

WATCH the CURVES



BY RICHARD HOFFMANN
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THE STORY FROM THE OPENING CHAPTER

Following his father's criticism of his idle life, and the notification that he need not expect any immediate financial assistance, Hal Ireland, 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 at once. 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 whom he instinctively dislikes, Martin Crack. Barry's reticence annoys him. To Kerrigan he takes at once, 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. Proximity seems to soften Barry's apparent unfriendliness, and they exchange kisses. The following day Hal tells her he loves her. She answers that she mustn't love him, without giving any reason. Crack brutally insults Kerrigan. Hal forces him to apologize abjectly, and his feeling of enmity and disgust for Crack is intensified.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

"Then one day her father told her that the man had asked his consent to their marriage—the girl's and the lodger's. Her father had given it. He treated it so much as an ordinary matter that, even without warning, the girl had no real feeling about it one way or the other. And her father wanted it. So they were married, quietly, right away, she being just under seventeen and her husband a little past thirty. For more than a year there was hardly any difference in her life; she gave up her beads, counted her husband's laundry and sewed on his buttons as she did for her father. It was like a sort of dream—not happy, not unhappy—that doesn't seem worth breaking down because you know it is a dream and you'll wake up soon.

"Then her father was taken ill—very ill—so that the doctor told her she must think of his dying. She couldn't—not possibly—it filled her with such panic. It filled her so dreadfully, so desperately, that she never wondered what would happen between her and her—husband. One night her father called her to him; he asked her to promise that she would stick to her husband no matter what happened, do what he wanted her to do, no matter what it was, never leave him nor disobey him, for ten years. She promised; and then in his weakness and fever her father forgot about it and begged her to promise all over again. It was so terribly important to him—really terribly—terror mixed up in it. And while she stayed watching him after she'd promised, her father died."

A dog barked in the still, hot town and the dark, sleeping silence of the plains lay out and away before them forever under the starless black of the sky.

"Later," said Barry quietly, "when she began to believe that it had happened, she told her husband she would try to love him, if he would wait—try to love him for the friendship and trust her father must have had for him, to make her promise that. Her husband laughed at her as if she were a fool; he said, 'He made you promise that because he wanted to keep his respectability in back with him, and I can have it back whenever I like.' He showed her a paper, a sort of receipt that was practically a confession of something her father had done before he'd come here, in another bank—an acknowledgment that her husband had covered it up for him.

"That was four years ago. Her contract still has six years to run, and what she'll be when it ends—Her husband's plans are definite enough—to make money for him, and power for him, in the ways he finds. The four years have been mostly a sort of schooling for that, with a few little—troups."

She paused only an instant. "I'd like to help her, but there's no way, you see. Disillusion at nineteen doesn't seem to drown nineteen years of love and reverence, and a—superstition about promises, about a sort of honor even in dishonor."

The black spread of darkness before them was oppressive, stealthy in oppression, and Hal tightened his arms to make sure she was still there against him. He had shut the meanings of the story out of his mind, but he shouldn't have let even the words come in—the deliberate, simple words that softly infected his unacknowledged fears. Now he must say what would slip the secreted leashes on their going-on together, over the near, elusive threshold of enchantment. Then Barry said steadily, "That's the story, Hal. What do you think?"

"It's improbable," said Hal at once, "and banal and wickedly irrelevant to what my heart and the whole world is full of. Barry—"

ed moment, was a single surging of life. Then her lips evaded him, her cheek pressed hard against his, and he heard her whispering.

"You see, I'm not strong enough, brave enough to tell you you aren't the person with whom I want to spend the rest of my life, anyway, anyhow—that you won't always be the only person, no matter what can happen in this whole wide green world, or in heaven, or in hell. My own darling, I love you. That's all there is. To say I love you most or best or dearest makes the word cheap, and it can never be cheap again. I can never use it again—except for you. I love you, and I haven't been strong or honest or brave for you. O G—d," she said in a final cry, "perhaps I'm glad I haven't been."

With sudden, frantic strength, she tore herself out of his arms and was gone from him, into the waiting darkness.

CHAPTER VII

Sunday.

IT WAS only quarter to six, but Sister Anastasia was waiting for Hal at the head of the stairs, the serenity of her cool, close-framed face concerned with sorrow as she watched him.

"She has told you," Hal said quietly when he came to her. Sister Anastasia bowed her head a little and whispered, "Yes." "And what do you think?" The nun looked up at him as if Hal reminded her of some one only a little forgotten after a long time, "I cannot tell myself what I think," she said. "But I feel—feel very sawrl."

Hal glanced down the stairs into the deserted lobby, before he said: "Sister, she must tell me where I can find this—husband, and I must see him. I can buy him, or—I can—but I needn't tell you that. I can buy him. He is for sale."

"She will not tell you," said Sister Anastasia, saddened by her helplessness. "She would not tell me. All she will say is that he is not waiting for her in California."

"I shall find him," said Hal. "She asked me to ask a favor of you," said the nun, as if she hadn't heard him, and Hal drew an uncomfortable breath. "I think you will do it for her. She did not sleep last night."

