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Red Death Over China

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Chapter One

JOHN HAMPTON patrolled the eastern shore of the Yellow River in a way as careless and slipshod as the rickety, ancient Bristol.

The Bristol had wandered in from faraway England, an outcast, and wandered without any destination more definite than old age.

John Hampton was little better than his ship. He had less color to him than the dun plains which reached interminably to the smoky foothills. He was an in-between—he stood for nothing definite, he cared about nothing, he knew nothing he wanted.

Even the puffballs of volley fire on the ground meant little to him. He knew that the southern soldiers did not have enough training to lead him his length. Faintly contemptuous, he looked down at the muddy banks of the Yellow River, and inland to occasional barricades crudely made of bagged sand and piled muck.

Far away, a growing dot against the saffron haze of the day, another plane was coming. It could not be a friend, as the Bristol was the only plane Mao possessed and John Hampton, such as he was, the only pilot.

A fight was in the offing. He knew that and did not greatly care. The Bristol was fleet enough to run away.

Southern soldiers on the ground had seen their ally on the wing. Impulsively they leaped up on their earthworks—bouncing gray dots, something less than human.

Behind John Hampton, a Lewis yammered. He turned and looked at his gunner and shook his head.

The gunner showed no surprise, neither did he show any tendency to obey. He was a wild-eyed little man with uncontrollable black hair which came out from under his oversize helmet and streaked back from his yellow face in the whipping wind.

Chou, the gunner, again depressed the muzzles of the Lewis guns and raked a barricade. He looked defiantly back at the foreign devil in the front pit.

John Hampton shrugged. The Lewis started up again. Leaping puffs of dust sprang up beyond the barricades. Bouncing gray dots scrambled backwards, falling into grotesque, shuddering heaps.

John Hampton looked at the oncoming plane and turned a bend in the stream, his plane's shadow flowing through the depths of the murky water. He could wait a little while. It would look better if he took a burst or two before he went away. Not that he cared whether or not he made any show but, after all, his gunner would talk. As nearly as possible, Hampton stuck to the middle ground of existence.

The other plane was getting big enough to distinguish its type. It was a two-seater, an observation plane, but more than a match for the Bristol.

Hampton cared little about that either.

The rattle of the Lewis guns annoyed him, but it was useless to tell his tail gunner to stop.

The Rolls was cruising and still had a few horses to spare. Hampton kept on his course. There would be nothing to report this day. There was never anything to report. Men died on both sides of the river but they were men in gray cotton and there was nobody to mourn their passing.

General Mao's CPVAJR Army was fighting with its back to the Great Wall and the Sinkiang Desert, outnumbered, out-armed, but not out-generaled. The great Chiang was making one last great push to wipe out his rebel generals forever. And now only the Yellow River's greasy flood intervened. The fanatical troops of Mao were low on food, clothing, ammunition, rifles, horses. . . . But they were holding out at the Yellow River, dying on the wintry plains of Shensi.

The two-seater roared forward into the fray, hungry prop chopping off the distance in a churning blaze of light.

John Hampton squared around in the front cockpit of the Bristol and shoved his throttle full out. The clanking Rolls trembled in its mounts. The ancient Bristol's wings shivered. The patched fuselage angled away.

Chou's twin Lewis guns rattled ferociously and the southern two-seater veered hastily off.

Hampton had taken the burst. Now he could go home. He touched rudder and stick and stood the Bristol around.

The two-seater executed a swift three-sixty. Bow guns going, it clamped itself to the Bristol's tail. Tracer ate up from

the rudder toward the gunner's pit, gobbling small round holes which smoked in the slipstream.

Hampton verticaled, cocking his right wing down at the river's yellow face. Chou raked the two-seater from prop to rudder, his wide eyes alight with joy.

But the southern plane was not touched in any vital spot. Pilot and gunner, caring little about an ancient Bristol, swooped away and came back under the Bristol's belly.

Hampton kicked rudder. Chou was almost over the side with his guns. He fired short, rapping bursts downward into the other two-seater's nose.

The Bristol straightened out again. Hampton was once more heading toward his field, away from the river.

The southern ship scrambled for height, went over the hump and streaked down. Chou, leaning back against the rim of his pit, centered his sights on the two-seater's nose and again let drive.

Small round holes, gashed by southern bullets, crept up the tail, inch by inch. Chou held his shaking guns and shouted defiance into the shattered wind.

The holes came inevitably forward. Hampton verticaled away. The two-seater hung on. Chou's words rose to a shrill scream, audible even above the yowl of engines and guns. He was driving his bullets with every ounce of energy he possessed.

The two-seater followed around. Once more the yellow waters were under the Bristol's canted wings. Once more the southern slugs were eating into the Bristol's fabric, rapping steadily forward to the gunner's pit.

Chou leaned into his Lewis guns. His bullets were almost

gone. His target was never in place. But he yelled and defied the southern dogs to try their worst.

The slugs came up the turtleback, smoking as they riveted wood and steel.

Chou's last bullets were chattering out. The two-seater's prop was in his sights. The target was fair, coming straight on for an instant. Chou held on.

The southern slugs passed over the mount, drove black dots into the leather seat, into the floor, into the empty ammunition racks.

