

WATCH THE CURVES



BY RICHARD HOFFMANN
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WNU SERVICE

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 whom 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.

CHAPTER V—Continued

"Oh no—than-ck you," said Sister Anastasia, her eyes grateful and still amused, her diction trying carefully to elude the accent that touched it.

It was an enchanting voice—in its gentleness of grace and inner assurance that still, as Barry had said, kept you from using the word humble. Hal smiled in pleasure as he watched her. And since Barry would not meet his eyes—not actually avoiding them but seeming to know of no use in meeting them—he had double welcome for an impulsive tenderness, brought his tray of lunch to the empty place beside the nun.

She spoke only when she was spoken to; but the restrained ease of what she said, the smooth, quiet cadence she gave to each sentence made it delightful to go on prompting her. They talked of nothing much that Hal remembered clearly; how long she had been in America, the pleasures and imperfections of crossing the ocean, the view from the Empire State building, the world eminence of American cities in degree of summer heat. And then Hal had an innocent, urgent desire to see her blush—a little, once, to see what she might have been like as a young girl with a first beau. And he said:

"Have you heard, Sister, that California is a place where the fruit has no flavor, the flowers no scent, and the ladies no charm?"

"No," she said, looking at him in guileless interest. "I've not 'eard that. Is it true?"

"I don't know surely, because I've never been there," said Hal, without concealing his pleasure in her. "I've tasted oranges from there which were sweet; and I've been told that their orange blossoms at least have the scent they do in other places. As for the last part of the saying, I know it will not be true when you and Miss Trafford get to California."

For an instant Hal was afraid he would have to be ashamed of himself: Sister Anastasia glanced quickly away; but then he saw she was looking toward the other end of the table where Barry sat, her head turned from them, intent upon whatever Kerrigan was telling her. The nun turned to him again, a contained, soft smiling in her look.

"It is a long time since I've 'eard anything like that," she said in tranquil simplicity. She looked down at her plate, and Hal's pleasure leapt for the faint running-up of warmth under her cool, immaculate cheeks. Then she said, very softly, "Miss Trafford is beautiful—inside, too."

Hal was two places behind Barry in the line at the cashier's window. A spectacular woman, past her twenties, leaned beside it, waiting until the cashier should be free again. She wanted a spotlight to tone down the heavy mascara on her eyelashes, the bold make-up of her lips, the revealing tightness of her bright dress. She watched Barry steadily, unaware of being caught; her resentful eyes moved from detail to detail, calculating the composition of each effect; her petulant mouth, loosely at rest, indicated neither approval nor envy. Hal was watching the woman's whole, unconscious interest when Barry paid her check.

Barry looked down at Doctor Calligari, flicked his leash to start him up, then raised her deliberate glance to the woman's face and smiled. Hal could see Barry's profile, clear and candid, and she spoke her low, friendly "Hello." The woman's sullen eyes cheered quickly and artless dimples came at once beside her efficient smile. As if she recognized

Barry, she said, "Hello, cuteness."
"Hot out," said Barry.
"Hot is right," said the woman. "Keep out the sun."

"Will," said Barry, a quiet sort of thanks in her smiling; and her easy, long-legged walk took her toward the door, the woman's look following her in contented approval.

Now, why did she do that? Hal asked himself in uninvited, unconsciously unreasonable irritation. He caught up with her outside the door to the street that seemed baked, not only by the sun but by a fanatic furnace just under the pavement, too.

"Going to walk the Doctor, or sit in the car?" he said.

"Walk," said Barry, hardly looking at him.

With a single mirthless laugh at the beginning, he said, "D'you rather I sat in the car till you're finished?"

She looked at him as if she hadn't quite caught his meaning. "Come if you like," she said.

They walked toward the principal street and turned into it—without speaking. Then the restive need to clear something up, to purge something out of his gathered dissatisfaction, took sudden charge of his tongue and he said, "Barry, I want to talk to you." And the pointlessness of that was apparent to him even before he'd finished.

"All right," she said inconsequently. "What about?"

"Not on the main street of Peoria at two o'clock in the afternoon," he said.

"Why not?"

"You know d—n well why not." Barry looked at him unsympathetically but without anger, and her low, steady voice said, "In the first place, I wouldn't've asked if I knew why not, and in the second place, throwing d—ns around doesn't help me understand you."

