

L. RON HUBBARD



Man-Killers of the Air

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

A Dangerous Bet

LESS than a hundred years ago, a cannonball traveled about sixty miles an hour when it was going fast. Smoke Burnham, with his throttle a quarter back, was sliding down the sky at four times the rate of a cannonball. And he still found time to glance overboard at the ground—where people looked like pepper strewn on wrapping paper—and say with great bitterness, “Damn it! He’s done it again!”

The single-winged, stubby racing ship was mostly engine with fins attached. And yet it had two cockpits. It was all metal, and when the sun struck it, people had red spots before their eyes for hours after.

Smoke Burnham’s remarks referred to Alex Montague, the man who could sell the Brooklyn Bridge five times in one afternoon and still find enough leisure to promote a new flying field.

This test flight—a mere jaunt of a thousand miles—had been strictly on the QT four hours before, but now it looked as though the whole world had heard of it and had turned out to see Smoke Burnham land the new two-seater pursuit which Smoke’s plant had recently developed.

Smoke didn’t mind the crowd for the crowd’s sake. Smoke knew the value of publicity—Montague had taught him that. But Smoke did hate to be driven away from his own field.

After all, when people get tangled in prop and landing gear, it's liable to be embarrassing all the way around.

Umpteen hundred horses up front were snorting in mighty discord. The retracted landing wheels whistled shrilly as the air caught them in the process of being lowered. People stared worshipfully upward, for this was Smoke Burnham, *the* Smoke Burnham. Their ears would have burned had they heard what he called them.

At one time in his career, Smoke Burnham had hated to land on a crowded field because the people immediately rushed in and tore him apart. He had taken care of that now.

A velvety nose was peering out of the gunner's cockpit. Sleek dun-colored ears. Baleful yellow eyes which looked out at the cloudless sky and racing ground through a pair of specially tailored goggles.

This was Patty, the cheetah. An admirer Smoke had never seen had given him this hunting leopard straight from India. Smoke's friends had wondered what use a racing pilot might have for a cheetah. They left it to Montague to find out. Crowds weren't so eager when Patty purred softly and rubbed against Smoke's whipcords. There is something about a cheetah . . .

Smoke dived down at the field. His French cavalry glove came back on the stick. His grease-splattered helmet jutted over the side.

"Damn it!" he bellowed as he shot over the field. "Get off the runway!"

It is unlikely that they heard him, but the police knew

what he meant. In a moment the runway began to lighten in color, and when Smoke had spurred his charging mount around into the wind, he nosed down for a swift, clean landing.

As usual, they ran at him like so many potential assassins. Smoke hastily reached into the rear cockpit and hauled out Patty. A hundred-odd pounds of cheetah bounced lightly on the concrete, immediately brought to a halt by the leash.

Smiling with chapped lips, Smoke Burnham hopped down. Patty rubbed against him and the crowd halted a dozen feet back. They grinned and pointed, and told each other that this was Burnham, *the* Burnham, and that that was the Mystery Ship. Camera shutters rattled like machine-gun fire. Notebooks were waved. Smoke Burnham grinned, and Patty purred, and everyone appeared to be very happy.

And they were until Smoke spotted Paul Harrison Girard.

Smoke's grin faded a little and then came back, but his blue eyes were no longer smiling. His hard, wiry body was taut, and the hand on the cheetah's leash whitened along the knuckles.

He sauntered toward Girard, and Patty effectually cleared the way by smiling at one and all indiscriminately.

Smoke's face was mostly black, except where his goggles had ringed his eyes. His even teeth were in startling contrast to the rest of his face, and the parachute-silk scarf, though a little gray, served to set off the burnt-cork illusion which had been handed back from the flying heels of the umpteen hundred horses.

Alex Montague rushed out and pumped Smoke's hand with

great fervor. Alex had a large, kind face, topped by dignified gray hair. His sport-cut clothes were worn with the air of a cutaway.

