

L. RON HUBBARD



*Inky
Odds*

GALAXY
PRESENTS

Inky Odds

THE calm and dignity of the Shanghai Office of World Press had all the aspects of a church—providing the church was being hurled aloft by a typhoon. Men sat at their desks, girls at their typewriters, and business went on as usual—as usual, because, practically unnoticed, George Graves was tearing the place into fragments with a lusty bellow. And the reason—also as usual—was Bat Conroy.

“Where’s Conroy? Where’s Conroy, I say! Damn it, are you all deaf? *Where’s Bat Conroy?*”

For an instant Graves recalled that he had visitors and turned with a hypocritical smile of apology. One was a lady of perhaps twenty-five years, dark and glamorous, and with an air of sorrow which made her twice as lovely. The other was a baffled little woman, Gwen Fairington’s maiden Aunt Agatha.

“I’m sorry. I can’t ever seem to find anybody,” said Graves. And then to the whole office again, yelling from the door of his own, “Where the hell is Bat Conroy? Are you all dead?”

A scared secretary who was of a size and appearance which made it probable that George Graves would some day eat him without salt, lifted a tremulous voice. “He’s covering the Japanese attack on the Twelfth Route Army north of Changkow, sir.”

“Where?” roared Graves, as though he had received a personal affront.

“North of Changkow, sir.”

“Oh, lord! Lord in heaven deliver me! Oh, by all the saints and devils and demons and— That’s gratitude! That’s gratitude for all I’ve had to put up with from Bat Conroy! Here’s the biggest story of this confounded, out-of-date war, and Bat Conroy is north of Changkow! Here’s a story with a heart-throb, pathos, drama and big copy, and Bat Conroy is covering some peanut-sized battle north of Changkow!”

“You . . . you sent him yourself, sir,” quavered the secretary. “I sent him!”

“Yes, sir. It’s the b-b-b-biggest b-b-battle we’ve had in months, sir. You said so, sir, when you sent him.”

“Stop stuttering! Of course I sent him! That’s right—lay all the blame on me! Now listen! This is Gwen Fairington and her Aunt Agatha. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Y-yes, sir. She’s the heiress to the toothpaste fortune, and her husband deserted her and came to China and got l-l-l-ost—”

“Right! That’s news. That’s news, do you hear? We’ve found her husband for her and she’s come to us for help. And where is he? Where *is* he?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“He’s up in Fu-Chiang, that’s where! Up beyond four battle lines. And he’s a doctor, so what’s he doing? He’s trying to keep the Americans at Fu-Chiang from all dying of cholera. He’s in deadly danger and there’s no way to rescue him. But we’re sending a boat upriver. Upriver through shot

and troops and bombs and rapids and whatnot, to rescue Bill Fairington and restore him to his wife who has searched for him for two years. Have you got that?”

“Y-y-yes, sir.”

“All right. *All* right. Then grab an office telegraph and send word to Bat Conroy that I don’t care how many battles he’s covering, to return here immediately and take charge of this. Tell him it’s the greatest story of the war. Tell him it’s terrific. Tell him it’s dangerous. But get him back here as fast as he can travel.” The secretary was about to scuttle away when Graves stopped him. “Has he filed about that battle?”

“No, sir.”

“Huh! Hell of a lot of good *he* is lately. Battle going on and he hasn’t got the story in! Now beat it!”

Mopping his brow, George Graves sank down at his desk. “I don’t know how I ever live through this,” he told Gwen Fairington. “Nothing ever goes right. Nobody is ever where you want him. And International Service is scooping us on everything that breaks. Some day I am going to blow out my brains. I feel it in my bones.”

A sigh of sympathy came from Gwen Fairington. “But you are being lovely to us. I shall never forget it.”

“It’s . . . it’s all a little confusing,” said Aunt Agatha. “This Bat Conroy—”

“You’ve heard of him, dear,” said Gwen. “He’s the best World Press has.”

