

**L. RON  
HUBBARD**



**THE  
FALCON KILLER**

**GALAXY**  
PRESENTS

# THE FALCON KILLER

FIRST there had been a city; then there had been bright and hungry flame; now there was nothing but a corpse-gutted ruin where men moved with dazed determination to refuse the shambles all about them. Indeed, it was too much to believe that Nencheng, mightiest river port in China, could ever become a reeking rubble of broken masonry, corpse-strewn, smoke-shrouded, leveled to the earth from which it had sprung full five thousand years ago.

Nencheng had survived the hard hoofs of the Tartars, led by the Scourge of Mankind, but its death had not come from the wastes of the north. Wings in the sky had passed their shadows over the land to drop their acrid death. And then, to complete the havoc, belligerently refusing the conquerors aught, the rear guard of the Chinese army, leaving by one gate as the Japanese entered by another, had applied the torch.

Incredible as it was, men, hundreds of thousands of them, Chinese and their families, were still in this town. There was nowhere to go. This was home. Hardly rock stood upon rock, but people remained to be bayoneted, shot and worse by the overzealous vanguard of the invader, maddened by the torches which had robbed them of their prey.

But the Chinese lives hand in hand with death for all his

days, and though the smoke still rolled and the ashes fell like snow upon the scrambled streets, business, as it had done for five thousand years, went on as usual.

The foreign sections had been least injured; their tall walls had held out the stampeding crowds, their flags had made them almost proof against bombs. But here the ash-snow fell just as it did in the streets; and even through the walled garden of Tsoi Yan, the acrid pall drifted.

The owner of Tsoi Yan's wide acres was absent on prudent business in Hong Kong and, as long as he had neither dared nor cared to use them, he had left them at the disposal of his good friend Henry Thompson, adrift now in a sea of shifting battle lines.

Disconsolately, Henry Thompson pushed the ashes from his dark, heavy shoulders and, with a twinge of irritation, picked an especially large one from his drink, deciding immediately afterward that the whiskey didn't taste very good anyhow. Nothing tasted good. The world had lost all its flavor two days past, when he had landed in the wake of the Japanese to find himself forever cut off from his fortune, to say nothing of the business which was his life.



*Henry Thompson*



*Marion*

Footsteps came from the dragon-emblazoned house and then the tinkle of ice in a glass. Henry looked up and, as though a curtain had been raised from his heavy bulldog features, he beamed upon the girl who came toward him. Life could never be so bleak but what he could find a smile for his daughter Marion, she who had grown so suddenly into the image of her lovely mother, dead now fifteen years.

“Refill,” said Marion, taking away his glass and wiping the ashes from the table to set another drink before him.

“As if there weren’t a dozen servants waiting on the bat of an eye,” said Henry, with a pretense of gruffness. “Want to lose face?”

“To wait on you is to gain it,” said Marion. “You’ve been sitting out here alone too long—and that is very, very bad. You’ll be cross.”

He watched her as she seated herself across from him, the pale sunlight glowing in the white, light collar of her tea gown, and bethought himself suddenly that, as soon as it was fully realized everywhere that he was ruined, she would have no more such dresses—lucky to have a roof and food.

“No,” he said gently. “I won’t be cross.”

“Stop thinking about Ruhur,” she ordered. “The game isn’t lost yet. Szui Mai had ninety thousand troops, enough and more to guard those mountain passes.”

“I am afraid they think as little of Szui Mai as I do,” said Henry morosely. “He could hold out for twenty years, but if the least thing goes wrong—such as my not arriving—he’ll wait twenty minutes and then slope.”

“Something will happen sooner or later. I know it will. We’ll get permission to go through the lines—”

“To make certain that the Chinese armies get Ruhur oil?” Henry laughed harshly. “Not so’s the Mikado will know it.”

He stared into his drink and was silent. For almost half an hour neither spoke, and then Henry glanced up to see that Marion was looking into the smoky sky.

“What’s up?” said Henry.

“I thought I heard a plane.”

