

The Falcon Strikes

By Major George Fielding Eliot

IT HAD been a bloodless victory. With the first appearance of Jim Davison's swooping wings above their mud walls, the villagers had flung down their arms. They were unprepared for attack from the air, and the plane piloted by the Yank terrified them.

Now the Russian infantry—advance guard of a column pressing forward through the mountains to the attack of the Iran fortress of Maku—were swarming into the town.

Davison, laughing a little, cut off his motor and glided down to land on the hard snow of the pass. He had seen nothing of the German plane, flying for the Persians as he was for the Russians, reported to have been flying over the pass; but his mere presence had won a battle which might have cost a hundred lives.

The officers and soldiers of the Siberian rifle regiment came surging round him as he stepped out of his plane, slapping him on the back, offering him their vodka flasks. The colonel, after profuse thanks for his timely appearance, begged him to take dispatches back to Headquarters, where Commissar Babushken was in command. Davison nodded, promised to wait.

Near the gate of the village, a tall young man stood staring at the airman and the plane. Davison returned the gaze of those burning black eyes with interest. The youth held his head high, and for all his clothing of

ragged sheepskin, he carried himself like a prince.

Suddenly he moved toward Davison with quick, determined steps, as one who has suddenly come to a decision.

He was carrying something on his wrist—and Davison saw with astonishment that it was a falcon, hooded with leather and with leather jesses on its legs attached to a light leash. It was a splendid looking bird, as haughty and fierce of bearing as its master.

"You like the falcon?" The young man spoke in Russian. "Her name is Tamara. She is of the finest breed in all Georgia."

Davison—Lieutenant Jim Davison, Yank pilot serving with the Royal Flying Corps, and temporarily attached to the Russian Army of the Caucasus as a flying liaison officer—nodded good-naturedly.

"I like it very much," he answered slowly; his Russian was pretty lame. "I am from Georgia, too—but not your Georgia. Georgia, U.S.A."

The youth stared at him.

"You're not Russian?" he demanded sharply.

"No. American," Davison answered. "If you happen to know what that is."

"Of course I know what it is. I went to college in New York," the young man snapped in excellent English. "Look here. I need you. Will you do something to help me? You'll be well paid," he added as

Davison hesitated, searching for courteous words to explain that he was not his own boss.

Davison reddened.

“Sorry,” he said with some asperity. “I’m a soldier. There’s a war on.”

Who did this half-baked whelp think he was, anyhow?

“I am David—Prince David!” It was as though he’d read the thought. “I need your help, I tell you! There is a secret treasure-place, high in the mountains. Only wings can reach it—and I must go there!” He laid a hand on Davison’s arm. “You’ll take me?”

He seemed to think he had only to express his desires, in order to be obeyed.

“I must go—before the Russians take Maku,” he insisted.

Davison saw the colonel’s adjutant coming with the dispatches.

“I must go, too, Prince David,” he said, and held out his hand. Somehow, for all the arrogance, he liked this hot-eyed young fellow. “See you again some time, I hope.”

“You refuse to help me?” cried the “Prince.”

“Sorry. I must.”

The young man knocked Davison’s hand aside furiously. His eyes flashed lightning.

“The black curse of Shamyl on you, American pig!” he snarled. “And you have not heard the last of this! You will yet come when I call—remember my words!”

The falcon, excited by the noise and sudden movement, echoed its master’s cry and struck at Davison.

“Remember!” said the youth again. And then he was gone, running full speed along the village street and disappearing in the lurking smoke by the farther gate.

Davison took the message from the adjutant, thrust it into an inner pocket, and hurried out of the village gate to retrieve his

plane. In twenty minutes he was in the air. Orders first—

He could refuel at Headquarters, and go search for that German plane later.

Which did not prevent his giving a sharp look around for a possible enemy as he cleared the pass, and the magnificent panorama to the south of the mountain came into view.

Visibility was poor toward Maku, where haze thickened into mist on the summits of the Palenteken. The great fort was firing heavily toward the east, the flashes of the guns almost continuous. Davison saw nothing of the expected Messerschmitt, but there could have been a dozen of them soaring in that haze and he might have missed them.

Flying in the Caucasus had its problems, and they were not the problems of France.

