

Yankees of Mars

by Jimm Johnson

Captain Jack Bishop, of the Union Army of Kansas, steeled his faltering resolve and led his ragtag company of tired young bluecoats on through the Missouri swamp. It was September 30, 1862, the sun was set and full moon shone down blue and bright. Bishop was a stern man, large and strong. And tired though he was, his men detected no fatigue in his steady advance. At only twenty-eight he'd been soldiering for ten years now. This was his chosen career. He knew soldiering was his destiny, yet even so, he was a man torn in two. There was a part of him that longed for a sweet young wife and a quaint little country house, with two towheaded boys -- his boys -- wrestling in the yard. With the splash of a boot the fantasy ended and he was a soldier again.

It was Captain Hayes and the redskin, Keokuk. They splashed their ways past the line of men and came up along side Bishop. He turned to the Indian. "How close are they, Keokuk?"

"Not far," the Indian replied gravely, "Many greycoats. Maybe ten score."

"Captain Bishop," Hayes interrupted, "We number less than forty men now, and the injun says that Cooper's troops are less than a mile behind us and gaining. These boys are exhausted, sir. We can't keep up this pace."

"We don't rest, Captain Hayes," Bishop raised his voice so that all his men could understand. "Colonel Cooper doesn't take prisoners. We push on! North to Sarcoxie, or we die fighting in this swamp. And I don't think any of us want that. We push on."

Captain Hayes was about to argue when a crack like cannon fire sounded out of the dark swamp directly ahead of them. There was a flash too, but not like that of a cannonade. This had a distinctly thick, dark, reddish quality to it. For a second it permeated the air all around. And even after the initial burst, something the size of a small campfire continued to smolder some hundred yards ahead of them.

Bishop looked around. All his men lie unconscious-- asleep in the swamp, even Captain Hayes. Only Bishop himself and Keokuk, their Dakota guide, seemed unaffected by the strange spell. The Indian began cautiously moving toward the flickering light. The blue light of the full moon reflected eerily now off the swamp, making Keokuk appear almost spectral as he advanced. Bishop recovered his wits and caught up to the Indian.

"Keokuk, what is this?" he whispered.

Eyes fixed on the strange fire before him, the Indian whispered back. "A strange spirit has taken residence this swamp. A spirit foreign, alien. Something not of this world." Jack Bishop, a man not easily frightened, now hesitated. But the Indian gripped his shoulder and urged him forward. "Come he said. The spirit beckons you. That is why you did not fall asleep as all the other white men."

"You didn't fall asleep either," Bishop protested. "Maybe this spirit wants you!"

"No," replied the Indian. "My people are native to this land. It would be very difficult for a spirit of foreign origin to affect me so. It has left you conscious for a reason. We must approach it to discover its purpose."

As they approached Jack Bishop felt a distinctly electric tingle all through his body. The air itself seemed to be charged with some strange otherworldly force. As they neared the small fire, they began to make out the grey shadow of a hunched figure seen through the drifting, red haze. The figure, seated on the ground just beyond the flames, seemed to be wrapped in loose layers of heavy clothing. As they neared, the fire hissed and seemed to speak. "Come no closer, you called Keokuk, son and native of these shores. My business on this world is with the pale-skin called Jagbishap. With him alone will I speak. Come forward Jagbishap of the unbroken line."

Bishop was about to move forward when Keokuk stopped him. "Wait," said the Indian as he took something from around his neck. "Take this with you." Bishop took it from him. It was a small wrapped pouch on a leather string. "Put it around your neck. It will protect you."

"What is it?" asked Bishop.

"It is a pouch of red sand," replied the Indian. "A great healer of my tribe gave it me when I was small. He took it from the deserts of another world once in a dream. And he told me that someday I should give it to a white man as protection against a spirit of that world."

Bishop put the pouch around his neck and stepped forward beyond the fire. The cloaked figure spoke in reptilian hisses, keeping its head always lowered so that Bishop could not see its face. "Your friend is quite wise, Jagbishap. The charm he has given you prevents me from taking you by force. However, Oo'Vash, sage of ancient Dinsoor, has come prepared for just such a contingency." From the folds of his cloak, the shadowy form produced a copper disc, and presented it to Captain Bishop. He took it. It was about a hand's breadth in diameter, graven on one side with hundreds of small dots and interconnecting lines. He turned it over. Upon the other side was etched a single symbol: a hollow circle with an outward pointing arrow extending from it.

Bishop suddenly felt that he vaguely remembered these carvings, as one remembers a particularly poignant dream from their childhood. "What is this?" he asked.

"A key to another world," the hissing shadow responded. "At the Northeast edge of this swamp you will find a stone archway of ancient design. Fit this disc into the hollow above the portal and you may return to the red world from whence the last Jagbishap fled so many ages past."

With that the figure leaned forward into the flames and was gone. Only thin snakes of grey smoke remained where the strange fire had been. Captain Bishop could hear the sound of his bewildered soldiers waking, and Keokuk approached him urgently. "Captain," the Indian spoke, "Cooper's skirmishers are approaching. They are Cherokee scouts. We must get away from here quickly, or they will discover us."

