

L. RON HUBBARD



LOOT OF THE SHANUNG

GALAXY
PRESENTS

BILLIONS AT STAKE

THE press releases flowed across the desk in a miniature Yangtze at flood time. The office of the *Oriental Press* throbbed with effort and excitement.

Jimmy Vance, both hands full and a pencil between his teeth, stared up at the copy boy. "Here y'are. Tell them to run this on the first page. I'll hand the fills over in a few minutes. About his life and all."

"A lady to see you, Jimmy," said the copy boy.

"The devil with that. Where'd I put that *Who's Who*?"

The *Who's Who* came to light when it was going down for the third time in the tan copy paper. Jimmy flipped it open, swept his very blond hair out of his eyes, and ran his finger down the column.

"George Harley Rockham," said the *Who's Who*. "Born 1890 in Chicago, Ill. Appointed to Russian Wheat Commission, 1919. Served as Secretary of Interior, 1924–6. Held oil leases in Regular Oil Company. Developed vast holdings in South America. Created an oil monopoly in China, 1928. Known best through his hobby of travel. Married Virginia Courtney in 1908. His daughter, Miss Virginia Rockham, has long been known to Long Island Society. . . ."

"Huh," said Jimmy, "that's plenty. Plenty." He grabbed at his battered typewriter, inserted half a dozen sheets after the

custom of copywriters and began to hammer the keys in an industrious hunt-and-punch system.

The copy boy, bucktoothed and mostly grin, was at his elbow again. “Jimmy. That dame says she won’t wait. You got to see her. Here’s the card.”

“Busy,” said Jimmy, continuing to write.

“She’s a swell looker,” informed the copy boy. “Real class.”

“Beat it,” said Jimmy, scowling at the *Who’s Who*.

His story grew out of the roller:

Shanghai, China, May 14, *Oriental Press*. As the fate of George Harley Rockham, the great oil magnate, tonight remained shrouded with mystery, his many friends over the world watched anxiously for the first news.

Jimmy scratched his head, scowled at the sheet and then wrote:

It is debated that he still lives. The coastal steamer *Shanung* has not appeared in Hong Kong, and while there are no storms recorded north of that city, it is thought that the *Shanung* might have foundered, run aground or met any other perils of the sea.

Rumor is current that the *Shanung* was captured by the notorious pirates who range along Bias Bay, a few miles north of Hong Kong. This is only one of many conjectures that . . .

The copy boy was there again, still grinning. “That dame gave me a five-spot to see you, Jimmy. Y’can’t let me down now. I need five Mex and if you don’t see her I’ll have to give it back.”

“Scram,” said Jimmy, pondering anew. He was about to consult the *Who’s Who* for further rumors, conjectures and so on when he became aware of a pair of hands on the railing before his desk.

He stopped, looking absently at the fingers. They were nice hands. White and graceful, with long, naturally polished nails. A diamond ring glittered, but it wasn’t on the engagement finger.

Jimmy was suddenly interested. He looked up the arms and discovered a Cossack jacket with silver cartridge cases. He looked at the high Russian collar and then saw the face.

The face, decided Jimmy, was very pleasing. The girl’s eyes were dark, rather wistful and sad. Her cheekbones were high, giving an air of severity to the features. But the fullness of the good-natured mouth belied that.

“You’re Jimmy Vance?” said the girl, very quietly.

“Yes,” said Jimmy and then instantly recovered himself. “If you’re looking for the society editor, he’s first corridor to your right.” He turned back to his work, not meaning to be rude, but aware of the necessity of stopping the study of the girl.

He was about to write another paragraph on the story when he saw the card the boy had laid beside his typewriter. The card was simply engraved. It said, “Virginia Rockham.”

Jimmy’s eyes flashed up. It was one of the few times in Jimmy’s headlong career that he registered surprise. He jumped to his feet and swung the gate back.

“Good golly, Miss Rockham. I’m sorry as the devil. I thought you must be one of these Ruskies, the way you’re

dressed. I didn't have any idea . . . Here, have a chair. Now listen, Miss Rockham, I've got to have some dope here before I can go on."

She was mildly surprised at his manner. Jimmy usually gave the impression of a meteor in full flight. He was not so very tall and he seemed utterly without color. His eyes were big and swift and frank. He had the air of hurrying even when sitting still. Restlessly, he offered her a cigarette and then lit one for himself when she refused.

"Dope, Miss Rockham. The presses are grinding, the boys are waiting on the streets. The international cables are holding down their keys, waiting for this stuff. I've heard opinions, I've heard theories, and now, by golly, I want to hear some facts."

"I . . . I don't know any more than you do, Mr. Vance."

