

# WATCH the CURVES



BY RICHARD HOFFMANN  
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## SYNOPSIS

Following his father's bitter criticism of his idle life, and the notification that he need not expect any immediate financial assistance, Hal Ireland, only son of a wealthy banker, finds himself practically without funds but with the promise of a situation in San Francisco, which city he must reach, from New York, within a definite time limit. He takes passage with a cross-country auto party on a "share expense" basis. Four of his companions excite his interest: a young, attractive girl, Barry Trafford; middle-aged Giles Kerrigan; Sister Anastasia, a nun; and a lively, dislike, Martin Crack. Barry's reticence annoys him. In Kerrigan he finds a fellow man-of-the-world, to whom he takes at once. Hal is unable to shake off a feeling of uneasiness. He distrusts Crack, but finds his intimacy with Kerrigan ripening, and he makes a little progress with Barry.

## CHAPTER III

### Wednesday.

The morning light looked washed, the air carried the semblance of refreshment from the night, and the rich smell of the exhaust seemed hopeful as they started off, aiming for breakfast at some near town. Miller seemed to think nothing had changed since yesterday, for, after he had lashed the luggage under the tarpaulin behind, he climbed into the driver's place. "Not today," Hal said to him. "Better try your invention, in back."

Hal looked over at Kerrigan, whose eyes were smiling as he peeled a peach with a large knife. The knife caught Hal's eye; the single, tapering, four-inch blade was set to a handle of natural stag-horn, also tapering, with a ring at the thick end.

"Nice knife," he said. "French," said Kerrigan, regarding it. "Laborers use 'em to cut their bread at lunch and each other Saturday nights."

"Is that what you'll use—when you round out your collection?" Kerrigan gave an innocent, generous smile. "Might," he said. He finished his neat peeling of the peach and held it over the wheel where Hal could see it. "Manage that?" "Oh, thanks," said Hal, and took it. The car, with its age, ailments, and unnatural load, was cranky, and Hal guessed that it might be a good thing that the driver's rear-view mirror didn't give him Barry's face to look at. Instead, it showed Sister Anastasia's tranquil and immaculate, below the oblong of the back window. And when Hal glanced up, out of an habitual alertness for motor cycle police, he saw the nun's head occasionally turned toward Barry, her lips moving, her expression one of comfort, of trust, of intimacy almost. He strained his ears for a hint of what they might be talking about, but their murmurs were unintelligible among the dry and labored songs of the car's antiquity.

Hal remembered yesterday's sense of portent, of the shadow of something impending—like a presence with them. It had been odd, almost vivid, and he had been half waiting for it to come again. If it came, and he could see Sister Anastasia look like that—her serenity made deep, limpid, cool round the traces of an unforgetting sadness near her eyes—the feeling wouldn't make him uneasy again. And it might not come. Purged of his own confusion of spirit, with Miller's outrageousness on the road and his sleepy thievishy disarmed, the atmosphere was healthier. He must get Kerrigan at lunch time and decide what was best to do about Miller in Detroit; turn him off loose, try to get him blacklisted with the agencies, if they bothered with blacklists, or let the police have a go at him. The man oughtn't to be at large, and yet it might . . .

"Say," came Crack's indolent, confederate murmur close to Hal's ear; "thought any 'bout what you'll do to this bird Miller?"

Hal snatched a bite of breakfast and, to save time, went off to have the car sustained with water, gas, and oil, while the others either joined or watched the Pulsifers celebrate the earnest ritual of eating. Barry's eyes were soberly, internally thoughtful again; and the transient civility that had stood in them for a moment when Hal met her look was no recognition of their advance of the night before. When he came back to the breakfast place, she gave him her polite recognition and would have turned away if he hadn't held her eyes with the steady, curious twinkling of his.

cleanly traced, barely curved—and prompted him. "What?" "Must you be so solemn?" he said. "You look as if you couldn't remember whether you'd turned off the gas at home."

She smiled without special joy. "The morning's always solemn," she said. "Everything's so clear. In the morning you know it's silly to be afraid of the dark, but you know that when the dark comes you'll be afraid again."

"Are you afraid of the dark?" She shook her head a little. "Not in the morning," she said. "Kerrigan wants a paper. If I find a place open, do you want one?" Not a personal favor.

Hal bowed with a smile as politely reticent as hers. "Love it," he said.