“What of it? The Japanese won’t bomb us, now that they own the place.” But in a moment he heard the engines also. He had been too long in this war not to give heed to the growl of motors overhead.

Suddenly the roar was punctuated by the chatter of a machine gun, instantly followed by the rising scream of an engine tortured by a dive. Henry stood up. The skies were pennoned by smoke, and it would be almost impossible to see these ships unless they came overhead. Nevertheless, the sound of firing in the vicinity of Nencheng had been absent for twenty-four hours, until now.

“There he is!” cried Marion in excitement.

Across the smudge bowl of sky lumbered a great Japanese bomber, a flying battleship evidently returning from a raid on the new Chinese lines in the northwest. But it was doing more than coming home. The four engines were racking themselves in the bedlam of full throttles. The great wings were streaking at almost three hundred miles an hour. From the stern turrets red pom-poms blazed, as Mitsubishi guns yammered at an unseen attacker.

Henry stared with wonder. He had never seen Chinese planes so far inside the Japanese lines and, further, he saw no planes at all. The engine din was too great to distinguish any other motors until that shrill, vicious scream of a dive came again.

Abruptly the Chinese attacker was in view. He pulled up, stabbing scarlet nose at great gray belly and letting drive with both bow guns. Tracer was white, plainly seen from the ground, so low were the ships. Hanging on its prop like a bulldog hangs to the bull, the red ship emptied its drums full into the blaze of the Mitsubis just above.

“God!” cried Henry into the bedlam. “That’s *nerve!*”

For a moment a shredded wave of smoke blotted them from view and then, when the sky opened anew, it could be seen that the bomber was doomed. Great black gouts of smoke geysered from beneath the right wing, cut by wicked streamers of flame. The Chinese pursuit ship was high above, just starting another dive with loaded guns. The scarlet javelin streaked past the bomber’s tail and came up again, to pound swiftly through the turrets and cabin.

The bomber lurched, the fire as red now as the great suns upon its wings. Not a gun aboard her was replying when she began her dive, out of control, toward the yellow river.

The pursuit plane leveled off and came back over the gardens, evidently orienting itself for a dash back to its own lines. With a battering roar, the ground machine guns of the town began to rake the interloper.

Marion's eyes were flashing as she cried, "Go! Get away! Please *go!*" She did not realize that her voice was nothing in the tumult. For the scarlet plane had nosed up into an almost vertical climb, turning slightly as it went until it was almost heading east.

From the river came the thunder of the bomber crash. From every emplacement in Nencheng came the clamor of antiaircraft fire. The heavens about the scarlet ship were sprayed black by shrapnel's smoke.

And then, in common with the whole town, the watchers in Tsoi Yan caught their breaths in a sob of despair. The Chinese plane had come in too deep, even past the drome south of town, and now from that drome there had arisen two squadrons of Japanese pursuits, which lanced down upon their prey with greedy guns.

The scarlet ship turned to face them, charging straight at them through the smoke. The stair-step formations held, all trips down, throwing a concerted blast of lead through which nothing could live.

Even before he reached them, the pilot of the scarlet plane was riding a wingless bomb. Antiaircraft fire did for his foils, machine guns sent his prop into a thousand silver fragments.

The scarlet ship stabbed earthward, out of control, painted with fire, raked still by the avenging squadrons.

Marion hid her face in her hands and Henry, with his hand on her shoulder, still stared upward. Suddenly he shouted, "He's making a jump of it!"

Marion looked again. Behind the streaking ball of fire a black speck grew swiftly larger in the sky. The pilot was falling free, an atom of life in a roaring void, bracketed by every weapon in Nencheng.

"He hasn't a chute!" groaned Henry.

Once more Marion was unable to look, but Henry saw the dot grow into a toy doll and then, with astonishing swiftness, into a man. Less than three hundred feet from the ground a startling thing happened. A white wake ripped out behind the pilot, to become in an instant a great canopy of cream-colored silk. The jerk of the harness almost tore the man apart, but his hands were hauling hard on the shrouds and the chute was spilling until again it was nearly free fall.