“Great stuff, Smoke!” roared Alex. “Great stuff! You beat your own record with that ship—beat it both ends from the middle—and I want to be the first one to—”

“Can it,” said Smoke through a tight mouth. “They aren’t listening. Congratulate me for them later.”

“What’s the matter?” cried Alex. “Didn’t you beat—”

“Pipe down. There’s Girard.”

“Gir-Girard? Where?”

“Behind that last bunch on the apron. I guess we weren’t fast enough, Alex.”

“Oh, don’t take it to heart,” said Alex, in a more natural voice. “We’ve been sold out before. To hell with it, Smoke. You’re a hero right now. Make the best of it.”

“Go give them your line, Alex. I’m going to get this thing finished up right now and no later. I’m tired of playing with the fat shylock.”

Smoke, following the cheetah, cleared his path to the front of the concrete hangar which bore his name in gold letters across the doors. Letters six feet high. That had been Alex’s idea. Alex was always having ideas. Like that one about Girard. How Girard would give them backing and see them through. And now Girard—

“Hi, Smoke! Great going!”

“Attaboy, Smoke. We got it in the bag!”

“Look, there’s Smoke Burnham!”

Smoke gave everyone a big grin and went on toward Girard.

Girard was standing with both feet solidly planted, both hands shoved into the pockets of a pure camel's-hair overcoat. Girard's face looked as though someone had started to mold it from soggy putty and had then become bored with the job.

Girard was a big man—knew it, said it and acted it. He could afford to be a big man. He was one of the greatest newspaper publishers in the United States, one of the greatest exponents of that fourth stage of the newspaper, yellow journalism. He had once tipped a waiter a thousand-dollar bill, and the next day he had fired a legman for being twenty-five cents over on his swindle sheet.

Girard was surrounded by his own men, but one never saw those. They were dressed plainly, looked plain, were plain, and always nodded eagerly, "YES!"

"Well, well, well!" rumbled Girard. "That was some record, my boy, some record! Hey, you over there with the movie camera, want my picture shaking Burnham's hand?"

The movie man started to comply and then saw the look Smoke Burnham gave him. "No," said Smoke. "We aren't waving any flags. Not today. And I'm not shaking hands with you, Girard, any day!"

Girard was startled. "But, my boy—"

"Save it," said Smoke. "Let's get ahead with our business. You came up here to make me fork over the dough you lent me. And you've got the sheriff right there behind you, so don't deny it. You're foreclosing on Burnham Aeronautical Company, but you don't want to do it until the crowd goes."

Patty looked at Girard and licked her feline lips. Girard stared at both pilot and cheetah.

“Who put you wise?” he demanded.

“I did, mister. You haven’t got a lease on all the brains in this country. You want this new fight-plane so you can turn it over to the government.”

“But how—”

“I know what you’re up to. You’ve got an air defense campaign underway, Girard. You’re saying that the Japs are about to fly across San Francisco and wipe us out with bombers. And you’re saying via a hundred newspapers that we haven’t a single plane to withstand that offense.

“And, furthermore, you’ve challenged anyone to produce such a plane.”

“You’d better watch out!” cried Girard, as though he wielded a saber instead of a Malacca cane.

“And,” rapped Smoke, “you’re going to foreclose on me, take the plans of this ship, the ship itself, and turn it over to the Army. That’s patriotism! That’s honor! You jump your ad rates on the resulting circulation and clean up.”

Girard still waved the cane. He might have struck Smoke, because there were plenty of men behind Girard. But the cheetah was still licking her lips, and Smoke’s hand was loose on the leash.

Two fighters, identical with the one Smoke had just flown in, crouched in the hangar. Smoke pointed to them. “Those two ships are company property. The one I used today belongs to Melanie King. I gave her the bill of sale. Now go ahead and serve your papers.”

The sheriff, at Girard’s nod, stepped up, skirting Patty’s

striking range. Although Patty had never struck anyone, people thought she did, and that was just as good.