She left him, and Hal rummaged in the car for a tire gauge. Then Miller came out, blinking in the sun. "Got a tire gauge?" Hal said. "Sure," said Miller.

"Throw it on all around and see what we've got, will you?" Mrs. Pulsifer came through the door then, followed by Sister Anastasia and Crack. Miller half turned his grin toward them, and said with an air of sleepy cleverness: "You're drivin'. Why'n't you do it?"

Hal looked up smartly; at one Miller's beary grin was less certain of itself. Was the man possessed of some animal loathsomeness that could affect others? He commanded Miller's flimsy frontistry with his eyes, conscious that the golf ball in Crack's lazy hand had stopped joggling, as if sharing its master's curiosity to see what Hal would do.

"Check the tires," said Hal quietly. As he watched Miller go for the gauge, Hal's hands hung clear of his body, carefully, as if he had been handling sewage.

So this day too was started with something wrong, something almost stealthily in it—something besides the infirmities of the car and the heat that grew to a slow embrace of everything in the hazy, still landscape. To get to Detroit quickly, to be quit of Miller and the car—that was the focus of urgency.

The engine was little by little making up its mind to quit, discouraged by the brevity of easier gradients and cowed by a team of three busses that charged down—a fierce happiness in their flapping tarpaulins—from the Alleghany summits. "This is bad enough," said Kerrigan. "But think of hopping the Atlantic. Listening for the horses to cool off every second for thirty hours would harden all my arteries, give me a million dollars' worth of persecution complex." And over his shoulder he asked Miller, "What's the matter with this studio-number of yours, Robin Hood?"

"Little warm," said Miller, like a doped horse-trader. "How far do you reckon it to Detroit?" "There was a sort of lazy triumph in Crack's saying, as if he had a map and a speedometer in his lap: "Between three and three fifty. 'At'll make it a long trip for today."

"We're going to do it," said Hal, "if we have to trade this barge for bicycles."

It rained as they dipped down the last rolling land of Pennsylvania to the straight roads of Ohio. For two miles a short passenger train hurried darkly along the straight track that converged upon the straight road. Kerrigan musing on it, Hal glanced at him and at it with a pleasant sense of intimacy deepening between them. Then the locomotive cried exasperation at the crossing.

"Train comin'," Pulsifer murmured. Miller chuckled. "I seen that quite a ways back," he said.

Then they came to Akron, a spread of buildings that grew irregularly higher toward a nubbin of the tallest, in the modern style. Mrs. Pulsifer knew it was Akron by the smell of rubber. The city had lunch places, and that was important. It was near three o'clock. Miller frankly distrusted the "Tea Shoppe" that had caught Mrs. Pulsifer's bright and hungry eye, and he wouldn't go in. But the lady made it hard for the others—impossible for John—not to follow her. The dog had dragged Barry down the street on a good scent, and Hal and Kerrigan let the others fill one table, avoiding the solicitation of Crack's lazily hopeful look. "You and the princess aren't still walking round each other stiff-legged, are you?" said Kerrigan.

watching the friendly brown eyes quizzically. "Why?" "Oh, I haven't got any Kreuger blood in me," said Kerrigan quickly. "I just wondered if we could begin having a happy time—the three of us—or whether I had to be a referee."

"I think she's a grand girl," said Hal calmly. "You'll forgive my asking what Kreuger blood's got to do with it." "Kreuger made matches once along with a Mr. Toll," said Kerrigan.

Hal laughed and started to say something, but then Barry came in to them. Her unstudied smile of pleasure at having been waited for barely included Hal in its beginning, and the end of it, with a leered drooping of the eyelids, was all for Kerrigan. And that piqued Hal smartly, even while he pretended to chuckle to himself.

I know a weakness in you, beautiful, and I'm still going to use it. But he found himself watching her carefully, alertly, as if he might miss something pleasant. "First," said Kerrigan, when they'd sat down, "we ought to be sociable."

Barry glanced up from her menu in innocent inquiry. "I thought we were," she said; "aren't we?" "All right, we are," said Kerrigan. "You admit it. Then let us bare our hearts to each other. Here's what I thought—just for an awfully good romp. Each of us gives a short biography of him, or her, self, you see—like the suburban obituaries in the city paper."

"Jolly," said Hal. "Well, we don't have to die afterwards—unless we want to," Kerrigan went on. "And it's no fair dying either till each of the others asks one question. We draw lots to see who starts."



