

# SNOW LEOPARD

by CHRIS HAWTHORNE

CHAPTER XXVIII

The airplane they were to use in their flight to the mountain "Our Lady in White" had reached Maura early in the day before. Bannister busied himself examining the motor and other essential parts of the machine. Toole also had some knowledge of engines, dating back to 1917-18 and service in the U. S. air corps ground school. He took readily enough to Dick's hurried instructions.

"You know," the detective remarked reminiscently, "I once turned a piano with a screw driver and monkey wrench. We found the old pan in a German officer's dugout and it was a little off from dampness."

"Well, you could do the same thing with this motor," Dick laughed. "It's as simple as a wheelbarrow. Pool proofing is the order of the day."

Toole had cut away part of the burlap that covered the fuselage. "Queer color," he sniffed, "what they call lavender, ain't it?"

"Orchid," grinned Bannister.

"What?"

"Oh, a kind of purple that got scared and turned pale." Dick laughed. "Suits you, suits you. They're having polka dot planes next. All a man's got to do is invent some-

thing and a woman comes along and paints it or ties a ribbon on it or squirts perfume all over it."

"This machine could fly on perfume—do you know that?" Bannister rejoined, adding: "Cologne spirits are one hundred and fifty proof alcohol and this is an alcohol motor."

The natives hang like bees and gnats around the airplane, although Toole ripped off an area to keep them back. Long before the plane was ready to start the entire population of Maura, along with invading hillemen, assembled outside the corral. Native police were stationed at intervals to keep the curious ones away from the deadly whir of the propeller.

An expected message from Abbe Berger reached them just as they were becoming impatient. It contained an air map of the territory they were about to traverse. The message itself was a warning which would have been meaningless to them without the aid of a local interpreter who made something like this out of it:

"Beware the black buran! He tells you to avoid sandstorms. They are terrific in the desert north of us. Fly high above them or you will be blinded. The sand will get into your bearings and

blind them out like a lath."

Beware of the dunes that ripple! Don't land in the desert where the sand is heaped in piles. These dunes move like the billows of the ocean and may cover you up."

Beware the Sarik! "This is a fibrous yellow grass. If you land in a patch of sarik it will hold you like a bird in a mousetrap."

Beware the perash! The perash are the witches of the desert. Don't worry about 'em unless you make a fool of that sort of thing. They're just native bogies, y'know."

Beware the khulan! "Wild asses—they've been known to attack caravans. That holds good of wild dogs, too. They're nasty brutes and run in packs."

"Lot of wisdom in what that old codger has told you," the interpreter, who was an Englishman, admonished them. "Best of luck—you're heading for a territory new to white men."

Toole stepped in and Bannister took his place at the controls. The propeller whirled, shooting a score of turban and straw hats back in the wake of the plane as it taxied over the hard sand. An hour later they had passed the last of the native villages, again becoming outcasts to take a last hazard with their lives. What urge had moved them? Perhaps they had met a fate fitting and merciful for their kind.

"Dick" and the veteran detective climbed out of their plane. After a gingerly ascent Bannister found the crisp structure of the machine was holding fast, although an occasional crackle and split would send Toole's eyes rolling skyward. They had been flying another hour when an outline of faint blue foothills began to pencil the horizon, rapidly deepening to indigo and purple.

Bannister was beginning to worry over his fuel supply when he heard a shout from the detective. He seized his own glasses. Deep in the distance he could see a mighty white pyramid—alone, majestic, like a ghostly sentinel at the gateway to a new world. Their goal was in sight. The spectral mountain must be "Our Lady in White!"

"We'll land on the lady's shoulder!" Dick shouted back.

Yet it was fully an hour before the plane was circling the stark peak, white and cold in the upper reaches, but wearing skirts of pale yellow and green.

"She's in evening dress to greet us!" cried Bannister.

The near slope of the mountain, an outpost of the great Himalayas that flung themselves over such a tremendous area, presented a sheer declivity, but a segment of the far side descended into the valley by a series of abrupt terraces—deep angular cliffs, stepped like a giant's stairway. This, they knew from the map, was the western approach to the Sire Depression. Bannister began to maneuver for landing on one of these ramps but found them sprayed with boulders and split with deep crevasses. A crash landing seemed inevitable.

"Buffaloes!" yelled Toole suddenly.

They were over the third broad "tread" of the great stairway, counting from the top. Bannister looked down. Two great beasts, the size and shape of oxen, but with shaggy pelts, were feeding peacefully near a long, low object that looked like a stone hut. He dropped nearer and saw a clearing, wide and long enough to afford a landing. Hearing the roar of the propeller, the animals looked up, hucked, plunged, and ran to cover.

