

The WHITE DESERT

By Courtney Ryley Cooper

CHAPTER I.

It was early afternoon and down in the hollow which shielded the scrambling little town of Dominion the air was warm and lazy with the friendliness of day.

A long, sleek, yellow racer came to a stop beside the gas tank and wheezed its silence. A young man rose from his almost flat position in the low-slung driver's seat, stretched the long legs and turned upward toward the glaring white Mount Taliesen, the highest peak of the continental backbone, frowning in the coldness of snow that never departed. "Gas?"

"Yup." The young man stretched again. "Fill up the tank and better leave half a gallon out."

Young man was almost a boyishness, yet counterbalancing this was a boyishness of expression that almost approached somersense. The eyes were dark with something that approached sorrow, the lips had a tightness about them which gave evidence of the pressure of suffering, all forming an expression which seemed to come upon him unaware. But in a flash it was gone and boyish again, he had turned, laughing, to survey the gas tank.

"Barry Houston, huh? Must be a new make. I—"

"Camouflage," laughed the young man again. "That's my name."

"Oh, is it?" and the vihler chuckled with him. "You've got th' plate right where the name o' a car is plastered usually, and the plumb fool'd me. Where you headed?"

"Over Hazard."

"Ain't daft, are you?"

"I hope not. It's May, isn't it?"

"Look up there," The old man pointed to the spotches of white, thousands of feet above. "It may be spring down here, but it's January up there," only a mile or two over Hazard since November and they come through last week. Both of 'em came through here lookin' like teles o' a' swearin' t' beat four o' a kind."

A thrill shot through Barry Houston. His life had been that of the smooth spaces, of the easy ascent of well paved streets, of streets and comforts and of luxuries. The very raggedness of the thing before him lured him and drew him on.

"They've got me," came quietly. "I'm—going to make the try."

The gears meshed. A stream of smoke from the new oil spout for a second.

Then, as the machine started with the beginning of battle, the machine swept away toward the slight turn that indicated the scraggly end of the little town of Dominion, and the beginning of the first grade.

"A 6 per cent grade if it's an inch!" he mused. "And this is only the beginning."

He settled more firmly in his seat and gripped hard at the steering wheel. Gradually, the severity of the grade had increased to ten, to twelve and in short pitches to even eighteen and twenty per cent.

At a stop, while the r-s, hissing water splashed from the radiator cock, and the lifted hood gave the machine a chance to cool, before replacement came from the murky, discolored stream of melted snow water. Panting and leaning back from the altitude, Barry leaned against the machine for a moment, his hands touched his face and melted there—snow.

An hour and three more after that—a last final, clattering journey, and Barry leaped from the seat with something akin to enthusiasm.

The snow, the snow which sifted past the glare of his headlights, he could discern a sign which told him he had reached the summit, that he now stood at the literal top of the world. From now on he could progress with the knowledge that his engine at least need labor no longer. But the dangers? But the risks? That had only begun. The descent would be steep as the climb had just made.

Again he started, the brake bands squeaking and protesting, the machine sloughing dangerously as now and again its sheer weight forced it forward at dangerous speeds.

He gripped desperately for the emergency brake. For five minutes there had come the strong odor of burning rubber; the foot brake linings were gone; everything depended upon the emergency now! And almost with the first strain—

Careening, the car seemed to leap beneath him. The road was gone, the emergency had not even lasted half the first hill. Barry Houston was now a prison of speed—cramped in the seat of a runaway car, clutching tight at the wheel, leaning white, tense-faced out into the snow, as he struggled to negotiate the turns, to hold the great piece of runaway machinery to the road and check its speed from time to time in the snow banks.

One chance was left, and Barry took it—the "burring" of the gears in lieu of a brake. If the burned gears could only hold the car for a mile or so more—

But a sudden, snapping crackle ended his hopes. The gears had meshed, and meshing had broken. Again a wild, careening thing, the car was speeding down the steepest of grades like a bullet.

man thing determined upon self-destruction.

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