Aunt Agatha made a fluttery motion with her hands. “But this will be very dangerous for him. He might be killed!”

“No more than us, dear,” said Gwen. “We are going on that boat with him. I’ve searched too long for Bill to—”

“*Chief!*” came an agonized wail from the outer office, and a reporter loped in with a telegraph blank. “Chief, I’ve just found out that International Service filed that Changkow yarn five hours ago and the battle has hardly started! It’s that Perry Lane!”

“Oh! Oh, oh, oh!” cried Graves. “That Bat Conroy has been scooped again! Hell and snowing cats! If he gets killed going upriver on this trip it will damn well serve him right!”

Along a shell-ripped road, below a sky as leaden as the spumes of powder gas which soared above concealed but raging batteries, Bat Conroy wended his happy way.

China was in flames! Millions were dead! Starvation, disease, flood, fire, agony and disaster avalanched across the land!

China was in flames and Bat Conroy warmed his capable hands before the conflagration and grinned a happy newshound’s grin. He shot out sizzling copy and heard the snick of bullets by his ear with an ecstasy another man might experience at the opera. Bat Conroy was not bloodthirsty. In itself, disaster did not make him happy. His detached, human self might even writhe in sympathy for these doomed forfeits to a major political error.

But blood made news, and there were those who said that the great Conroy of World Press had not been born at all, but had been cast in a linotype and had come smoking

and half-molten into the world to talk in headlines, to eat newsprint, and to bleed, not blood, but ink.

He was well over six feet, though the way he had of standing—a careless, cheerful way—reduced his height. He had an eager, overjoyed air about him which, some said, not even the news of his own death could have changed. His nose was a prominent part of his not unhandsome face, and when he was excited his nostrils quivered like those of a high-strung horse—and he only got excited when he smelled a headline in the making. His eyes never seemed to take in the immediate vicinity, but were forever looking just beyond the horizon where, they seemed to hope, a much bigger battle might be killing a much larger number of men. He had neither combed nor cut his yellow hair in the memory of his associates, or perhaps that was an illusion caused by his habit of exhibiting his emotions by smoothing, tearing or tousling that yellow mop.

Just now his long military trench coat was splattered to a dun color by the mud of the alleged road. His abused felt hat was hauled down over one eye to keep out the spatter of rain which had come to bog down guns and horses and so prevent the Japanese from following up the retreating Chinese and putting a final period to a couple of divisions of troops.

This war had been going on for years. It would probably continue to go on for years. It was no longer front page, and yet it still had to be reported. And Bat Conroy, knowing that, lived in perpetual hope that it would take a sudden dramatic turn and again loom three inches high on page one. At times

he even went so far as to wonder just how he could go about making it that exciting, but, so far, he had no usable ideas.

His joy was being melted by this rain, little by little. For when the Japanese had driven the Chinese out of this town, it had seemed possible that the Chinese would be followed up across hard, coverless country and annihilated to a man. That would have made a story. But this rain!

Here was a tank, its treads half swallowed by muck. There was a gun limber with a squad of the lads in mustard straining at its bogged wheels. Nearby was a tangle of men and equipment, an infantry brigade, gazing dolefully at caked boots and thinking with despair upon the probability of complete starvation. Further along was an ammunition supply column, overrunning its own front line and trying to get turned around where there was no room to turn, before Chinese artillery found it and scattered the landscape with Japanese.

There were two houses in this town which were not burning, and one of these had no rear. Of the others, there were a few walls, a few gravel piles bedecked with various bits of personal property, including bits of human beings.

Up high, a shell roared and exploded in a fountain of earth and men somewhere to the right. The next shell came down so near that it did not howl at all. There was a swift whisper and then a shattering roar, and the last half of the ammunition train exploded all together to ornament the sky with pieces of trucks and cases and unlucky drivers. Down past Bat Conroy a wounded horse came screaming, scattering the bogged brigade through its center. A shot cracked and the horse went down. A little officer raced up and down like a wild thing and

in a high, panicky voice told his company to be calm. There came a certain note in the air above, Bat Conroy dropped on his face in mud, and then came a blast so furious that it seemed to invert the very earth. The company was gone. So was the little officer.

