



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 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 are a young, attractive girl, Barry Trafford; middle-aged Giles Kerrigan; Sister Anastasia, a nun; and an individual who he instinctively dislikes, Martin Crack. Barry's reticence annoys him. To Kerrigan he takes at once. Hal distrusts Crack, but his intimacy with Kerrigan ripens, and he makes a little progress with Barry. Exchanging reminiscences, she learns Hal is the son of the wealthy Frederick Ireland. Through a misunderstanding, that night, Hal is directed to Barry's room, instead of his own. Propinquity seems to soften Barry's apparent unfriendliness, and they exchange kisses. The following day Hal tells Barry he loves her. She only answers that she mustn't love him, without giving any reason.

CHAPTER V—Continued

"You don't have to tell me anything," said Hal, shocked by the quiet decision that was trying to rob him of this time he had so surely looked to: "all you have to do is listen to me, to the things I must tell you. You can rest, listening to them—just up there, a little way, by the river. We'll sit against a tree, and when you want me to stop, I'll stop and you can sleep on my shoulder. I promise, if you tell me to, I won't speak again—not a word, not even what keeps on running and trembling in all my nerves, muscles, heart, tongue, everything: I love you. I love you so that—"

"Hal, don't, oh, don't, please, Hal darling." Her free hand gripped his arm hard, and he couldn't tell whether it shook to enforce what she said or whether the desperation that shivered under her voice was in her body, too.

"Barry," said Hal in severe quiet. "You've got to listen. Why do you frighten me?—before you've let me say, before—"

Her exclamation was a whimper of fear, and she turned her frantic head toward the cabin. "Sister Anastasia!"

The door opened on the neat, lighted room of raw boards, with the nun's silhouette in the oblong. "Yes, sweet?" she said, her modest voice tranquil and soothing.

"Sister, I just wanted to know you were there. I'm coming now. Please wait for me." She bowed her head as if to see more clearly the joining of their hands in the dimness. "Good night, my darling," she said hurriedly. "I'm a coward—a coward, and I'm so sorry."

She had her hand away from him, and quickly she was at the nun's side in the lighted doorway.

"I'll bet you," said Kerrigan, and the smoking cigarette end in the corner of his mouth looked short enough to burn him. "I'll bet you if we went in to town we could find a something would knock us out from under our hats."

"I'll bet you couldn't," said Hal listlessly, the echo of Raspuntin's long droning in his ears again. "I'll bet you two somethings we couldn't."

"Sir, a wager," said Kerrigan. "Do we ride or walk?"

"Walk," said Hal. "It's not far." In spite of the fact that he had no use for it, he felt the soft, impermanent refreshment under the stars. It was to him as if, out of a world murmurous with simple expectancy and untangled pleasure in the hushed resting of the night, he were singled out for traffic with deviousness and complication. Put into plain order of words, it was all so straightforward: he loved Barry; she indicated by every look, every gesture, every shading of her low voice that she was, at the least, ready to love him. So there they were—or should be. If she wasn't so sure of herself, she could tell him so; if there was a more definite barrier against her coming to him, it could be spoken, faced, and—if not demolished—then circumvented. That was so simple. Barry was candid of nature, as honorable as her golden head, her lithe body, were lovely; yet she ran from him, left him to a darkened, indefinable complexity in which he felt the restive nearness of fear and remembered the presence of something impending, something that seemed to prowl in stealth out of the future, vanish into it again when he looked warily to see its shape.

Thank heaven for Kerrigan—good Kerrigan. Hal had started out with him for the purpose of getting a

stiff, resentful drink and venting his beleaguered gloom on whatever his companion chose to talk about. But just in walking beside him, Kerrigan's air of unacquisitive well-being, of confidence in the propriety to his soul of anything that might happen, brought Hal's hopes a little away from the dominion of bafflement and left his uneasy brooding to wait.

They went up the street. Down a half-respectable alley with a wrecking car and some stacks of old tires in it, they came to a door that had "Office" printed on the dark glass; and Kerrigan knocked briskly. A crack opened, revealing bright light on unstirred layers of tobacco smoke beyond a screen, and a dim strip of face that held one steady eye.

"Pete here?" said Kerrigan. "No."

"Like to see where he works," said Kerrigan.

"He don't work nights."

"Frisky sent us. I've got his penny."