The ground below was clear enough. He could see moving dots—men; whether the late defenders of the village, or Russian scouts, he could not tell. There was a little smoke in a deep valley off to the right. Perhaps this was the “secret place” of which David had spoken. The snow lay deep in the gorges and rock pockets; elsewhere the wind whirled it over the frozen earth, or drifted it high against the bases of the cliffs.

It was bitterly cold. Davison tried not to think of the weather, but to concentrate on the Headquarters mess room, with its blazing fire and steaming samovar. It was only a half hour away.

Yet between his mental vision and that cheerful picture kept coming the face of David, framed in the curve of a great interrogation mark. Who was this lad? What was he? He had a prince’s name, and a truly royal falcon—in ancient Georgia only princely houses had such birds. Was he indeed a prince, or a son of princes?

Without the least warning something struck Davison a heavy blow in the face. Sharp points ripped at the flesh of his cheeks below his goggles. He was blinded by a dark fury that clung and beat and tore at his face, blocking his vision, forcing him to lift both hands to save his throat. The plane, controls released, lurched into an air pocket, whipped over and began to spin.

Davison tore the dark fury from him. Great wings beat at his face as he hurled it out into space and grabbed for his stick. He fought the spinning ship, steadying his controls in neutral to bring her out of the spin. But with a crash the flying devil was upon him again, striking the side of his head with its furious onset, tearing at him with savage beak.

Now he saw what it was. A falcon—a black falcon!

Its yellow eyes gleamed with a feral light as, sinking its talons in the sleeve of his overalls, the great bird struck and struck again with that curved, wicked beak at the exposed portions of Davison's face, wings flapping madly all the time.

With one hand he could do nothing in that cramped cockpit. Again he had to let go the stick and tear the falcon from its perch. This time, as he swung it outward, he tried to crack its head against a strut, but a sweep of the mighty wings jerked it from his grasp and it circled the plane, screaming its hate and seeking another chance to strike.

Truly it was a brave hawk. Davison would have to kill it to stop it.

He felt the blood freezing on his lacerated cheeks as he reached again for the stick. The plane was sideslipping, wobbling. It was darker here. With horror Davison saw walls of rock on either side and realized that he had lost altitude so dangerously that he was now flying in a valley.

He could see several men scrambling along a narrow path which clung to one of those precipitous walls. Below in the valley itself there was only desolation; stunted evergreens, and a frozen stream, with patches of snow everywhere and bare rocks showing blackly through them.

Screaming still, the falcon came at him again. Davison beat at it with clenched fist, but he might as well have struck at a shadow. He had no chance to get at his gun, buttoned beneath his heavy jacket as it was. And he realized that if he hit any more bad air, he would inevitably crash.

He tried to bring the nose of the plane up, to climb clear of those menacing cliffs, but again the falcon hurled itself right into the cockpit, as though it knew its prey was escaping. There was a moment of breathless fighting in which the cockpit was full of feathers and beating wings, while that beak, those talons, seemed everywhere at once.

As, for the third time, Davison threw the falcon out, he realized that the wind of a spin was whispering past his windbreak again. The rocks along the valley's floor seemed to be reaching for him like the jagged fangs of some lurking monster. And ahead, the valley narrowed suddenly.

Even as he brought his ship to level flight, barely clear of the rocks, he realized that he could not rise again. There would not be clearance for his wings in the narrow gorge to which the valley dwindled. Not a chance to turn back, of course.

There was one hope—the stream. There was a straight stretch just ahead and below. If the ice would bear the impact, he might land there. If it broke—well, he was done for anyway.

He shut off his motor, eased the ship down with careful touch. Behind him he heard distant shouting. He swung away from the rocks—there was the ice, looking solid

enough. He'd have to set down tail first, let the tailskid drag and check her before he let the wheels touch—or he'd nose over.

And he had no great distance to spare before the stream curved into a regular mess of boulders and fallen detritus, narrowing as the valley narrowed and with midstream rocks showing through the ice in grim menace.

Now was the time for the falcon to strike again; now when Davison needed all his powers, every bit of skill and courage and dexterity that he possessed, for the one task of landing the ship. Now the falcon could in truth make its kill.