Instantly a human figure appeared—at least it walked erect and wore clothing. Except for these details, it might have been some strange monster, new to the eyes of white men.

Bannister shut off the motor and a distinctly human voice permeated the dying hum of the blades.

The figure darted out from the shelter of the hut with wildly waving arms. It was that of a dwarf—the head and face large, the apparent size of both being greatly augmented by a tremendous effusion of hair. The shoulders were almost broad, and the chest deep and flat. As Toole later commented the "legs hardly long enough to reach the ground!"

The Americans sprang from the machine and heard a voice, sonorous, and pleasant, speaking in their own tongue.

"Welcome, gentlemen!"

The dwarf was a white man, and a hearty, well-spoken one at that. "Abbe Berger?" Bannister asked.

The strange little fellow nodded. Took Dick's extended hand in a grip even more powerful than his own, releasing it to grasp Toole's with his steel-like fingers.

"Mr. Bannister and Mr. Toole!" he boomed. "I hardly expected you so soon. But that makes you doubly welcome. And makes you doubly welcome."

Abbe Berger led Bannister and Toole to his hut. Entering, they found a clean, well lighted room about thirty feet square. The stone floor was carpeted with rough matting, evidently woven from stiff grass, the sarik which they had

been warned to avoid in a plane landing.

Bannister told the Abbe of the storm in the desert and the fate of the caravan.

"Whipple's army of freebooters," said the Abbe. "God's hand seems to have reached down and prevented the slaughter of Sire's homelands. Yet it was a merciful death for the mercenaries."

He walked to a little chapel in the corner of the room, knelt and offered prayer. Toole, standing in the middle of the floor, sunk to his knees. Bully crouched down and looked at his master who presently found himself kneeling. The requiem ended as quickly as it had begun.

The raid on the Thessalonias, Whipple's escape and the kidnapping of Karen Sire already were known to the Abbe.

"Knowing Whipple's ambitions and his methods better than either of you," he said, "I am inclined to think Miss Sire is safe for a time. There is no place on earth, except in the Depression, where he will not feel himself safe. He will not know until his actual arrival here what has become of his bride-to-be unless he should meet some survivors, if there be any. He may even walk over their burial place without seeing a trace of them. He probably will arrive here with a few trusted retainers, holding Miss Sire as a hostage. A bargain with Sire for her unharmed return is the only hope he can entertain of ever returning to civilization. Yes, I think she will be safe—for a time."

"How did you manage to send keep in touch with all these things?" Bannister asked, relieved at this sanguine opinion.

"You have just come from the heart of civilization," the Abbe answered, "yet you will find it difficult to believe that Sire is able to communicate with me by wireless. But it's a fact. I have a receiving set but as yet I have no radio sender. All Sire's messages come to me in a broadcast from Shanghai, where Sire has agents. These programs reach the general public in the innocent form of music and comment, but they are coded for me. Sire sends his code messages in the regular way to Shanghai and his agents do the rest."

"How did you manage to send that warning to me at Maura?"

"There is a caravan route centuries old along the north rim of the valley below. With glasses I can pick up the infrequent travelers. I had accumulated quite a number of messages from Sire before I was able to send any back to him by this means. The note to Maura was included among them."

(To be continued)

## U. S. TO BUY SEED GRAINS FOR FARMS

WASHINGTON, Aug. 5.—(AP)—The AAA said today the department of agriculture's drought committee planned to buy 8,000,000 bushels of seed grains to assure a supply for farmers in the drought stricken areas.

The grain, it was explained, would be sold to farmers who lack seed, at cost plus carrying charges. It was estimated \$10,000,000 would be needed to finance the purchases.

Under the program, seed specially adapted to dry weather will be acquired by the federal surplus commodity corporation and sold through regular commercial channels under a provision that it must be used for seed.

Stocks of spring wheat, durum wheat, oats, barley and flaxseed are to be acquired. The program is modeled after a similar seed conservation plan used during the 1934 drought.

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**TWIN BEADS WITH CORD REINFORCE**—In larger sizes twin beads are used to give tire firm seat on rim. The beads are tied into the cord body by the special Firestone method of cord reinforcement.

**FIRESTONE NAME AND GUARANTEE**—Assures truck and bus owners greater safety, dependability and economy.

"The perash—desert witches!" yelled Toole.

Bannister heard the same blood-curdling cry but gave them a more prosaic interpretation.

"Witches!" he shouted back. "Sounds more like wild dogs to me."

But a more appalling quality permeated the medley that rose from the churning pits below them. It was as though a flight of screaming turban had escaped from torture, only to be dragged back again to their place of torment. And in it all a distinctly human note had become discernible.