He broke matches to different lengths, offered them in his fist, the her. Her look at Kerrigan was unworried, but faintly reticent. And Hal was as intent for the parting of her full lips as if she were going to tell his fortune. Then in quiet leisure she said:

"I'm twenty-three. I was born in Massachusetts, in Deerfield. Both my parents are dead. I finished high school and was secretary to a country lawyer for two years. I'd always wanted to go on the stage, so when I—when things changed, when my father died, I got a job in stock. I had three years of that round the East, without getting to Broadway; and now I'm going to try to get into pictures." She looked down thoughtfully, perhaps relieved, at the knife in her hand to show she had finished. "Thanks for listenin'," she added, with a brighter glance at Kerrigan. "You get questions, too."

"What do you like best—to do?" said Kerrigan at once. "Read," she said. "You've read a lot?" he said. She smiled easily. "I learned to read when I was six, and I've read ever since. I've learned darn near everything I know from reading—what I like, what I don't like, what I—what I want. I copied characters in books until one day I found I didn't have any idea who I really was at all. And that frightened me a little."

Lunch came then, and she seemed to stomp sooner that she had at first intended. Hal hoped the obituaries would be ended too—including his question to Barry. He couldn't ask her any of the things he found he really wanted to know; and such passable questions as he thought of sounded silly. But when the dishes were settled and the feed-tea and coffee situation straightened out, Kerrigan looked at him and said, "Now your question."

Barry looked up at Hal with a frank, quiet confidence that gave him unexpected pleasure. "If you—when you make good in the movies, and have lots of money," he said, "what will you do?"

Her eyes were faintly surprised by interest and they stayed on his, appraising the picture he'd provoked for her. "If I hadn't thought," she said. "If—I should arrive. . . ." That picture was dubious, but the light lingered gently in her eyes, neither reckless with hope nor intimidated by disappointment. "If I should arrive and they plugged me and finished me, I'd go to England—France, to see it, to see if it's the place I've thought it might be. I'd live there for a while, and then . . . I don't know."

Her lighted eyes came back slowly and without bitterness to the fragile, cheap tearoom. Hal wondered if the loneliness in her look was accidental; he felt that if she'd been aware of it, she wouldn't have let it appear. "Now it's your turn," she said to him. "I'll tell you," said Hal. "I'm twenty-six. I was born in New York, but if I had it to do over again, I wouldn't be born there; I'd only go there when I felt like it. I went to school and college in New England, and then was sent abroad—to decide what I'd do. I nearly decided on a career of just being abroad, but one dark, rainy morning I was carrying a sort of headache past a steamship office, when I suddenly went in and bought a steerage ticket home. I was a runner in Wall Street for a while. Then I got a chance at a job about three thousand miles away from the Stock Exchange, and took it. That's where I'm going now—San Francisco."

She watched him a second longer, the gentleness draining reluctantly from her eyes. Then for the first time since they'd sat down she turned to Hal, incuriously, and said, "You get one."

"The one time you were fired—" Hal began, watching to be sure it was all right. Kerrigan's look started a pleased dancing. "Why were you?" Hal said.

"Well, it's a long story—a long story," said Kerrigan. "Then all the better," said Barry, low and comfortable. "Come on—you started this."

"Well, my friends, it seems I have a half-brother," said Kerrigan, still tasting the cheerful reminiscence; "older—respectable, systematic as a ball team, steady, worthy, ambitious."

"I used to displease him very much in youth," Kerrigan went on. "So we didn't get along. He gave up the job of reforming me—and went into a bank and did well. Ten years passed. I had a job on a paper in Montana. My half-brother's bank sent him out to look at some copper mines that were in trouble and I was s'posed to get an interview. I knew the situation at the mines, and I was pretty sure the situation in my brother's head hadn't changed much in ten years. So instead of listening to what he thought he ought to think about it and getting ten years' accumulated Y. M. C. A. on the side, I smacked out a couple of columns of what I thought he ought to think and went off to sit up with a sick friend."

"My brother made his tail pretty big when he saw the interview, but it was bigger when he found out who wrote it. And before I could get to the office, I was fired. It was a dirty trick on him. But it made a new man of me. That was before I got used to having things make new men of me all the time."

Barry watched him for a moment of confidential pleasure, smiling, and then said, "I like that." And Hal suspected that if the tough cheeks hadn't been so thickly peopled with the little red veins, Kerrigan might have blushed.

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She raised her eyebrows—simple,

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