Every second, as he dropped the plane closer to the ice, Davison expected to hear the whir of those wings, the scream of the furious bird. He forced himself to unyielding concentration on the task in hand. If the falcon struck, let it strike.

At least Davison would go down fighting.

His tailskid dragged on the frozen stream. The plane lost speed; the wheels, held up for an instant by the drawn-back stick, touched the ice. The ice held—but the wind, whistling along the surface, lifted the tail dangerously.

Davison threw his weight back as far as he could. The wind lessened a little, the tail dropped back and the ship skidded to a stop with the tip of the prop not ten feet from the first of the midstream rocks.

“Whew!” he breathed, suddenly aware that his torn face was smarting furiously.

He looked up for the falcon. It was not to be seen.

High overhead, the cloud-streaked sky showed between the beetling crests of the cliffs. Thank heaven the wind would be right for a takeoff when he had turned the plane around. It would be no very great task, with this smooth, solid ice underfoot.

He got out his automatic, pumped a shell into the chamber, slipped the gun into the side pocket of his flying jacket against the possible return of the falcon. Then he bent to the task of pushing the tail of his ship around to head her into the wind.

His feet slipped on the ice at the first heave and he went to his knees. He was in the act of getting up when he heard a shout. When he looked up, it was to see a dozen men dashing around the bend of the stream, running toward him along the ice!

They were armed to the teeth. Every man carried a rifle, crossed bandoliers gleaming with brass cartridge shells, and a belt stuffed full of daggers and pistols. A wild, savage-looking crew, in sheepskin coats and capes and soft leather boots, they were led by a giant of a man, black-bearded and gaunt, who wore the spotted tawny pelt of a panther flung over his shoulders.

Davison instantly realized that a show of resistance would mean his finish. If he could have gotten into his back seat and unlimbered his rear machine-guns, he might have bluffed them off. But there was no time for that. As it was, he faced them coolly enough, addressing their leader in Russian as the motley yelling crew surged around him.

“*Starova bradzye!* Good day to you, brothers,” he began.

“No brothers of yours, you Russian vulture!” retorted the leader, stopping directly in front of Davison and standing there, legs well apart, hands holding his rifle across his body in readiness to shoot. “What are you doing in our valley?”

Davison pointed to his wounded face, explained how the falcon had attacked him and how he had been compelled to this forced landing.

All the men laughed loudly.

“A Georgian falcon is a match for one of these flying Russian devils any day!” cried the leader. “You dog of a spy!”

Davison had heard of these Georgians, men not entirely sympathetic to Russia in the first days of the war. They remained hostile and suspicious, fighting always in defense of their mountain villages. And now they suspected him of being a spy.

The leader’s deep-set, brooding eyes were fixed on Davison’s face. Far in the depths of those eyes twinkled tiny points of fire.

There rose a snarl of hatred from the others. Daggers flashed, a voice yelled:

“Let us cut his throat—now!”

Davison backed up against his plane, ready to pull his gun and fight to the last. He heard running feet padding on the ice, saw another man round the turn and come racing toward the plane. He stared in sudden astonishment, for this man’s head was tightly encased in a leather flying helmet, and the laced boots he wore had never been turned out by a Georgian village cobbler.

“What is this? I saw a plane land when I was flying toward Khotab!” the newcomer cried in Russian as he came up. “Have you caught a Russian pilot, Vasil?”

He was a tall, blond young man, with an arrogant face, cold blue eyes, a thin-lipped mouth that seemed perpetually to sneer beneath a wispy blond mustache.

“A Russian spy, you mean,” retorted the leader of the Georgians—whose name, evidently, was Vasil. “We are about to slit his gullet for him.”

“Ah,” said the blond young man. “An excellent idea.” He looked at Davison. “Hail and farewell, my friend!” he sneered. “It was you whom I saw over Khotab this morning, I presume?”

“Yes, and you took darn good care I didn’t see you!” retorted Davison. “If you’d

stayed to fight like a man, you wouldn’t be here.”

“I am Gustaf von Jalberg,” replied the other, reddening. “My courage is not to be questioned. My mission here is too important to permit me to risk my life in small combats. In a day or two—not more than three at the utmost—I shall be quite at your service. But I forget. You—er—will not be available. Most unfortunate.”