The ship crashed unseen into a battery on the outer wall. The diving planes, bethinking themselves at last that they were firing into a town their own troops occupied, pulled up and zoomed skyward. Seeing their prey no more, all guns abruptly stopped. And in that silence could be heard the whistle of wind in the shrouds of the parachute, as the pilot fought to land on the largest clearing in sight. At the last instant he let his shrouds go and was snatched from the spiked branches of a tree to plant his boot heels into the turf and swiftly spill the wind from his chute.

Working with the speed upon which his life depended, he



succeeded in rolling the silk into a ball and crowding it into the broken pack. A small rock garden stood by a lake and he snatched up boulders to crowd them in, lashing it all with a quick turn of the harness. He flung the chute into the lake and then spun about, striving to locate a place of concealment for himself.

Suddenly he caught sight of the two people at the table before the house and his hand jerked to the holstered automatic at his side. Then he seemed to realize that they were white, and he staggered toward them.

When he was within ten paces he stopped again. Marion saw with a start that his smoke-grimed face was Nordic. She sensed the strain of holding himself upright. And then she saw that there was a hole in the chest of his black leather jacket, and that small, bright drops of blood were dripping from his sleeve to the grass.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "This was the only open space. Foolish thing to do . . . but they killed my friend two hours ago. I . . . I suppose they'll be pounding on your gates in a moment. If you could tell me where your rear gates are, I had better be going."

"Nonsense!" cried Henry. "After a fight like that? The whole town—the Chinese, I mean and ourselves included were cheering you! Marion! Show him into the house. Send Wong out here to wipe up that blood. You're in the hands of friends, my boy."

An uncertain smile came to the strangely pale features of the man. And then, with a suddenness which prevented

Henry from reaching him, his knees buckled and he fell limply, face downward in the grass.

Henry started toward him and then looked up to call for his boy, but every servant in the place was abruptly there. These Chinese neither wanted nor waited for any orders. With a swift glance at the gate, they picked up the unconscious pilot and, with Marion going ahead, carried him into the huge house.

Henry heard a car come to a grinding halt. He glanced around and made certain that every mark had been obliterated from the grass. He sat down and took solid hold of his drink. In a moment, the butt of a rifle thundered against the portals. Henry stayed where he was. Then a young Chinese number one boy, fat with dignity, swished his skirts along the walk. He opened the small door port with the air of one who is about to spit. The face of the Japanese officer was hot as a hound's upon the scent, his voice loud enough to reach half a mile.

"Solly," said the number one boy, unmoved. "No savvy."

The officer was about to become apoplectic when he bethought himself of his interpreter. That worthy came to the gate port and volleyed in Chinese.

"Solly," said the number one boy. "No savvy Shanghai dog-talk. Masee plenty busy. You come back tomorrow." He closed the door port.

Instantly the rifles thundered in concert upon it, until the hinges threatened to cave. The number one boy opened the port again.

“You wantchee somesing?”

The officer almost lost his lungs.

“Solly. No catch.” And he would have shut the door again had not a resourceful private stabbed his bayonet through it to threaten the number one boy’s much-cherished paunch.

The officer had been joined by other Japanese, and every instant the street grew thicker with patrol cars, armored cars, tanks, cavalry and soldiers. Another man, evidently of higher rank, took over the door port and resorted to the only nationally understood tongue.

“You catchee one piecee Chinese sky boy!” shouted the linguist. “You talkee talk plenty damn chop-chop! Where catch?”

“No catch,” shrugged the number one boy, moving backward without much concern.

“You bling boss!” roared the officer.

“That will not be necessary,” said Henry. “If someone will please tell me what this unseemly commotion is about, I shall be glad to offer every assistance.”

Another officer, of evidently even higher rank, took over at the door port.

“Very sorry. Most deeply regret such noise and dust. Excuse me.” He made as much a bow as he could through the port. “Ten or fifteen minutes ago a Chinese pilot landed near here, and with my most abject apologies, I must demand the regrettable liberty of searching your peerless gardens.”