The strip of face vanished and the door swung wider.

They sat down at a table, and a dark, competent young man waited without speaking. Kerrigan turned to him pleasantly. "What's the bourbon situation?" he said. There was no particular in which you could have said the young man's expression yielded to Kerrigan's friendly ease, yet it did change; and he said, "We got some stuff here in Kentucky bottles, but you wouldn't call it bourbon."

Kerrigan looked at Hal. "Rye, then?" he said.

"Fine," said Hal.

Kerrigan looked up and said, "Rye."

The young man stood there watching Kerrigan steadily; he said, "Want some bourbon?"

"Bourbon," said Kerrigan, with just the right mixture of interest and incredulity.

"Half a minute," the young man said crisply and disappeared through a door beside the bar.

"Now there you are," said Hal sincerely. "If I lived to be a hundred, I'd never have the gift. Here it is fifteen minutes after you decide you want a drink in a strange town, and you not only get it, but get something special, almost without asking for it. I need lessons."

The young man came back with a veteran bottle, three-quarters full. Kerrigan read the stained label reverently while they waited for glasses and water. It was bourbon, and not of this decade either; and even before they tasted it they had tacitly acknowledged that this time was ripe for something more than a nightcap. Kerrigan hooked a chair toward him with his toe and swung his feet up on it before he said, on a relaxed key, "It's a good trip; and there's more of it coming to us yet."

"Hope not more of it only," said Hal.

"There's a toast no bourbon's too good for," Kerrigan said quickly, almost as if there were something a little foolish about saying it. "A good trip," he went on, "in spite of something funny, something queer going on that—"

He stopped as Hal's look promptly sharpened. "Maybe you know all about it," he said.

"I don't know a thing about it," said Hal, "but every so often it gives me a scunner, makes me feel something might be going to happen."

"Y'know," Kerrigan began, watching the young bartender pass to answer a knock at the door, "we had gifts once, a couple of ten-thousand years ago, when we were roaring around Middle Europe in bearskins, looking out for ourselves and making darn few mistakes—we had gifts then that have got good and rusty since. Sometimes we get some use out of 'em—in hunches, intuitions; sometimes one of those rusty gadgets will get contact—try to do its job—and our civilized, so-called minds can't make out what that bumping is in the cellar; it makes us uncomfortable. If you could harness that, ever without understanding it—"

The bartender came to their table and leaned his hands on it, looking down at its ring-stained surface. "There's somebody wants in," he said. "Says he knows you two." He looked at Kerrigan.

Kerrigan glanced at Hal in dubious expectancy, then up at the young man again. "Don't know anybody here," he said, giving his head a shake that was not quite final. "No. Tell him he's made a mistake; or—well, I'll look at him." He dropped his feet and heaved himself up reluctantly.

Just talking about it had brought

that unsubstantial whisper of premonition somewhere near again; Hal cursed it, and the interruption that left them there alone with it.

Behind the screen the doorlatch clicked and there was a moment of silence. Then without surprise or pleasure, Kerrigan's voice said, "Why, hello there, Splash"; and he came back into the room looking gloomily thoughtful. Martin Crack ambled after him, his smooth-skinned face under tidy hair barely stirred by the slight unassuming smile.

"Sit down, sit down," Kerrigan grumbled at him.

Crack's light-blue eyes sought Hal's—hopeful, it might have seemed, of some sign of pleasure, though not counting on it. Hal wondered again why, under their lazy hopelessness, the eyes should seem to know something that gave them faintly mischievous amusement, seemed also to weigh the possibility of Hal's knowing what it was. "Hi, there," said Hal, nodding; there was always something stopped his being quite civil to this quiet, narrow little fella.

"Happened to see you come down here," Crack said, addressing himself to Hal without hurry, "and thought you wouldn't care if I came." He paused, as if on the chance Hal would say it was all right. Then he turned to Kerrigan, less amiably. "After you're through this round, I'll buy one."

"Nice of you," said Kerrigan, "but we've got this bottle between us. Welcome to help yourself."

"Oh," said Crack. "Well, thanks. Maybe just a little one."

And here it was spoiled between Hal and Kerrigan: Hal's rising heart turned dully toward bottom again, toward the fretful confusions that hedged and tripped and badgered his longing for Barry and the wonder of her straight, golden loveliness. He could have escaped through Kerrigan for the time; but now there was only the bourbon, and he knew beforehand it wouldn't be any good to him.