"I will do anything in the world for her," said Hal, "except one thing."

"It is not the one thing," said Sister Anastasia. "It is only that you will for today—for twenty-four hours—not speak of your love, nor ask her to speak of hers. She must rest—inside she must rest, to find where she is, now that you are together. She is nearer to—despair than—than she should be. She is beautiful in her spirit; she must not be driven closer to—"

Hal gave her a quick, acute glance and saw that she believed what she had started to say. He looked down the stairs again, the sleeping quiet of the shabby hotel grown subtly perilous; then he returned his look to the nun's and said, "I promise."

head high, the thick bush of half-curls touching her smooth, faintly dipped cheeks. He stopped before her, met her brief acknowledgment of intimacy with conscious sedateness.

"You see, don't you?" she said, as if she had been explaining it to him. "Los Angeles will be the end of everything. There's a little time of beauty left. We shouldn't waste it in making ourselves miserable over what we can't have."

His gray eyes stayed out of reach of her appeal. "Barry," he said steadily, "there's nothing we can't have."

Kerrigan kept them waiting a little this morning. Barry took her old place in the tonneau, and Hal played a stalking game with Crack round the car, in the sweetish pungency of the waked exhaust. Crack, he felt, was edging up to hint a desire to ride in the front seat; and Crack, sitting beside him, drowsily seeming to follow his impossible groping for actuality in the fiction of Barry's marriage—the prospect of it made Hal flinch and shudder. Then without chagrin, Crack surrendered to Hal's casual keeping the car between them, bounced his golf-bag once on the pavement, and climbed into the tonneau. Then Kerrigan came.

"And how are you, colonel?" Hal asked as they started. "Like the mouth of a factory chimney," said Kerrigan, scrubbing the red filigree of his tough cheeks and blinking cheerful appraisal of the morning. "How's that, Mr. Kerrigan?" the young man asked, eager for a fresh token of his kindly old friend's wit. "Why bless you, said dear Mr. Kerrigan, radiating goodwill toward all, 'top-hole is the answer: what else? And with that gay quip and a gleam of benign mischief in his nice old eyes, he went off—lippy loppity—in the direction of Mr. MacGregor's carrot patch."

It was somewhere east of Cheyenne that Hal felt a silent, unseen magic putting more momentous dif-



"She is Beautiful in Her Spirit; She Must Not Be Driven Closer to—"

ference under the sky; and accidentally he glanced up—above the haze of the horizon—and saw the source of it: dim, sloped patches of white high on the far peaks of a mountain range.

At the filling station where they stopped in Cheyenne, Kerrigan said: "What I want to arrange some day is this; a personal archangel who'll zoom down to you every so often when you're in a new town, or an old one you like, and say to you: 'Baby, you need a tonic; here you are in Cheyenne; I can't help that, but if you'll pick any day of its past that you'd like to see, I'll get you a ringside seat right in it.'"

"Know any archangels?" said Hal. "What would you pick here?" "Ever hear of the Gold Room?" "No, what was that?" "Jim Allen's Place," said Kerrigan, almost wistfully: "the big hdy-ho establishment out here in the days when you had to know your way around to support life. I'd want to be around there the day the first U. P. train rolled into town back in '67. Think of the time all the gals and the guys must have had that day, Mr. Ireland; and think of the gals and guys they must have been that had the time."

"You've got something there," said Hal, watching the gusto which Kerrigan's eyes made authentic and infectious. "Gold Room itself's torn down by now, I s'pose."

A hollow click sounded on the pavement behind and Hal had to keep himself from turning too smartly. Crack stood there holding the little ball where he had caught it, his lips were in their slight smile, his eyes showed Hal their drowsy mischief.

"Everything's tight and smooth, 'ey?" he said, as if he knew Hal thought so, but wanted to commit him to it. "Far's I know," said Hal. "I wouldn't be good to get stuck out there where we're goin'," Crack said. "Hadh't really planned to get stuck anywhere," said Hal.

Crack flushed a very little, but his lazy eyes still smiled as he bounced the ball again. Then the others came, and Hal tried to rout the discomfort under his skin by a

look at Barry's fresh, unconscious bravery of carriage. She was there, and real; the slick of gold under her hat, the color touched to her smooth cheeks, the clear, young texture of her throat in the white-framed opening. It was impossible to conceive of her—of that man; yet under the habitual perceptions and responses that still commanded Hal's behavior, it was impossible not to try to conceive of him.

They were in Rawlins for a late lunch, with a sort of awed fatigue upon them all at the thought of having covered three hundred and fifty miles since getting up.

"When do you think we might come to Los Angeles?" Sister Anastasia asked Hal; she looked down shyly, sorry to have put so bothersome a question. "Peraps you cannot say. But there is some one waiting for me in Santa Barbara; and if you could peraps tell me when we would possibly be there, it would not be bad to telegraph from ere—even if we did not come there in time."