“A pilot, you say?” quoth Henry, in great surprise. “Ah, I believe I did hear some sort of firing. Although this is, of course, a most irregular proceeding—perhaps you noticed the

American flag over the house—I cannot do otherwise than invite you to search.”

“My gratefulness exceeds my poor talent of expression,” bowed the officer. And when the number one boy had unbarred the gates, the colonel bowed, drew his automatic and began to bawl orders to his men, who instantly swarmed into the gardens. The other two officers gave the number one boy hard glares as they passed him but that worthy spat perilously close to their boots and they leaped nimbly.

In ten minutes, the turf was thoroughly scarred and the bushes bowed and broken. The Japanese went through the place with a microscope, leaving, literally, not one stone unturned. At last they were forced to give it up, and the colonel paused meaningly upon the steps of the house.

“My most humble regrets,” he said. “But I should be reprimanded if I did not make a search of the entire grounds. My own wishes in the matter are as nothing, but my superiors . . .”

“Go ahead,” said Henry.

With a gleam in his eye and a tighter hold on his pistol, the colonel barely restrained himself from going ahead of Henry. They marched, with double files of soldiers behind them, into the hall of the house and from there, back and forth, they entered every room, leaving a sentry in each, for fear their quarry might change his position in the place and thereby escape.

Henry was conscious of very moist hands. He had to steel himself to enter each new room without glancing hurriedly all around it. The polished teak floors echoed to the tread

of boots. Portières were swept ruthlessly aside. Chests were opened and banged shut. Closet doors were almost ripped from their hinges. The servants' quarters, the kitchens where the staff was startled at its work, were ransacked, down to the last pallet and flour bin. The wine cellars, the eaves, even the roof, were given an attention only possible by Japanese.

At last the colonel stood in the hall again, his dark eyes smoldering. "My most humble apologies for so inconveniencing your honorable household. It is quite evident that the pilot landed elsewhere." He bowed deeply. "May I offer a heartfelt sorrow for the trouble I have caused you." Thereupon he strode angrily down the walk and bawled for his troops. He ushered them through the gates and then, with a sour glance back at the house, told off a guard and detailed an armored car for a constant patrol of the walls outside. With one last glower at the smug number one boy, the officers departed. The number one boy solemnly spat on a private's toe and slammed the gates shut.

Henry stood panting on the steps, mopping at his face. The liquor boy put a glass of whiskey in his hand and without looking at the source, Henry drained it at a gulp. Then he turned and, with some wonder himself, began to search out the pilot.

He paused between two walls which rose endlessly into a scowling sky and stretched to infinity both before and behind him. Nowhere was there a foot of cover. But if there was no cover, neither were there any Japanese sentries immediately available. For a long time he hesitated, irresolute,

one blood-smeared hand covering the hole in his leather jacket. He felt badly about the jacket's getting spoiled. Gabby had given it to him, and now Gabby was dead. Gabby had said he had won it in a crap game—but he had forgotten to take off the eighty Mex tag. Gabby had said, "How the hell would I feel if you got pneumonia and left these patrols all to me, huh?" And now Gabby was off on a lone patrol of his own in the void between the worlds, never to return. They'd riddled his ship and then, when he had bailed out, the bomber had followed him down, bracketing him as he floated helpless in the air. The crimson tatter which had landed hadn't been Gabby. Gabby was probably selling Saint Pete on organizing an air force, saying maybe Bill Gaylord would be along presently, and promising that if there wasn't a war, then, by God between them they could make one. It had been a swell jacket.

He didn't see how he could ever reach the end of the masonry canyon. He hadn't strength enough to hold himself up against this wall, much less walk. That's the way with a fly, he told himself, when its wings get pulled off. It buzzes and frets and doesn't go anyplace, and the surrounding territory must look a lot larger than this.

Well, hell, he couldn't stand here gawping. A sentry might show up and then that would be the end of it. How he could get through the Japanese lines and back to his own he had no faintest idea. White men in the battle area were too few to go unremarked and, further, the little bow-legged gentlemen in mustard wouldn't be apt to overlook an opportunity to fill private coffers.