The southerner's prop exploded into a fanning pattern of fragments. Smoke swept out from under the two-seater's cowl. Chou was holding on.

The two-seater lurched and dived helpless into the yellow water, sending up a soaring column of dirty spray.

Chou grinned feebly. He raised his hand halfway. It dropped suddenly over the side and Chou sagged over the skyward pointing guns. A small, dark trickle ran out of his mouth and out of his sleeve, to blend together and match the scarlet of the red star on the Bristol's side. Chou grinned again. He coughed and tried to right himself. His head dropped limply to wobble against the bright steel of his gun mounts.

Hampton looked back and saw him. He knew nothing could be done. The two-seater was a scattered patchwork raft floating slowly down with the murky river. The sky was clear. The barricades on the eastern shore were once again dotted with puffs of volley fire. Chou's glazed eyes looked down and back at them, not caring now.

The wind had carried the fight far down the stream, across

many bends of the tortuous course. When Hampton spotted his position he saw that the closest way home was through enemy country.

But the two-seater was gone and even though his gunner was dead, as long as his motor continued to run there was nothing to be feared.

Hampton was shaken. It was a new experience for him. His life was such an even, listless plane. He had seen many men die and he did not really care. But Chou—he had known him. Chou had cursed him day and night, had hammered at him to get the patrols done. Chou had been so fiery and alive. . . . Hampton glanced back at the dangling hand which moved to and fro to smear the red star.

He faced front again and straightened out his course. He was not really thinking. His gray eyes were dull, almost bored. His lean, common face showed no particular strain, even now.

But something he could not define stirred uneasily within him.

They had drifted farther than he had thought. He found himself far east of the bending river, crossing over a wide, deserted plain. It was cold, but in this land it rarely snowed. Dust, bitter, chilly dust, was eddying along the ground. As far as Hampton could see, the horizon was smoky and yellow.

He hunched down in his pit, flying like an automaton, wishing only that he had a drink—and not even ardently about that.

Something was usually doing on this plain, but not today. No troops or trucks marred the gray-brown expanse. Only the dust and the shadow of the ship moved in the sullen world.

Dully Hampton remarked the absence of troops below. He would remember and mention it in his report—after he had a drink. Nothing stirred. . . .

To the north he thought he saw a sparkle of metal in the cold sunlight. Presently it was repeated.

It was one thing to watch in a world of sameness. Hampton watched it.

The sparkle multiplied until black dots could be seen behind them. It was a detachment of cavalry, a southern squadron patrolling behind their lines.

Then Hampton saw that the horses were running and that the Mongol mount in the lead was far ahead of the rest. Too far ahead to be the leader.

He was flying in the same direction that the horses rode. The Bristol's shadow came up and overtook them with a contemptuous flicker, passing swiftly by. Faces jerked up and ponies dashed to the right and the left. They had seen the red star.

But Hampton would not have machine-gunned them. He wanted to go home and take a drink. He looked down at them as he passed.

The single horseman out in front wheeled around and opened his mouth as though to shout. He raised his arm and waved it frantically at the Bristol.

The movement attracted Hampton's flagging attention. Cold and hazy as the sunlight was, thick though the dust, Hampton was not so high that he failed to see a red star on the soldier's cap.

This was odd. Below was one of Mao's officers, deep in

enemy territory, cut away from his troops by the barricades and the river, pursued by southern cavalry.

Hampton glanced back at Chou's dangling arm. Something stirred uneasily within him again. An impulse was as foreign to him as he was to China, and yet something very like an impulse seized him and made him obey.

The Bristol verticaled and came back at the southern troops. Hampton stabbed the nose down and opened up with his bow guns.

The knot of horsemen scattered wildly right and left. A chunky Mongol pony went down. The rider rolled out and lay still. Dust streaked in straight, violent lines through other men and horses, dotting the dun plain with gray and brown.

The man with the red star on his cap was still racing away. Hampton turned and looked again at Chou. He looked down at the earth which was flat and hard. He saw the upraised hand of the officer.

Hampton cut his gun and leveled out. The officer rode wide and Hampton floated the Bristol above the plain. The wheels crumped against the rough earth and the Bristol slowed.

In the comparative silence came the sharp raps of rifles far behind. Horsemen were spurring in pursuit, shooting as they came.

The officer swerved in alongside the still rolling ship.

Hampton shouted, "Throw out the gunner and get in!"

The officer looked at Chou and then at Hampton. Mounted, his head was as high as the pits. There was a strange expression in his eyes.

“Throw out the gunner!” shouted Hampton. “They’ll nail us in a second. Snap into it!”

He had never spoken that emphatically before, but that was not the occasion of the officer’s stare.

Hampton noticed then that blood was staining the fellow’s tunic. A round hole, very dark, was under his breast pocket. The officer looked back at the running cavalry and shook his fist. A bullet ricocheted off the wing and screamed away.

The officer took the side of the cockpit and lifted himself from his saddle. The effort must have cost him agony, but his only expression was one of triumph toward the cavalry.

He came down in the pit beside Chou. The pony streaked away, afraid of the engine’s sudden roar. Another bullet splintered a strut before Hampton got away.

The Bristol rolled faster and faster. The cavalry was left impotent, far behind.

The Bristol roared skyward and Hampton looked back. He met the strange look in the wounded officer’s eyes.