He stepped ostentatiously aside. Daggers glittered in a dozen brown hands.

Davison’s fingers closed on the grip of his gun. He resolved to shoot the leader first, then von Jalberg, and take his chances of getting to his machine-guns in the resulting confusion. But he thought the chances mighty slim. These men were fighters—warriors born.

There was a whir of wings, a raucous scream. The black falcon wheeled above their heads. Its scream was echoed in a high-pitched cry from the cliff side. Davison remembered the people he had seen on the path. Here they came, three of them, scurrying down the narrow ledge with the agility and seeming carelessness that only mountaineers and Alpine chamois seem to achieve.

The first two, smoke-blackened, bandaged, armed and truculent, were—Davison was almost sure—villagers of the late garrison of Khotab village. The third was—young David!

Even as the Yank looked, the black falcon wheeled, flew to the youth, perched upon his wrist.

David jumped lightly from the path, ran across the rocks, bounding from one to another. He thrust the crowding Georgians aside and confronted Davison.

“I told you you would yet come to my call,” he gloated, and thrust the falcon forward. “Tamara, I flew you at him, and

you brought him down like any heron! A fine flying man—brought down by a falcon!”

His delight was at once childish and wickedly vindictive. The unwhipped brat! So he was responsible.

“You had better get out of the way, David,” said Davison.

“Your friends, here, have decided to cut my throat, and you are delaying their pleasure.”

David swung around to face the Georgian leader, Vasil.

“What nonsense is this, Vasil? This one,” he pointed to Davison, “is my friend. I need him. Bid your men begone.”

“But—”

David swore viciously.

“Do you say ‘but’ to me, Vasil Perviatin?” He switched from Russian to Georgian, and began to talk faster.

“No, Prince. No,” said Vasil hastily. He whirled to his men, spoke swiftly and sharply in Georgian. They sheathed their knives, lowered their rifles, turned and started shuffling, reluctantly, off upstream.

Back to Davison turned this surprising young man.

“Now!” he cried, speaking English. “I have saved your life, Lieutenant Davison. Will you remember it, and do what I ask of you? I, who have need of your wings?”

“I must do my duty, David,” said Davison quietly. “The Commissar Babushken waits for my news.”

“He will wait long!” flashed von Jalberg, reaching for his gun.

But at a word from David, Vasil’s men leapt forward and pushed the German back.

“Wait!” David commanded. “American, it is not your duty but your life you must think of now—”

“My wings can serve you, perhaps!” von Jalberg cried. “Kill this rascal, and command me as you will!”

David turned startled eyes upon the German.

“I had not thought of that!” said he. “Perhaps—perhaps your work was in vain, Tamara. Perhaps this German will serve as well—”

“No perhaps. I will help in any way I can. It is the treasure of Queen Tamara you seek!” Von Jalberg spoke with all positiveness.

“You have heard, then? You Germans know much.” David nodded as he finished speaking. “Very well. American, take your plane and go. I at least am not ungrateful.”

Davison flushed, amid the shout of dissent set up by von Jalberg and the Georgians.

He stepped into his plane without another word, for David had turned coldly away from his outstretched hand and was sharply commanding Vasil to see that the departure of the American was not interfered with.

They had to wrest von Jalberg’s pistol from him to keep him from shooting Davison down. But the mountaineers obeyed this surprising boy David in all things. And so Davison flew up and out of that valley of surprise, his mind filled with conjectures—and with a queer uneasy sense of having abandoned a friend in peril.

Another morning had dawned above the snow crests, and Jim Davison, on reconnaissance, flew high in the chill mists over Maku.

Things were not going well with the Russian arms.

The 1st Caucasian Corps had been repulsed with heavy loss from its assault on the fort. All night long the battle had raged, and the Commissar was said to have ordered up his last reserve for one final effort.

Meanwhile General Prjevalsky's mountain column, delayed by the resistance at Khotab, had not yet made itself felt in the Iranian rear. If the last assault failed, if Prjevalsky did not come, the Commissar's army faced certain defeat.

Davison flew shivering above the thunderous ridge of Ala-Goz for half an hour, trying to make out details in the flame-shot murk of mist and smoke and the fumes of Russian high explosives that shrouded the battlefield. He could see confused movement, but as for useful military detail, he might as well have been back with his Russian friends at the mess room samovar.