Bat Conroy dug himself to the surface and spat out the yellow mud. Well! The Chinese were making a good retreat of it, anyway. "Twelfth Route Army Retreating in Good Order—"

*Zingaro*wwwwww! Mud and bricks and the triple explosion faded into hot, dry smoke, leaving baked earth where a stalled camion had been.

Japanese artillery bellowed and blasted, and the far-off moan of an airplane motor brought them on their target. Bat Conroy lay for a while in an acrid-smelling crater, on the theory that a gun pointer usually changed his sights between salvos. Near and far, for the next twenty minutes, shells continued to land, but at longer intervals. The Japanese artillery, too, began to decrease in volume. And then the gray skies opened in earnest and the chilly flood reached with cold fingers down Bat Conroy's neck, no matter how tightly he buttoned his collar. He looked at his watch and found that it was three in the afternoon, a fact which surprised him, for he had supposed it around ten in the morning. Simultaneously his stomach confirmed the passage of time and, without really taking his mind off his story, Conroy got out of the crater and began to scout for food.

Bat Conroy drew a long breath, for it was quite apparent that the Chinese had made good their retreat and that the Japanese would now only mop up and dispose of a few snipers

and possible spies. He would find something to eat and then he would burn up the highway—or what was left of it—if he could find a car—for Changkow and file his story.

For a moment a small barb of worry nagged him; a little anxiously he looked around him, half-expecting to discover his nemesis of the last four months.

Every time he had something hot to file of late, he felt this way, the way an inventor feels when his task is done and he begins to realize that another man might get the invention to the patent office first. Conroy was getting wholly superstitious about Perry Lane.

He had no inkling of Perry Lane's appearance, knowing only that he was a competent war correspondent on the staff of International Service who had appeared suddenly and without fanfare upon the Chinese front to especially bedevil the days of Bat Conroy. Five times in six weeks Bat Conroy had filed a hot story, only to have Graves, at Shanghai, scathingly inform him that International Service had released the yarn some hours before, and invariably under the byline of Perry Lane.

Bat Conroy had tried to figure out all manner of explanations, even that of telepathy, so that he was almost afraid to think a story before he filed it.

But General Shimizu, that morning, had informed him that he was the only correspondent with the Japanese in this vicinity and that the one called Perry Lane could not, therefore, be around. Conroy solaced himself with this information now, and walked through the mud and rain and debris, nearly convinced that he had, for once, an exclusive. Of course, he would have liked some additional angles. There was a lot of

stuff being printed about what the Japanese were doing to their prisoners, and possibly, if he could get the story, World Press might be mollified, despite his recent tardiness.

With this in mind, Conroy eased off the road toward a group of disconsolate Chinese under Japanese guard, intending to interview some of them and then wait and find out what happened.

An officer with a red band on his cap looked with hostility at Conroy. "I am sorry—very sorry—but you cannot linger here."

They were standing beside a high, if battered wall, the exterior of some school yard that offered some small protection from the rain. This officer's refusal was all that Bat Conroy needed to make him stay.

"I am Conroy, of World Press."

The officer looked closely at him. "Papers?"

Conroy showed his line passes and the officer became very courteous.

"I am sorry. I was given orders not to let anyone see these prisoners. But if you are Mr. Conroy—"

"Thank you," said Conroy and turned to address a Chinese officer who, stripped of sidearms and coat, dismally awaited his reunion with his ancestors. But before Conroy could speak, there came a crashing rattle beyond the wall. Two machine guns were going in there. They stopped. Conroy looked sharply at the Japanese officer and then turned to enter the arch.

"No. No. So sorry! You cannot go in there!"

"Thank you," said Conroy, and walked in.