Smoke began to smile and then to grin. The effect through the grime was ghastly, but he meant it.

“If you’ll come inside,” said Smoke, “I’ll sign everything up and we’ll all go have some lunch.”

Girard’s face was puzzled. Smoke Burnham had more records than Girard had newspapers. A story about Smoke was worth a hundred-thousand circulation jump. But that was no sign Smoke was an open book. Warily, Girard stepped into the hangar in Smoke’s wake.

Smoke indicated some folding chairs at the back, “Sit yourself down, gentlemen. I haven’t any cigars, but I see you’ve brought your own.” He thrust a cigarette into his mouth at a climbing angle and lit up. Patty sat down in front of him, watching the curling blue wisps.

Girard, far from trusting Smoke, seated himself. It was all that he could do.

Smoke, still holding the burning match in spite of the mammoth sign: *No Smoking! Fire Hazard!* looked casually about him. Under the belly of the first pursuit ship there was a small puddle of gasoline, spilled at the last filling and not yet wholly evaporated.

Smoke flipped the burning match into the puddle.

A geyser of white flame shot up. A piece of cotton waste, soaked with oil, ignited with a crackling sound.

Girard jumped to his feet. “Fire! My God, *fire!*”

Smoke watched the flames engulf the shiny metal. A tongue

slapped out and sideswiped the other ship. The heat rose from seventy to two hundred in a space of seconds.

Girard's crowd charged toward the hangar's doors, shrieking. Patty bared her fangs and unsheathed her claws in fear. Acrid fumes leaped, black and greasy.

On the outside of the hangar the crowd surged, shouting advice, shouting prayers, shouting anything as long as they made noise.

Alex ran wildly about crying, "Anybody seen Burnham? Where's Smoke?"

Newspaper men were milling, bellowing, "Where's Girard? Mr. Girard's in there!"

The thickening smoke was heavy and hot, completely filling the hangar. It was thick enough to carve.

A staggering man came out of the flame-seared maw. He was lugging another man.

Alex cried, "It's Smoke!"

The reporters yelled, "There's Girard!"

Smoke, stumbling and coughing, dropped his burden and then fell flat on his face. With a glance, Alex saw that Smoke was still all in one piece and that Girard was breathing.

Alex suddenly confronted the reporters. "There you are, boys! Get those pictures! Get this story! There you are!"

"What happened?" demanded a pale-faced newshawk.

Alex waved his hands majestically. "Girard accidentally threw a lighted cigar into a gasoline can and then Smoke stayed behind, searching for him. Looking through all that flaming hell. Fumbling under the ships, around already burning chairs.



*A staggering man came out of the flame-seared marw.
He was lugging another man.*

He heard a sound like coughing and crept nearer, not letting himself retreat from the searing, scorching heat. And then he found Girard. He found Girard, gentlemen, at the risk of his own life! And there's Girard, safe and sound. But he would be but a blackened corpse if Smoke Burnham had not—"

Girard was sitting up. He saw the reporters running toward the phones. It was too late to stop them. And besides, circulation would soar instantly with those headlines. Money was in the making.

But that did not keep Girard from rolling closer to Smoke. The publisher's flame-stung face was the color of raw beef. His eyes were a sickly red.

"You win, Burnham. But I'll make you a bet. I'll bet this place rebuilt against that one last pursuit plane."

Smoke grinned and lit a cigarette, as though he had not had enough smoke as it was. Patty, licking scorched fur, watched him with adoring eyes.

"Okay," said Smoke. "What's the bet?"

"That you can't win my transcontinental derby next month."

Smoke nodded. "Do you recall the other contest before that?"

"Yes. You'll have to win that before you can get into the derby."

"Make it a place twice as big as this and you're on."

Girard smiled, circulation figures dancing before his eyes.

"All right, Burnham. We'll have that put on paper."