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Outpost In China
 By Val Gielgud

Chapter I
 The sun blazing down out of a cloudless sky, Leslie Dale, setting out for his afternoon ride reined in his pony at the curve of the apology for a road which led up to

the crest of the hill behind his house, and wondered why on earth he had ever been such a fool as to start.
 Sitting very straight in his saddle, his face shadowed by a very battered sun-helmet, wearing an open shirt and the shabbiest of breeches and fieldboots, Leslie Dale was none the less worth more than a casual glance.
 He was a man of thirty-five, and looked a trifle older. His face was very tanned, with a formidable jaw, splendid teeth, and a rather craggy nose which spoiled his good looks. He had a horseman's figure—slim at the hips, broad at the shoulders—big capable hands, and those blue far-seeing eyes usually to be met with in naval officers.
 His voice was curiously gentle. That may have been to some extent owing to disuse in its own language. For Leslie Dale had been Agent-in-Charge of the town of Tan Fu on the upper Yangtsekiang river for the famous Chinese firm of Harwood and Greer for five years. And during all that time he had been the only Englishman in the place, except for the local missionary and his wife, who were almost as busy as he was himself.
 Dale sat in his saddle and looked back over the weathered roof of his square stone house with its wooden bullet-proof shutters to the roofs of Tan Fu, the yellow tumbling confusion of the river, the dusty plain on the further bank, out of the raw jagged red hills northward which stood up against the burning horizon. Frankly, the hedges of a place—the very back of beyond! He knew every yard of it for twenty miles around—its stinks, its shooting, its queer occasional beauty, its people. He had no illusions on any point. And yet twice he had refused offers from the firm to change his station. Somehow he had come to the conclusion that the place suited him.



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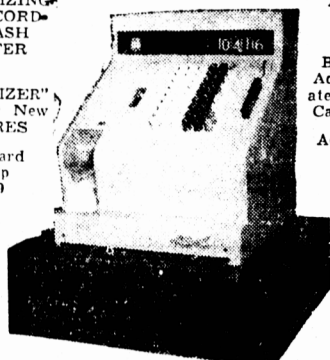
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His snatched week or two of leaves down in Shanghai had been curiously flavourless. He had lost touch with his kind—with pony-racing, and scandal, and limitless drinks in the Long Bar of the Shanghai Club. He had lost touch with his friends in England. And he had been sent up country so soon after arriving in China that he had only a few acquaintances in the treaty-ports, and they were always on the shift. So he had got used to solitude—and after five years he confessed a little wryly to himself that he probably liked it.
 The pony stamped impatiently and twitched its ears under the attentions of the more than usually persistent flies. Dale for once changed his mind, turned the beast, and rode slowly down the hill and back to his house. It really was too hot to ride that afternoon... and the monthly boat with the mail was already in sight down river, puffing laboriously against the current. Not that Leslie Dale expected anything much in the way of correspondence. But there might be instruction from Messrs. Harwood and Greer, who somehow would not understand that he knew his own business—and their—best; that the man on the spot was a better judge than men in an office hundreds of miles away, even if they believed themselves to be the elders and betters. Dale felt that he might as well know the worst as soon as possible, and get his resulting bad temper over as rapidly as might be...
 He had no intention of going down to the boat. Pat James, of course, would be there with his camera and his shabby suit of white ducks. He never missed the arrival of a boat. Janet, his wife, saw to that. Dear Janet! With her face like a horse, a skin like leather, grey eyes like gimlets, and a heart of the purest gold. One of the salt of the earth thought Dale, and just about as difficult to live with—un-

less you happened also to be one of the salt, as Pat James undoubtedly was.
ANYTHING ON THE STEAMER?
 Not that Dale would not be glad to see the boat arrive safely. With the new Japanese row, the whole country was getting into the deuce of a mess. The local banditti everywhere were having the time of their lives, with the regular soldiery withdrawn for the defence of Hankow and the Central Government. And Tan Fu's local bandit was an outside at his

particular job. Leslie Dale grinned at the thought of General Wu-Tso-Ling; complete scoundrel, capital company, tolerable scholar, and first class soldier. He had made friends with Wu. Nothing else would have served to save Tan Fu from burning and loot and rapine months ago. But at that time Dale had a local Chinese governor at his back, who disposed of a force of tolerably disciplined troops.
 Now the troops had been drafted south. And Dale, looking at the jagged line of red hills to the north,

wondered just what devilry might not be stirring behind Wu's impassive oriental forehead. After all there was a fortune—from the point of view of a bandit—in the Tan Fu go-downs. Leslie Dale had made a little gold-mine of what had been considered a hopelessly unpromising station at the back of beyond.
 Dale urged his pony into a trot at the thought that perhaps his last memorandum to head office might have borne fruit; that it was just conceivable that on that river

steamer might be a squad of armed police and a couple of machine-guns. He had asked for no more, just to keep Wu in his place if it became necessary...
 A Chinese boy came out to take charge of the sweating pony, and Leslie Dale walked up five rickety steps, across the verandah with its tattered striped awning, and through the french window into his living-room. While he groped within the recesses of his tobacco-jar and filled his pipe, he glanced round the room and reflected. For

the first time for years it entered his head to question its comfort, and the answer was not entirely satisfactory.
 It was rather a big, square room, with a fine view across the roofs of Tan Fu to General Wu's red hills. The furniture was the oddest mixture of good solid ebony stuff with carved feet, like his big desk—picked up for a song at a sale down at Chungking—and of flimsy bamboo tables and canvas chairs.

(To be continued)

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