"All I can say for sure is, there's a devil of a fight going on down there," he muttered. He resolved to fly north and try to locate the heads of Prjevalsky's columns. Their location would be news of great importance.

But in the valley of the Araxes the mist lay thickly. He could see nothing. Not so much as the flash of a Cossack lance-point or the glitter of Siberian bayonets. The mist guarded its secrets well.

Swearing, Davison swung his ship in a wide curve over Maku itself. He could make out the city; its features were well enough known to him now. He wondered what the Persians were thinking, down there. They must be already exulting in anticipation of victory.

To the south, grim and forbidding as ever, the high summits of the Kara-Dagh cut off all view, gazing somberly down on Maku as they had gazed through the centuries. Against them, with startling suddenness, Davison caught the flicker of white wings.

Von Jalverg's ship! It must be, for the wings of the Russian ships were a dirty grey. Straight for those flashing wings Davison steered. At least he'd settle accounts with that sneering Nazi.

He was climbing rapidly now. He wanted altitude enough for one killing dive. He gained it. He was higher than the enemy—a Messerschmitt—which he could see plainly, flying along apparently all unconscious of any foe.

Having gained just the right position, Davison put his stick forward and dived to destroy his foe. Down roared the ship, down, nose pointed at the Messerschmitt. Davison's hand steady on the trigger-grip of his guns, waited for the range to be deadly sure.

The seconds seemed like hours to his impatient heart.

Now!

A single tracer sped through the grey morning- and Davison relaxed. For just at that moment he had perceived that the Messerschmitt carried a passenger. His glass quickly confirmed his first suspicion as to who that passenger might be. There was no mistaking the proud set of that high-held head.

It was David.

He had, then, accepted von Jalberg's aid in the matter of this "treasure"—or whatever his real purpose was.

Whether von Jalberg saw that lone tracer or not, the German abruptly changed course. He curved south, toward the tremendous mountains, and began to climb. Davison, hoping against hope that he might not have been seen, circled away, then turned back to follow at a discreet distance.

He could not bring himself to shoot the plane down, with David in it. In fact, he thought his duty might well be to find out what the lad and von Jalberg were up to—yes, and to block them, too.

Higher and higher climbed the Messerschmitt. Colder and colder grew the air as Davison followed. Good Lord, was the German going right over the top of the

mighty Kara-Dagh? Beyond, far beyond, lay the wild country of the Kurds. What could he want there?

Surely he was not going to cross the mountains. Yet still he climbed, and still Davison followed, half-shrouded by the mist which still rolled and swirled along the flanks of Kara-Dagh, now thinner, now thicker.

Now one peak loomed dark and forbidding through the mist, nearer than the others. A queer, flat-topped mountain it was, not really a peak at all. At the nearer corner was some jagged bulk of stone—why, it was a tower! An old ruined tower, Heaven knew how old in this country of incredible antiquities. On the flat top of the mountain, beyond the tower, von Jalberg was landing.

There was little wind, hence the persistent clinging of the mist. When the breath of the ancient gods blew strongly up here atop the Kara-Dagh, no airplane that ever flew could have landed on that flat summit. This morning, however, the thing was quite feasible. And Davison suddenly knew that it was for this that David needed wings.

Here was a place, indeed, where nothing but an airplane could bring him.

Was this the hiding place of his “treasure”?

The sides of the mountain fell sheer away everywhere that Davison could see. Perhaps there was some goat-track, somewhere, but surely no man could climb to that summit. Then who had built the tower? It must be that in centuries past some earthquake had changed the shape of this peak and made it forever inaccessible, Davison conjectured.

And what would David do on this mountaintop?

That, Davison proposed to find out without more delay. His Colt was in his pocket, loaded and ready, when he glided

down to a landing beside the white Messerschmitt.

He leaped out, prepared for anything.

By the base of the ruined tower, the boy David and von Jalberg struggled in deadly combat, the German striving to keep David’s dagger from his throat, David fighting with the concentrated ferocity of a panther.

Davison darted forward, shouting.

Von Jalberg contrived to fling the boy from him, leaped into the dark opening that had once been the doorway of the tower and was gone.

