.

It could scarcely be an optical illusion if the entire village should witness its appearance.

Staring straight at the sun, his mind thousands of miles away from China, Dick forgot all about the thunder bird until he was conscious that a black speck floated against the red disk of the sun. It grew larger, and for an instant the sun was hidden from view. Then, painted with the sunset colors as it winged its way against the clouds, the thunder bird became rosy pink. Larger it grew, larger, and Dick had to strain his neck to keep it in view.

At last it appeared to pass over the roof of his prison, and then he heard the muffled throbbing that had caused the Chinese to name it "thunder bird."

He heard the yelps of frightened natives as they fled into their houses. He understood that the thunder bird had never approached so near before, had never appeared so appalling.

But Dick Forsyth was not afraid of the thunder bird.

He laughed aloud as it passed over his prison, and he even waved his hand cheerfully out of the window in the

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hope that the strange visitor might glimpse it.

The throbbing died away, and at last silence fell upon the village. There was no evening exchange of gossip, no twanging of rasping fiddle or nasal singsong of voices. The village of Pao Lao was scared into silence.

Dick realized that his prison was unguarded. Now was the time to escape. But should he venture forth yet? Was the time ripe?

He sat and pondered that question over and over after the thunder bird disappeared.

The moon arose from a pale cloud in the east and flooded the village with light. The shadows of the houses were sharp and black. The narrow street that was a filthy lane in the daylight took on a strange, mysterious half light. Somewhere a pariah dog barked.

Dick took three steps toward the little window and paused.

Out of the night came the distant throbbing of the thunder bird's cry.

His guard, who had timidly returned to his post under the window, uttered a yelp of dismay.

"Al yah!" he quavered. "Tis the thunder bird! It is the friend of the foreign devil. We shall be destroyed!"

Dick heard the bars of the door slip aside, then the padding of the coward's footsteps as he scuttled back to his hovel.

"Saved by the thunder bird!" ejaculated Dick as he pushed open the door and stepped into the moonlit night. His first act was to pick up a stout stick from the ground, and his second was to try to locate the thunder bird, and then, seeing it flying as though it came straight out of the moon itself, Dick turned about and went to meet it.

It was still many miles away, and he had to leave the village far behind and to climb up and down many hills before he came within close view of it.

It was flying low—perhaps a hundred feet above the ground—and it came it came, although it grew larger and more awe inspiring, the more relieved was Dick Forsyth of the United States and Shanghai, China.

Dick jumped up and down and shouted. He tore off his soiled white tunic coat and waved it frantically. He swore lustily in four languages as it appeared not to heed his calls.

For an instant he was baffled.

Then he put his hands to his lips and forced all his waning strength into the following roar of his college yell.

There was a queer, siren-like response from the thunder bird. The thunder dulled to a purring throb, growing slower and slower until the thunder bird descended in lessening circles and flapped on the ground.

The thunder bird was a grotesque creature. It had a wing spread of forty feet. Its wings were of canvas, its bones and tendons of steel and aluminum, and its feet were four rubber tired landing wheels. Yes, it was an aeroplane.

Moreover, it was an aeroplane familiar enough to Dick Forsyth, for it belonged to Benny Dorr, who had been one of the first foreigners in Shanghai to startle the natives with the sight of a flying machine.

It was Benny Dorr's flying machine, and there was no doubt in Dick's mind that it was Benny who was disengaging himself from the driver's seat and coming toward him with extended hands.

This explained Benny's escape. He had gone away so as to be able to return and save his friend. But how about Blakely and Remington?

"Well, old chap, I might have missed you if it hadn't been for that zip, zip, zip of yours," cried Benny tearfully as they wrung each other's hands. "I've been scouting around this God forsaken hole for two days now, hoping for a glimpse of you. Blakely has been hidden in a ruined temple back of the town here to keep an eye on you. He was to rush in and clean up the town if he harmed you. Remington went back to Shanghai with me so that in case one of us dropped out the other could go through and give the word about these hungry Chinkies! We got there all right, and I came back in this affair, thinking I might discover some way of aiding you to escape by its means. Remington is up there in the temple with Blakely, and they have a dozen husky, trusty men behind them in case you needed help in getting away. How is it you're wandering around here instead of being locked up?"

In a few words Dick told him about the thunder bird and the evil name it had gained among the terrified Chinese. Then he went in to confess how bitterly he had resented the apparent desertion of his friends.

"I don't deserve this, Benny," groaned Dick as he gripped Dorr's hand.

"Don't deserve it, eh?" laughed Dorr. "Don't you suppose we remember how you stayed awake two nights without a wink of sleep when we were taking that cruise in the south Pacific? Blakely and I were about all in, and you—oh, if you object to hearing your good deeds recited, why, don't wonder why we did it!"

"Just follow the thunder bird. Good name, eh? I guess I'll call it that hereafter. Just follow the thunder bird and it will lead you to Blakely's temple. Here's a gun for you in case any of the natives get over their scare and attempt to interfere. So long, Dick!"

In another moment the propeller of the thunder bird was buzzing merrily and the big machine was rocking over the uneven ground preparatory to flight. Then it arose obliquely and flew toward the southeast.

Dick followed so closely in its wake that it seemed as though he vanished with the aeroplane into the night air. The thunder bird hovered a moment over the ruined temple before it descended to join Dick and his faithful friends.

On a distant hillside above the village of Pao Lao a little group of Chinese saw a sight that filled them with superstitions awe.

They saw the prisoner, the foreign devil, walking along. They saw the thunder bird hovering overhead. They saw it plunge down, and pick up the foreign devil and fly away with him to the moon.

Then, because the evil bird had apparently taken what it came after, they lost their fear and went back to their homes relieved of their terror.

Of course the thunder bird never came back to Pao Lao.

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Tommy—Pop, a man and his wife are one, aren't they? Tommy's Pop—Yes, my son; sometimes one too many.—Philadelphia Record.

He is not the best carpenter who makes the most chips.—Old Saying.

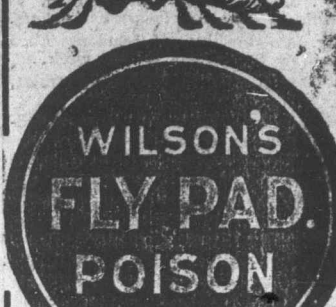
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