Bishop pulled the still groggy Captain Hayes to his feet. "Wake up Captain. Get these boys to their feet. Keokuk, we're going to head Northeast to the edge of the swamp. You scout ahead and report back if you find anything unusual."

"But Colonel," Hayes protested, "Sarcoxie is due North. If we veer to the East we'll miss the town and the Cooper's greybacks will surely overtake us."

"Cooper's men will catch us long before we reach Sarcoxie anyway. We're heading Northeast, and we're getting out of this. I don't have time to explain it to you. That's an order, Captain." Bishop looked sternly at Hayes. "Clear?"

Hayes backed up a step and nodded. It was now a desperate flight through the dark swamp. Every second counted, as Cooper's men were mere minutes behind them. After an hours travel Keokuk appeared from seemingly nowhere and reported.

"Captain Bishop, the edge of the swamp is very close. There is an ancient structure there upon an outcropping of rock, and beyond that only open plain. No place to hide or fortify ourselves."

"An ancient structure? Is it something that your people built?" Bishop asked.

"It is a sacred arch," said the Indian, "I have seen others like it before. No one knows who built them. They were here from before the time of my people."

Bishop took the copper disc from his side pouch and showed it to the Indian. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"Never," Keokuk replied, as he stared at the strange markings on it.

"The shadow-figure in the swamp gave it to me," Bishop explained. "He said that it's a key that fits into the sacred arch, and that it would lead me to another world." Bishop sighed and then continued. "I can't explain why, but somehow I believe the whole crazy thing."

At that moment the young soldier standing directly to Bishop's left fell dead, a Cherokee dagger, big as an Arkansas toothpick, through his heart. The captain pressed the disc into Keokuk's hand. "Take it. And take my men through that arch. I'll follow if I can." Then Bishop turned to his men. "Quickly," he ordered, "follow the Indian to the stone arch! Now go!"

As his men set off, Captain Jack Bishop hid himself among the tall reeds and drew his Colt six-shooter from its leather holster. Sure enough, Cooper's scouts were Cherokee, two of them. They crept by quiet as spiders. Bishop waited until they were about thirty feet past and then squeezed off two quick rounds. The first found its mark and sent a Cherokee sprawling lifeless in the shallow, black water, but there was no trace of the second indian. He seemed to have vanished into the darkness.

Cautiously, Jack Bishop moved forward, scanning for any sign of the other scout. Then, without warning, a screaming Indian rose up before him. The first swing of the scout's tomahawk knocked the pistol from his hand and sent him backward into the mud. But even as he fell, Bishop drew his sabre and delivered a powerful upward thrust to the furious savage descending upon him. He caught the Cherokee full in the gut, and the shrill war cry diminished horribly to guttural sputtering.

There was no time to think now. The sounds of his fight had alerted Cooper's approaching force, and the reckless clamour of many hurrying soldiers now echoed through the dark swamp. Wiping his blade on the body of a dead Indian, Bishop turned and sped off after his men.

When he emerged from the swamp the first ray of morning sun was breaking in the East above the edge of the plain. Immediately he saw his men, a short distance away, atop a small rocky hill, near what appeared to be a crude, decaying stone archway. They were positioned facing the swamp, their Enfield rifles loaded. As he scrambled up the

rocks The first of Cooper's men emerged from the swamp. But Bishop's own men opened fire, giving their captain enough cover to ascend the hill unscathed.

"Keokuk!" Bishop shouted as he reached the hill top. "Use the key!" The indian was already fitting the reddish metal disc into the circular cavity above the portal. As he did so the space within the arch distorted and shimmered. The scene between the edges of the structure shifted and was transformed. Beyond, it was no longer dawn over the green grass of a Missouri plain. Dry heat could be felt emanating from the arch. Through the ancient portal it was high noon in a vast red desert.

Captain Hayes had seen the transformation take place, and he gasped: "Witchcraft!" His eyes were wide with fear, and he dropped his weapon and ran back down the hill. He was dead by Confederate lead before he made it half way.

"Forget him," Bishop yelled to his men. "The rest of you get through this arch." His men were scared and hesitant, but Bishop quickly convinced them. "We don't know what's on the other side of this thing, but if you stay here you're surely dead." Keokuk passed through the portal, and seeing no harm come to the Indian, the soldiers scrambled through after him. Captain Bishop came through last, just as Cooper's men mounted the hill top.

Amidst a vast red desert, a Dakota Indian and thirty-three bedraggled, bluecoated soldiers stepped out of an ancient stone archway and into the blistering heat of an alien noon-day sun. Back through the stone archway was a view of Missouri, where other soldiers could be seen, mounting a small rocky hill and approaching the opening. But the Indian quickly removed a reddish metal disc set into the arch on desert side, and the view faded, leaving only an endless ocean of sandy red when one looked through the interplanetary doorway.