“Back here—come quickly!” David dragged Davison to one side just as a pistol shot spat from a loophole in the stone wall.

“I’m going in after him!” snarled Davison, gun in hand.

“No—wait. He’ll shoot you down as you come through the door,” the youth insisted.

“Wait for what? Those loopholes command the planes. We’ve got to get him first.”

“Help may come,” said David. “I don’t know—but—”

“From where—the moon?” interrupted Davison. “And you—what are you doing here?—”

“I came for the treasure of Queen Tamara, once the great ruler of my country. For my people,” was the astonishing answer.

“The treasure of Queen Tamara?” Davison’s voice was charged with incredulity.

“Yes. Her jewels. They are buried in that tower. I want to get them, to sell them and use the money to help my poor stricken people, after this war is over. They will need money then—for houses and cattle and seed and clothes. Whoever conquers—Russ or Nazi—money will help my people to live.”

His eyes glowed with the light of this high purpose. In that moment he looked as much a prince as ever his ancestors of old could have looked. Or so Jim Davison thought.

“How do you know of this treasure?” the Yank asked.

“An old parchment, handed down from mother to daughter, father to son, in my family. I, David, am a son of kings. There came a time when it was forgotten what this parchment meant, but I read it, gleaned its secret, came here with an Austrian airplane hired for me by Vasil before the war. I saw the jewels. I took a few, left the others because I was not sure I could trust my pilot.

“I was right. He tried to rob me, and Vasil killed him. Then the war came, and I have lived only for my people, trying to keep the hotheads out of trouble, trying to make them stay at home and look after themselves.

“But now that the Russians are hammering at the gates of Maku, the Russians with their planes and their devilish noses for loot, I was afraid to let the treasure stay here longer. I wanted you to help me. Then von Jalberg offered—I could not wait, could not delay lest it be too late.

“I came here with him. But he wanted the treasure for himself, and when I had shown him the way, he tried to throw me from the rock, I would have stabbed him to the heart, but you came—”

From the door of the tower von Jalberg fired suddenly. The bullet whistled close. Davison answered with two quick shots, heard them spatter on the stones, heard von Jalberg’s mocking laugh.

“Then he knows of the treasure?” Davison asked.

“Yes,” said David. “He had learned something—I told him more. I offered him a price to help me. I thought I could trust him.”

“And Vasil?” Davison asked.

“Vasil knows, too. He wanted me to wait, said he would get the treasure for me. But I do not think even Vasil and his mountaineers can climb this rock. Perhaps they can, though.”

Davison was watching the door of the tower for von Jalberg to appear again.

“Von Jalberg,” he said, “has been intriguing with Vasil, has he?”

“Yes!” David nodded grimly. “I had not met von Jalberg before, but I knew he had been trying to stir up trouble, offering my foolish people great rewards, promising them all sorts of benefits if they only delayed Prjevalsky two or three days more.”

“He said something like that himself,” Davison observed, still watching the tower door. “That time’s about up. Wonder what he expects to happen?”

“He said that after that Prjevalsky would be otherwise taken care of,” David answered.

Before Davison could reply, a shout rang from a second story loophole of the tower.

“Hola, Vasil!”

“Ho!” rang in answer from the edge of the rock. The head and shoulders of a man—shoulders covered by a panther’s skin—appeared there. The form of Vasil scrambled into view.

“I told you, Prince, that there was a way up,” panted Vasil.

“Hola, Vasil!” cried von Jalberg again from the tower. “Are you alone?”

“No. See, they come, my brave ones!” Two or three more mountaineers appeared, and the noises of others still climbing could be heard. They were the same hard-bitten crew that had been with Vasil the day before. Though they carried no rifles or bandoleers now, every man had his dagger and pistol.

“Be warned Vasil! Treachery!” yelled von Jalberg. “Your prince came here with his Russian pal to steal the treasure, and when I tried to prevent it, they drove me into the tower and would have killed me had you not come. Treachery, Vasil! Seize them!”

Von Jalberg, risking his life on this cast, came striding out of the doorway as he finished speaking.

Vasil turned his deep-set eyes on the boy David—eyes in whose depths the little fires of the fanatic still burned.

“Prince,” asked he grimly, “is this thing true?”

“You dare to ask?” flashed David.