Hal borrowed Kerrigan's pocket map and took out his pencil to measure.

"Look," he said, showing her: "if you don't mind traveling hard"—her limpid, gentle eyes deplored the implication that she was the only one to be considered—"we can be in Evanston—there—tonight. Salt Lake City is perhaps a little far. Then tomorrow night we can be in Las Vegas, and the distance from there to Los Angeles is less than what we have done this morning. So day after tomorrow, I should think, the bon Dieu willing." Day after tomorrow; and Barry had said, Los Angeles will end everything. It wasn't true; there was no end.

"Do you think I should telegraph?" she said, and under her modest acquiescence, Hal could see the unpleading trouble.

With a grace that would not have come if he had calculated it, he put his hand over hers on the table. "Sister, telegraph that," he said, smiling tender assurance, "and we will get there."

Her eyes thanked him again, and wished they could show him something that would help him too.

After lunch she went to telegraph, Kerrigan with her, and the Pulsifers disappeared in search of souvenirs and popcorn. Crack sat on the runningboard of the car, his narrow body basking in the sunlight as his eyes did in their own pleasant thoughts. When Barry came from seeing to Doctor Callgari's lunch, Hal went to her and said, "Ride with me this afternoon." "I think I'd better not," she said thoughtfully.

"I'll be good—I swear I'll be good," said Hal. She looked at him in quick remorse. "Darling, I didn't mean that. It's Sister Anastasia. She's worried now, poor dear thing. She dreamt about her brother. Sometimes she held my hand this morning. If that helps, I'd like to be with her."

He tried not to look disappointed—smiled and leaned over to push his fist against Doctor Callgari's muzzle, wet and cool from a drink, but already panting again. "Right," he said. "I know. I hope to God we get there before her brother dies."

"Hal," she said, and he straightened up. "I've got to cheat, once." She looked down wonderingly at his mouth, then back at his eyes, and her quick whisper said, "I love you."

She went toward the door of the car, and Crack lounged up to open it. "Don't like the sunlight?" he said. But she got in without appearing to have heard him, her attention all for Doc's mistrust of Crack's courtesy. Crack shut the door and sat down again, speculating drowsily on Hal. "Like the sunlight," he said. "Like the way it bites on your skin, through your clothes."

Barry's whisper repeated itself, quickly, softly, over and over in Hal's running blood. Think of nothing but that, you fool—nothing but that and the power, the omnipotence that rushes in it: there's nothing will stand against you—nothing will dare haunt you. Then he heard the echo of Crack's slow words and focused his look. "Mm," he said in absent flatness, "so do I."

"Moonlight," said Crack, his shy smile spreading a little, "doesn't bite on your skin, but it's nice." He kept looking at Hal as if he expected him to say something. "There'd ought to be a good moon tonight."

"Ought?" said Hal. He leaned over to unclip the hood and look at the oil gauge, the private waiting of Crack's blue eyes out of his vision, but only partly dismissed.

For more than an hour, Hal and Kerrigan didn't speak beyond monosyllables; yet it was as if the deepening of their sympathy had become tangible within the huge encompassment of this country. When Kerrigan grunted, or Hal murmured some single exclamation to himself, it was an acknowledgment of what they not only watched, but felt, interpreted together. Somehow the awe of profligate natural grandeur and the tonic of single human understanding were akin for Hal—not in their silent speech, but in their teaching to his unfeigned spirit, his once disdainful, once indifferent, unfeigned spirit.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Men Used for Transportation
Men are used for transportation purposes in the greater part of Africa, south of the equator. Oxen are used only in the cattle areas.

WISE IS HE WHO PICKS HIS STEPS ON LIFE'S PATH

From his place at the side of the road the Philosopher sees the world go by. One man, with strained face and clenched hands, dashes on, without regard to the rights of others on the road, trying vainly to overtake the happiness that will always elude him.

Another, plodding wearily, stooped with the burden of his possessions, looks neither to the right nor the left, seeks only for firm ground under his feet. He is unable to see that the way is pleasant; that the sky is blue overhead, and that from the side of the road friendly hands are outstretched toward him. His journey is a lonely one.

The Philosopher, in his resting place, sighs that so many persons, in their blind search for the Holy Grail of happiness, in their frantic struggle for the great joy that they foolishly imagine is to be found in the great things, fail to grasp the happiness that is to be found all along the way.

Some, heedless and careless, dance and sing along the road, and the flowers they pick from the roadside fade and die. In their friendships is little of friendliness. When night comes they have no place to lay their heads and no one to comfort them.

And finally the wise man passes. He neither hurries nor loiters, but in leisurely fashion makes sure passage; finding time for work, play, and true friendships among those who line the highway. He finds warmth in the sun and coolness in the rain; the flowers and the songs of birds assuage his thirst for beauty. His hardships, being shared by others, become less burdensome, his joys greater because others may find part in them, and the Holy Grail of happiness is always at his hand.

The old Philosopher sighs with regret that it is late, and that he may not join this wise man in his journey.—Detroit News.

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