They went back, with a pretense of relish, to items in the day's journey. Crack sat unobtrusively enough, sipping his drink as if it were some not unpalatable medicine, half attentive to what was

blue of his eyes. "No," he said quickly, down at his golf-ball, "I didn't know it."

"Must have been a grand guy to get himself jalled in New York," Hal said to Kerrigan.

"Just a big crime-baby," said Kerrigan in quiet pre-occupation.

Crack's quiet persistence—instantiated even when he was silent—recognized no finality at the table. In a moment, "Say," he said to Hal, "it'd be fun to lay over more'n one night in some of these towns—to get acquainted. Comin' up the road tonight, it looked like there was talent here."

"Guess you could find any amount of it here or anywhere else," said Hal tastelessly, "if you felt like it."

Crack's immature, faintly smiling lips were undecided between embarrassment and assurance. He had the air of making remarks not so much for the direct reply as for the indirect reaction. "You—" he said insecurely, hopefully, "it don't seem like you felt like it very much."

Hal gave him an honest, impersonal look and said flatly, "I don't." Even as he turned to Kerrigan, he knew Crack's speculation was still lazily upon him. But then Kerrigan's expression was different; he was watching Crack with a severe vigilance that seemed outright inimical. Hal looked back quickly, to see what it was; the uncertain smile hadn't altered much; there was only his reticent mischief in it again for his saying, "I guess maybe you got other things on your mind."

Hal barely heard the remark. "Nothing on my mind," he said, "except to make five hundred miles tomorrow." He glanced at his watch.

"Late, Colonel," he added to Kerrigan. Kerrigan was still watching Crack as if he'd seen him tuck an ace up his sleeve.

"You don't think maybe—" Crack began with diffident care: "you don't think maybe you'd feel different if they wasn't somebody that's—"

"Button it up, slipstream," said Kerrigan.

"What?" said Crack, startled.

"I know what you're going to say," said Kerrigan quietly; "you button it."

Crack closed his fist loosely round the golf-ball, flushed again, swayed slowly, and blinked once or twice as if his eyes stung. "I wasn't talking to you," he said, his voice cracking once, warmed out of shiftlessness. "You might's well keep out of my business."

"If it was your business," said Kerrigan, his voice firm and too quiet, "I'd keep out of it surely. . . Plug your exhaust, splash, hear!"

Moisture appeared round the new intensity of Crack's eyes, and blushing besieged the roots of his straight, mouse-colored hair.

"Keep out of," he suddenly recited on a warning rise of tone. "Keep out of my business, you dang old drunk."

Hal, starting to his feet, had one astonished glimpse of Kerrigan's face—older, less ruddy, gravely compliant, essentially inattentive to Crack's venom. Hal's chair bouncing over backward made Crack whip round and rise all in one startled motion, as if he had forgotten Hal was there. He was stumbling away sideways before he'd well caught his balance, his golf-ball on the jump over the floor, as Hal went for him. Then the feel of his throat was between Hal's thumbs, fingers overlapped at the back, and it was the best thing he ever remembered having in his hands. His teeth tried to push one another back into their aching roots for that moment of fine squeezing. Somebody careened hard against him from the side and an arm, like the loop of a jerked hawser at his midriff, swung him away, ripping off his hold. The dark, certain young man from behind the bar stood close beside him, watching him pant through his open mouth as if he'd had fifteen minutes' hard wrestling.

"Listen, friend," said the young bartender, quiet, unsolicitous, unresentful; "kill him outside, will you?"

Hal, looking at him, grew steady at once, without surrendering a single good fragment of his hate. The young man's hand was spread on Hal's moving chest.

"Colonel," said Hal in smoldering steadiness, "if it'll do your experience-museum any good to watch me, I'll be glad to kill him."

"Brother, listen," the young man went on surely, "we got a little business here, see? And it won't help it none to have bodies on the premises. I want you to kill him all right, if you want; but some place else, friend, hey? Some place else."

"All right," said Hal. "Let me talk to him."

The bartender's hand came down, and Hal walked toward Crack. "You'll apologize," he said.

He heard Kerrigan breathing beside him; he was sorry to make him stand listening to this.

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