“Yes. I dare ask. I, Vasil, whose blood is as royal as your own. I see you here—with him,” and a finger stabbed at Davison. “I think he is a Russian spy, but you are here with him. You saved his life yesterday; today you bring him to the treasure-tower. I dare to ask what you mean by it. Do you dare to answer?”

For the silence that followed, the rumbling of the guns along the Ala-Goz made a grim background.

Then—while David still struggled with a rage that left him speechless—von Jalberg spoke again.

“Listen to the guns,” bade he. “The Russ batters still at the gates of Maku, and batters in vain. It is as I told you, Georgians. The day of the Russ is over. A new day dawns, a new and splendid German day. Throw me this Russian dog from the edge of the cliff, and afterward I will take the treasure and the prince to your valley in my plane.

“Fear no vengeance. I pledge you upon my honor that no Russian will be left alive south of the Caucasus in another fortnight.”

With a low growl the mountaineers surged forward.

“Stop!” cried David, but von Jalberg leaped suddenly and seized him from behind.

“Vasil!” yelled David madly, beating at von Jalberg with furious fists. “Vasil—help me!”

Vasil appeared not to hear. With the stealthy steps of the panther whose skin he wore, he was advancing on Davison, dagger bared.

A ray of sunlight suddenly cleft the mist and illumined the mountain-top with its golden radiance. At the same moment there sounded, far out in the valley, the blast of a tremendous explosion.

“Look there, Georgians!” cried Davison at the top of his voice.

The mist was fading before the rare winter sun, rolling back like a great curtain, revealing the horror and majesty of the battle below.

From the great fort, a vast column of black smoke rolled up and spread above Maku like a pall. Now the wind caught this smoke, dispersed it, showed the thin sliver of a flagstaff— and something which fluttered bravely on the rising breeze.

“Take them! Look!” Davison thrust the glasses which hung about his neck into Vasil’s hands.

Davison had already seen.

The battle-flag of Soviet Russia, the red flag of the hammer and sickle, floated over the key to Maku.

The Commissar’s last reserves had turned the tide of battle.

Vasil slowly lowered the glasses, his face working queerly.

“That man,” snapped Davison, looking at von Jalberg, “pledged you his so-called honor that in a fortnight’s time there would be no Russian alive south of the Caucasus. And now the Russians are in the fort. They will be in Maku before night!

“It is the Persians who are doomed, the Persians and their ‘technicians’ the Germans! Who will save you from Russian vengeance now, you who have held the passes against the soldiers of the Soviet?”

Von Jalberg said nothing. He let go of David, stepped back as though anticipating immediate attack.

Mercilessly Davison drove home his advantage.

“Only one thing can save you, men of Georgia! Come to the Commissar, ask his pardon, and bring this von Jalberg in a prisoner, if you’re in earnest about your repentance. Do this, and I pledge my honor that you will be received with kindness.”

The mountaineers surged toward von Jalberg, one crying “Treachery!” and another “Kill the German liar!”

Von Jalberg turned suddenly and raced across the mountain-top for his plane.

Davison fired a shot that missed, started to run, too late. He heard the whir of an inertia starter, heard the sudden clatter of von Jalberg’s engine. Warming up wouldn’t matter, with ten thousand feet of altitude to soar in.

“Fools!” shrieked von Jalberg. “Now you shall know what vengeance means!”

He pointed out from the mountain’s edge as his plane began to move.

Davison dropped on one knee, leveling his pistol for a long shot. He fired. Von Jalberg crumpled in his seat. His plane kept moving, rolled on over the edge, glided a little way and then went into a side-slip.

Davison, David and the others dashed to the brink to watch it.

When they saw it again, it was spinning, falling down, down toward the rocks of Kara-Dagh far below—falling with a dead man in its cockpit and dead hands limp on the controls.

“What did he mean about vengeance?” David asked, a little unsteadily.

Davison was looking out over Maku. Far beyond the city, he could see a dark serpent winding along the great north road, the road that led from the pass of Khotab.

He knew what it must be.

Prjevalsky’s column, on the march, come to complete the victory that the Commissar had won! The victory, thanks to their timely arrival, was secure.

Young David turned to Vasil and spoke a few words in an undertone. The man nodded.