Far beneath them the storm had roared past, close to the face of the desert. A fascination stronger than discretion, laid a maddening touch on Bannister's hand. He turned the plane and swept downward in a wide arc.

In the wake of that terrific wind the sand was settling back. Out of the yellow whirlwind their ears picked up the same eerie transported that had ascended through the vacuum funnel created by the tornado. In another five minutes the air had cleared entirely. Under the abrasive action of sand and wind, long ridges of red stone had been swept bare and polished like oyster-topped tables. With the light touch of a beetle the little craft taxied to a halt. Just in time to witness—far off—a desert tragedy.

Toole and Bannister leaped from the machine. Bully seemed to prefer the shelter and remained within. They were at an elevation of at least one hundred feet from the general level of the desert, their view encompassing an area bounded only by the horizon. Not a grain of sand was stirring in the still hot air, but the great dunes were billowing uneasily as they found new adjustments after the upheaval.

At a distance of less than half a mile they discerned a curious formation. Two high ridges of sand, running laterally and apparently drawn up to a tent-like acute angle by the suction of the wind, were gradually settling in a way as though pouring into some invisible mass of the desert. In the space between these deadly ridges, within the very raw itself, scores of huge, swaying things seemed to be intent upon climbing the sloping and ever-shifting walls—to escape threatened suffocation when the shifting mountainsides of sand filled the windward hollow.

Unmistakably, the objects were living creatures. Occasionally, one would find a firm foothold beneath the treacherous sand and free itself, showing a hulking body, only to be drawn back again as if by some pitiless, unseen hand. Then from the wretched victim of the shifting quicksands would issue a soul-wrenching wail of despair.

"Camels and boules and horses and men," observed Bannister grimly.

"May the Lord have mercy on 'em!" prayed Toole.

Whatever contempt they might

have had for the Abbe's warning against the perash this terrible tragedy of the desert had chastened them. With emotion strange to both, they gazed at the struggling, shrieking creatures, brought close to their eyes by powerful glasses. For another ten minutes they stood upon their own secure shelf of rock, silent, helpless and with eyes fastened upon that terrible spectacle.

The cries grew fainter. One by one, camels, horses, mules and men, were engulfed until at last a motionless yellow pall lay over them all. The desert had claimed its sacrifice; gorged, it had fallen asleep.

Toole had lowered his glasses and taken off his hat.

"Big Jeff's men," Bannister remarked finally.

The detective nodded soberly, uttered what sounded like a sigh, and said, putting on his hat: "Let's go!"

Neither had dreamed of such an end of Whipple's "mob." In that band of about three hundred there must have been some gallant souls. Many had been outcasts from their native countries, had fought in foreign legions, again becoming outcasts to take a last hazard with their lives. What urge had moved them? Perhaps they had met a fate fitting and merciful for their kind.

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## ICKES' ATTACK ON LONDON ANSWERED

CHICAGO, Aug. 5.—(AP)—Secretary Harold L. Ickes' radio speech last night criticizing Gov. Alf M. Landon brought two formal statements of reply from republican national headquarters.

Harrison E. Spangler, of Chairman John D. M. Hamilton's executive staff, made counter charges that there was a "matter bordering on a national scandal" in connection with the PWA which Secretary Ickes heads.

"Contractors, architects and material men," Spangler's statement asserted, "are being shaken down to pay for new deal propaganda... in the guise of PWA aid."

The republican spokesman declared: "This plan to smear Landon originated partly with Mr. Roosevelt himself and partly with two of his close advisors in New York who, but for their Roosevelt support, would certainly be classed

## VETERAN KILLED ON BONUS BOND TRIP

KLAMATH FALLS, Aug. 5.—(AP)—Damien Redmond, about 35, died at a hospital here this morning from injuries sustained last Monday night in an automobile accident at the Lost river curve near Merrill.

Redmond, on his way to Klamath Falls to cash his bonus bonds, was picked up on the highway by Clyde L. Hartshorn. He was fatally injured when Hartshorn's car collided with another at the curve.

The victim never regained consciousness, and it was not until today that his identity was established.

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4-Door Sedan... \$5.45 to \$5.95

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**LOW PRICED MEALS** Porter Service and Free Pillows in Coaches on all trains.

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For details consult Southern Pacific Agent or Write J. C. Conington, Assistant & P. Agent, P.O. Box 1000, Rock Block, Portland.

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This overnight trip brings you into Portland at 8:00 a.m. Above fares good in standard Pullmans, plus berth charge. Or ride in coaches at still lower fares.

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