

SNOW LEOPARD

by CHRIS HAWTHORNE

CHAPTER XXII

Karen sprang to her feet, her like young body quivering, her face illumined under its golden tresses of hair. Her eyes became brilliant stars; she seemed to melt away from flesh and change to a being without substance.

"A homeland for the disinherited!" she cried. "A hope for the hopeless! Do you laugh at that?"

The captain's mouth fell open; the outburst bewildered him. Karen Sire was no longer a girl, no longer the coddled child of a Croesus father. The new evangelist seemed to have come to her suddenly as a vital message. To Anderson it had been the mere vaporing of a Levantine spell-binder.

"Oh, come back to earth!" he expostulated. "All this stuff is just simply the patter of a demagogue—a mouthful of nothing. I think likely this fellow Whipple has his hand in it."

Karen stared at him. "And Prince Jura Bai—was he in it?" she asked.

Captain Anderson became nervous. "I'm not fully informed on the personnel of this racket," he evaded. "But, as I say, you must

keep away from Alexandria while it's in process. Your father's orders are unmistakable on that point!"

When Karen caught the word "racket" her head went up suddenly. "Are these people being exploited for money?" she asked in evident dismay.

Anderson merely shrugged. "Isn't it usual for these prophets to fix a certain date for fulfillment—say, for example, the time when these poor people will meet their queen?" Karen persisted.

"Oh, that's all fixed! It's about the first of October by our calendar, less than a month away. That's why I'm telling you Alexandria won't be a safe place for a young lady from now on. Dismiss that idea from your head—get off at Gibraltar and go home to your father. He'll be worried about you."

"Where is Mr. Whipple?" Karen asked abruptly. "He hasn't shown himself since we started."

"And he won't until we reach Alexandria," Anderson replied. "Whipple has orders to keep close to his stateroom. He has the choice of obeying or going to the brig. He's a prisoner by request of two governments—British and American."

The captain leaned over her. He became impressive. "You are to be guarded night and day, sleeping and waking."

"I don't seem to be in a very much better position than Mr. Whipple, do I?"

"You are the ward of a sea lord—that is myself. It hurts me terribly to say this, Miss Sire, but my orders are plain. You are like a princess in a cage on board this ship, shielded from intrusion, yet hampered in your own movements."

"A princess indeed!" Karen laughed. "Well, I'd rather be that desert queen leading those poor people you told me about."

Karen's light vein deserted her instantly when Captain Anderson left her. Geoffrey Whipple under arrest! Toole's doings, of course. Undoubtedly, Whipple was on board to recover the precious parchments she had abstracted from his portfolio.

But if Captain Anderson thought, as apparently he did think, that she would submit to being caged like a pigeon and sent home from Gibraltar he was vastly mistaken. The bulk of her funds, however, were in the purser's safe with the documents; the captain, no doubt,

would have the money transferred with her to a New York bank ship.

The story of the strange prophet who was gathering followers for a hegira to southern Asia was not a mere bogey tale to frighten her away from Alexandria, Karen felt. Did the captain suspect—had her father told him by wireless—that she, herself, was the mysterious sprig of royalty who was to come out of nowhere and magically create a homeland for a disinherited people?

What was the whole story contained within those ago-worn parchments? Only a part of the scrolls had been deciphered by Abbe Bergere, her father's "spiritual agent" in that strange land beyond the Himalayas.

Karen had expected to make her way quietly to the very spot described in the ancient writings, to visit Abbe Bergere on his lonely mountain and learn the whole truth from him. What then might befall remained in the lap of the gods.

But how was she to escape the net her father had flung across the Atlantic? Could she persuade him to relent, now that Whipple was safely in charge? Probably not.

Suppose she managed to escape? What could she do without funds? Her father held the purse-strings and he certainly would not finance this booby-tooty adventure of hers.

In a stroll about the deck, Karen Sire encountered Kinnaird Clark, the first officer. During their stay in the roadstead he had lingered below decks, keeping a look-out on three Greek deportees. "You can't tell when these fellows will pop overboard and swim for it," he explained. "Fugitives from justice naturally have no yearning for repatriation."