“He will get the treasure for me,” said the boy to the Yank. “Hide it in a safe place until I can turn it over to my people.” He drew himself up proudly. “But my people will do as you have suggested—we will go to the Commissar.”

Davison drew in a deep breath. And then he saw what von Jalberg had meant by vengeance.

Over Maku, high over the city itself, wheeled a formation of three planes. White wings, black swastikas—German planes, light bombers, arrived, like Prjevalsky, just in the very nick of time. Had they come a day or so earlier, Prjevalsky would never have gotten through the passes; it was for these comrades that von Jalberg had sought to delay the Russians.

Now, now they swooped upon the narrow gorge of the Araxes, a mere slit in the rocky hills through which Prjevalsky’s infantry must pass to reach the fort. They would make a shambles of that gorge.

Davison found himself running for his plane. One against three—but he would do his best.

“Fly, my falcon!” yelled David, running after him. “And I fly with you!”

With a great leap the young man landed in the rear seat, tore free the fastenings of

the tourelle, swept the Lewis guns back and forth in eager promise.

No time to argue. And Davison would indeed need those guns.

He started his motor.

The advantage of surprise helped Davison in the beginning. Dropping from his immense height, he was upon the maneuvering Germans in very truth like a swooping falcon upon a flock of herons.

The blast of his tracers ripped a bomber through both cockpits. The big ship burst into flames and fell tumbling, wing over wing, down into the city.

The other two turned to meet this unexpected foe. But Davison, diving past, was below them now, and dragging his ship out of its dive to rise for another kill.

Behind him he could hear the spluttering bursts of fire from the Lewis guns as David—who seemed to understand guns well enough—fought manfully to keep the third bomber off Davison's tail.

The stricken ship above began side-slipping. Davison, swinging his wings clear of the falling bomber, saw a last vengeful burst from the Lewis guns rake her cockpits, saw again the dreaded flames enwrap a victim in their scarlet winding sheet. Loud and high through the clatter of motors rang the triumphant battle-yell of David, Prince of Georgia, exulting over a vanquished foe.

The third German turned to flee, but as well might a lumbering swan have fled from Tamara, the Black Falcon.

Heedless of the flashing bullets fired by the fear-maddened German observer, Davison closed relentlessly upon his prey. He opened fire at fifty feet, his bullets tearing through the wretched German ship.

A mist seemed suddenly to wrap itself round her as she fell. Davison could hardly see her—but she was falling, stricken like the others.

Davison knew he must land. He remembered dimly some-thing about young David and the Commissar Babushken—he would speak to the Commissar—

From the Russian infantry in the fort a great roar of cheering rose to greet the Yank and his comrade as they swept down to land on the ridge.

The heady wine of victory still ran hot in Davison's young veins—yet he was oddly weak. He could hardly keep his ship under control till he landed. They had to lift him out of his cockpit.

It was not until that moment that Davison realized he was wounded.

Bullet through one shoulder—didn't hurt—one in the leg, too—things were getting sort of hazy—

They were lifting David out too. Then darkness came.

It was warm. Comfortably, deliciously warm.

Slowly Jim Davison opened his eyes. He was in a stonewalled room, covered with blankets, and the sun was shining through a big square opening, shining right on him.

On the cot beside him, bandaged but still grinning, lay the young man, David.

A slim bronzed hand came out to meet his own.

"Comrade!" said David softly.

Then there was a stir at the door, and into the casemate strode the tall form of Vladimir Babushken, of Russia.

Davison felt a cold chill go down his spine. He was afraid not for himself but for his brave young friend, whom Russian might regard as a rebel.

"Maku," said the Commissar in his deep voice, "has fallen. Thanks to you—both."

He saluted Davison, turned and saluted the young David.

Then he bent over them. When he straightened up, there lay on each tattered

blanket a bronze medal—the highest award of Soviet Russia.

Once more the Commissar lifted his hand to his vizor. His voice rang against those ancient walls.

“James Davison, Knight of the Red Star, I salute you. David, Prince of Georgia, Knight of the Red Star, I salute you. Rest well and recover soon. Russia has need of all her brave airmen.”

He was gone, and again, across the space between the cots, the hands of two comrades met in a joyous clasp.