The yard was about a hundred yards long, surrounded by

the wall. Two or three hundred prisoners were herded into one end of it, and perhaps fifty corpses were caved in at Conroy's right. Two machine gunners sat dispassionately upon their tripods and waited for the next batch to be sorted out and stood up.

The officers had men hauled out of the mob at random, clearly with the intention of executing all of them at length, but giving those who still lived something to think about to occupy their time.

Into the present batch was pulled a White Russian officer. His shoulder was damp with redness and he wore no cap. But he was grandly condescending to his captors. Two Chinese snipers were next.

Then the guard hauled out a white girl from the mob and thrust her into the newly forming group!

She was speaking in very rapid Japanese—so fast that Conroy could scarcely follow her. But she did not seem to be frightened, merely concerned.

“But I tell you this is a mistake! I am not a Russian. I am an American. I . . . I am an American missionary, and if you will cable President Roosevelt I'm sure he will tell you—”

“Quiet!” barked a Japanese officer.

“But the President and I are old friends! And besides, how could I be a White Russian! Born in Lansing, Michigan, USA!”

A guard thrust her toward the wall.

She disconsolately took out a pack of cigarettes and, offering one to the White Russian officer, lit his and her own.



*“But the President and I are old friends!
And besides, how could I be a White Russian!
Born in Lansing, Michigan, USA!”*

“This is highly irregular, Ivan. Your name, of course, *is* Ivan, isn’t it? They ought to have a court-martial and then a blindfold, and somebody ought to wave a sword before they fire and say it is all for the good of the Mikado.”

“It is a very messy day on which to die, madame,” said the White Russian. “One will make such a soggy corpse. But then, since birth, I have known that I would some day come to a bad end, and so now I have no longer to worry about it. First my vast estates, and now my life. Ah, but then that is fate.”

“Officer!” said the girl. “Officer, don’t you want my last words?”

“Quiet!”

Conroy, throughout all this, had been stunned. She had spoken Russian to a Russian, Japanese to a Japanese, and she must be terribly sure of getting out of this, for certainly no woman had *that* much nerve. And what a strange girl she was to find up here in the drenched plains of Central China! She belonged on a stage on Broadway with that face and figure. She was as blond as he was, and quite as splattered with mud—

She looked toward the gate and saw Conroy, and then she stood up straight and quickly masked the joy which had nearly burst through to the surface. Instead, she registered tearful relief.

“Oh! My brother!” she cried in Japanese. “My dear, long-lost brother! How I have searched for you!” And, her arms outstretched, she came past the guard and straight toward Conroy. The guard took a moment to see whom she was addressing and so failed to block her. And the next instant

Conroy had her arms around his neck and was being kissed tearfully.

“What is this?” cried the officer in charge.

“My brother,” sobbed the girl. “I have found him at last!”

“Who are you?” demanded the officer of Conroy. “Don’t you know that this woman is a White Russian spy?”

“He is Conroy, of World Press,” said the officer at the gate to his comrade at arms.

“Conroy?”

“Yes,” said the other Japanese. “I have inspected his papers.”

“Ah! I am *so* sorry. But is this woman really your sister?”

“Er . . . uh . . . ouch! Certainly. Yes, indeed. My long-lost sister. (Bite me again, my dizzy jane, and I’ll drown you!) Of course she is!”

“Ah! I am so sorry . . . so very, very sorry!” said the officer. “If there is anything we can do—”

But if this strange feminine waif of the battlefields was quick on the uptake, Bat Conroy was quicker. He had intended stealing a staff car or something and getting to the river, and then taking a launch down to Changkow. But there would apparently be no more battle in this vicinity, so—

“I do not know,” said Conroy, “how I can overlook this outrage. I was on the verge of reporting this as a sweeping Japanese victory. But if you celebrate a victory by trying to kill my innocent sister—well!” And he started to draw the girl through the arch, trying not to notice the startled and admiring way in which she now regarded him.

“No, no!” said the officer. “Wait! There is my colonel. I am sure we can explain. She was—”