He found Miss Sire only mildly interested in this. "Wonder if I couldn't have Mr. Whipple for dinner," she asked.

"How will you have him—boiled or roasted?" Clark laughed. "That fellow is in my charge, too—he's an international racketeer. I wouldn't permit him to sit at a table with you even if he had leg-irons on him."

"Yet he seemed to enjoy complete liberty in New York."

Clark became mysterious. "They got something on him since he boarded this ship," he said cautiously. "His valet is under detention with him."

A shadow fell between them. A little brown man, with his right arm in a sling, was standing a few feet away. From the look on his face he might have been a fiend poised for perdition for some mission that no mortal man could be found to undertake.

"Loose aft and stay there!" snapped Clark.

The little man started away, his head turning as if on a pivot to survey Karen Sire. Even in the bright sunlight some dark terror seemed to radiate from him.

"Whipple's valet," said Clark when the fellow had disappeared.

Karen Sire had been ready to make any reasonable concession to Whipple if only he would satisfy her curiosity regarding the scrolls she had taken from his portfolio and why the unfortunate prince sacrificed his life in an effort to get the leopard robe and the griddle.

A partial translation of the documents had been made in French—with all its fine-spun nuances, never an easy tongue for her to master. Aided by a bilingual dictionary she had managed to get the gist of some passages.

In her locked and guarded room, Karen picked up the written results of her labored efforts. She found some meaning and coherence in this:

"And for the white prisoners who had become his paladins and fought under his banner against the Turks, Genghis Khan did give in fee simple the mountain walled valley of Sira, that they might keep pure the blood of their fathers and not mix with the Mongol. For so great of heart was the Emperor of All Men that he yielded back their pride of race as a thing worthy to be held sacred. And with their women they did enter this valley, driving herds of horses, of asses, of goats."

Here followed what probably was an account of the upbuilding of a pastoral kingdom extending over a period of two centuries.

Karen's lexicon yielded little to enlighten her on this writing. Indeed, it was only her generous infusion of imagination that enabled her to give form to the first passage. Yet another fragment paragraph had not wholly eluded her uncertain grasp. Freshly translated (with abundant guessing and interpretation) it read:

"Thus the king, false to the oath of his forebears, did

bring back to the valleys captives of his forays. And there were Turks among them, and East Indians and Tartars. Their women did become concubines of the white men in the Sira valley and they did beget a brood without pride of race, without honorable tradition and lacking in vision for the future."

It was this passage that made Karen Sire's heart stand still. It was light upon this that she hoped to draw from Geoffrey Whipple in her effort "to have aim for dinner." Was she herself of the despised origin?

Again she stumbled on through her painfully transcribed script: "And the absconding king did flee from the wrath of those who yet had blue eyes and hair of gold and he did

become a freebooter of the desert beyond the Sira valley, making strong the passes to the domain and plundering all caravans that sought to make peaceful trade with the kingdom he had betrayed. They named him the 'Scourge of Tibet' and did call down upon his head the wrath of God. But in his Eternal Eye the time was not ripe for the men and women with blue eyes and golden hair. The 'Scourge of Tibet' did engulf them and take their herds and with fire and sword did make of their land a desert."

Who was this absconding king? Was the desert scourge the man of whom her great-grandfather had boasted? She turned to a parchment sheet that showed the least sign of age but which remained

untranslated. The scroll was abundantly decorated with curious figures, among them and most frequently recurring a snow leopard, colored in faded pigments.

Here, Karen felt sure, lay the prophecy. Somewhere within this baffling scroll dwelt the secret of her own ancestry. Whatever it contained was known to Brenda Whipple; it had been known to Jura Bai; it was known to the fanatical rabble now gathering from the four corners of the earth to occupy Sira valley. But it was not known to her. Did her father know? Was he ashamed of it?

Even in her superficial study of anthropology at school, Karen had learned that much of this talk about "pure white stock" was historic hokum. She knew the du-

bious origin of many northern European peoples. Further, she understood, that few actually know anything of their own grandparents.