"The hell you don't!" Jimmy was plainly aghast. "Well . . . well . . . think of something, anything. I've written columns on it already and I've had to make up each and every word. Good God, Miss Rockham, a billionaire doesn't disappear like that. Even out here in China. He has to be *someplace*. Even a Chinese pirate would know how much he was worth in ransom. Think, girl!"

She was studying Jimmy, listening to his voice rather than his words. Her dark eyes were suddenly alight. She sat forward.

"You're *the* Jimmy Vance, aren't you?" she said.

He was thrown into no little confusion, but he recovered quickly. "What do you mean by that?"

"You're the man who makes news news, aren't you? The

star reporter of the *Oriental Press*, the bearder of warlords and the formulator of international opinions.”

Jimmy gaped at her. “Gee whiz, Miss Rockham . . . I . . . Somebody has been feeding you a line. Look here, Miss Rockham, I got to have something for the presses, the cables. I got to have *fact*, not fancy. What happened to your father?”

“He was on the SS *Shanung*. The *Shanung* isn’t reported. That’s all I know.”

“But look here. I mean what’s the well-known lowdown? What’s he tied up with? Who’s trying to get him? What’s hanging over his head?”

“I thought . . . thought you’d know something about it,” she replied.

“Me? Why should I know anything? I’m just a dumb reporter, Miss Rockham. I admit I’ve had a few breaks, but does that make a clairvoyant out of me? Hell, no. I mean to say, I don’t know anything and I’m writing guesses.”

“This is big news, isn’t it?”

“Big news? Gee whiz, Miss Rockham, I’ll say it is. Might as well have the president of the United States disappear as George Harley Rockham. He’s got China oil in his palm. He owns more men and more companies than a nation. What made him disappear?”

“He went down to Hong Kong to look over some interests there. That’s all I know.”

Jimmy leaned tensely over his typewriter. “Where was he before that?”

“Chinwangtao.”

“Up next to Manchukuo, right? What’s he own in Manchukuo?”

“I’m not certain.”

Jimmy smiled a swift smile. “Then he *does* own something. Why did—?”

“Wait, Mr. Vance. We’re wasting time here. I came up for just one reason. I came here to see Jimmy Vance to offer him a job. I’ve been told and I know for myself that if anyone can find George Harley Rockham and do the job quickly, it would be Jimmy Vance. Speed is your name.”

“Why speed?”

The girl’s voice was low and earnest, “Because Rockham isn’t as steady as a rock the way the advertisements read. He holds his industrial empire together with one finger, but when that finger slips . . .” She reached into her handbag and threw a cable report of stocks on Wall Street on Jimmy’s typewriter keys.

“See those stocks?” she said, tensely. “They’ve lost points! And Rockham isn’t here. Because he’s gone, they’re selling him out. If we don’t find him in four days and tell the world he’s safe, George Harley Rockham will be on the relief rolls. That’s not for publication, Mr. Vance. That’s truth. We’ve *got* to find him!”

“Gee whiz,” said Jimmy, studying the report. “This *is* bad, isn’t it?”

“I have money in my own right but it’s tied up with the Rockham interests. I’d have to offer you a gamble. If you find him, you get one hundred thousand dollars. If you don’t, you get nothing because there won’t be anything to pay you

with. Your time is valuable, but I can't guarantee a salary or anything of the sort. I have enough cash for expenses, but . . ."

Jimmy was bouncing the hook on the phone. "Gimme Bruce Conway. That's right. . . . Hello, Bruce. Listen, I'm going out to find Rockham. . . . No, I'm not nuts. His girl just came in. . . . I know it's only twenty feet to your office. . . . I haven't got time. . . . Put somebody on this desk." He hung up.

Grabbing a battered gray felt hat from its hook he snapped it down over one eye and held open the gate. "Come on, daylight's burning."

"Then . . . then you'll go?"

"Well, what the hell do *you* think?" He thrust her through the outer doors and stopped. "Look. You go to your hotel for your toothbrush. I'll charter a seaplane and get a couple of gats. Where do I meet you in a half-hour?"

"At the Palace Hotel," she said.

Jimmy vanished from sight, shouldering his way between two very large men whose heavy faces bore a mark of stolid satisfaction. Their eyes were on the girl's back as she walked away. They followed her swiftly.

Presently one of them fell into step at her side. "Pardon me, Miss Rockham, but my name's Pete Gar. This other guy is my pal Joe."

Fear flashed across her face.

"Joe's got a gun in his hand," said Pete. "So you just walk along nice and quiet or I guess we'll have to plug you."

Joe nodded in solid agreement and lifted his hand inside his coat pocket. Joe's black-bead eyes were very attentive.