Why, then, had she erected this bogey barrier against herself? Why had she permitted Bannister to beat his hands in vain against its adamant walls? Simply this: The remoteness of it all had been dispelled by the harsh words of Brenda Whipple. Even yet, Karen was not sure that the dimness of centuries had obliterated the barrier. Whom did the "absconding king" take to wife when he fled to the desert? Who were his sons and the sons of his sons? Tartars all? And did they come down to any recent generation as wild desert men?

(To be continued)

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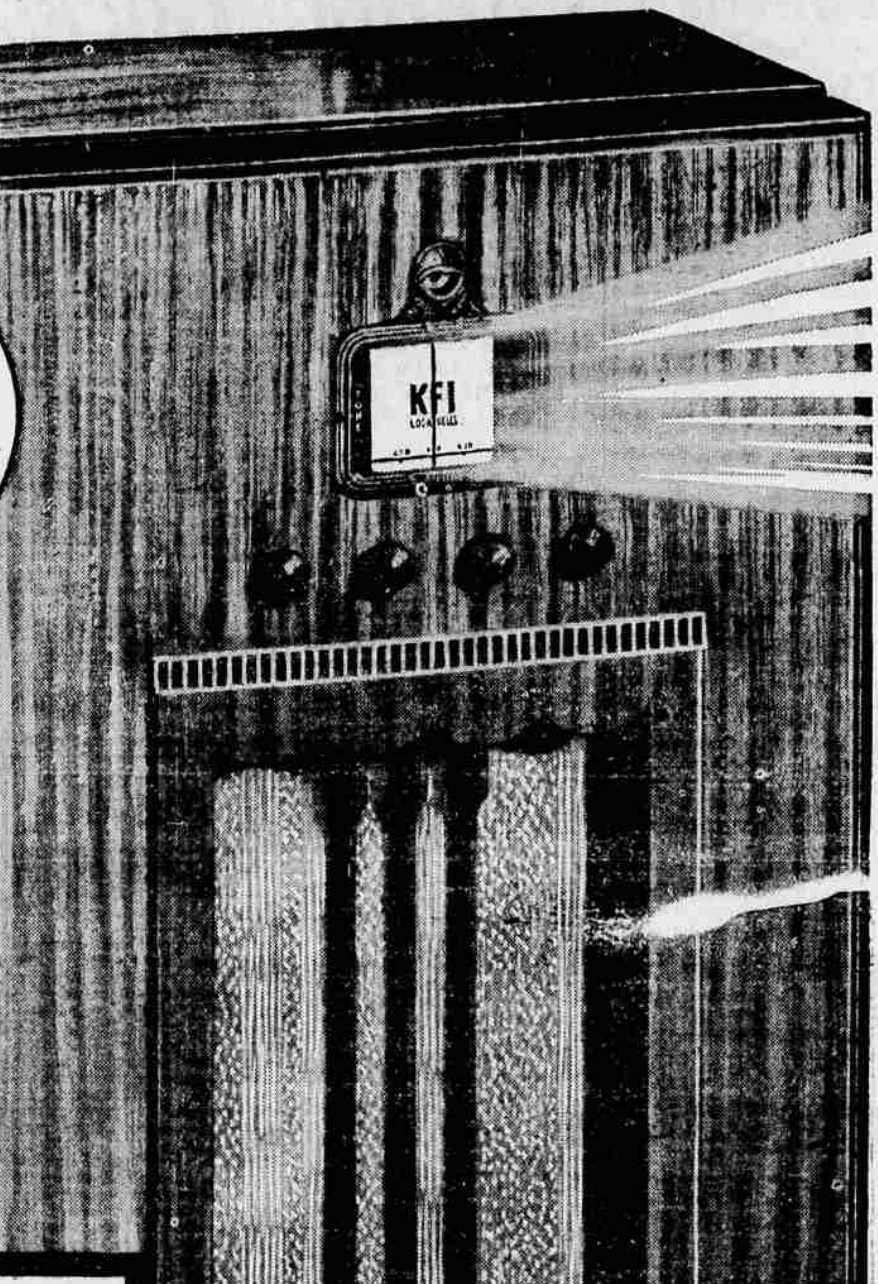
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