"Oh h—l," said Hal, more in vague disgust with himself than anything else.

"That's not necessary, either," she said.

"Barry, what's the matter?"

"Not a darn thing—with me," she said.

"Oh," he said; and they walked for another ten paces or so of silence. Then, as an accusation, he said to her, "You didn't know that woman you spoke to down there. Why did you speak to her?"

Barry waited an instant before she said, still not turning to him, "Because I liked her looks; because some day I may have to put up with what she has to put up with, and I hope people speak to me without thinking they're smart, or wanting something."

"Barry!" said Hal, in the quick authority he would have used for the dog.

"You asked me," said Barry. Her eyes and brows disclaimed response.



"But I Mustn't Love You. You Mustn't Love Me."

sibility for his reaction. "I supposed you wanted me to tell you."

"Barry," said Hal, with forced restraint, "tell me something else. Is last night gone clean out of your head? Did it mean nothing to you after I'd left"—and he added with not wholly convincing bitterness—"like an idiot."

She looked round at him, the clean, long arches of her eyebrows raised. Then, not as a question but ironically, to be sure that's what he'd said, she repeated, "Like an idiot."

He watched her without speaking, almost wishing her eyes would at

least do him the small honor of anger or defiance, not stay in their cool, remote composure that had nothing, one way or the other, to do with him. Then, just as some change began somewhere deep in her blue look, she turned her head and seemed to walk a little faster, as if she saw where she had to go.

Hal looked ahead too and said, with dissatisfied assurance, "I didn't mean 'like an idiot' and you know it."

He thought it was because her ankle had started to turn that her shoulder came slightly against him. But then her hand caught his, brought it half-way up, and pressed the back of it briefly against her jacket, over her heart, before she gave it back to him. And still she looked straight before her—a grave look, at nothing that was in the street ahead.

In the calm knowledge that flashed into abrupt, reckless command of his spirit, that then indeed became his spirit, his whole living conviction, he stopped her walking with his hand at her elbow. She let her body half turn to his hold of her, but not her head. That didn't matter; she would turn her face to him in another sure, plain moment. "Barry," he said, "I love you. You know that, too."

She glanced down at Doctor Calligari, as if she were trying to think of something that would show how sorry she was for him. And when slowly she faced Hal at last, her eyes were soft with grieving helplessness.

"I didn't make you say that," she said quietly. "I didn't want you to. Dear God! why did you have to say that?"

"Because I meant it," he told her, strength from extravagant stores running up to help him pierce most deeply with the bright rapier of his knowledge. "Because I'm too full of it to wait one more second of loneliness to tell you in every, sharp, desperate way there is that I love you, Barry—love you, love you, Barry—oh, blast Peoria and all its sunlight!"

"Darling," she said softly, just to say it under his watching. Then, more strongly: "Darling, I can't love you. I mustn't. That's true, true—even if I'd—I'd give my eyes not to have it. I'll tell you why—truly; and you'll see. But I have to wait till I know how to tell you. I promise, my dearest, I shall know. But I mustn't love you. You mustn't love me." She looked at him as if she had known him very well and he were now suddenly going to leave her.

Then quickly her eyes left his and she turned around, drawing at Doc's leash. "We must go back, Hal," she said hurriedly. "Please, we've got to."

They were on the heat-shimmered road again by three, a hundred miles from the Mississippi crossing. There was a current of gaiety which carried off even the standard post-luncheon torpor, as if the atmosphere of the car were infected by the profligate, exulting buoyancy under Hal's own heart.

For Hal could dismiss the conviction of grief in Barry's eyes for his joy in the small marvels of their passage in the street; the quick touching of her shoulder to his arm; the pressure of her living side against the back of his caught hand; the near-husky enchantment of her calling him darling. What could she have behind her blue eyes to stand against his invincibility? Some fragile shadow of an obstacle—the fact that he was Frederick Ireland's son, or the beckoning of Hollywood; trifles which he could shatter when he had his time to speak, out of the strength which she herself had unleashed to surge up under the single necessity left in the world.

The time was coming—today, as swiftly as the hard road under Rasputin's wheels. Excitement filled him, pushed newly in each moment to escape his chest; and there was room for no more than a flash of shame at the niggardliness of his spirit that had quibbled with his being most valiantly in love, for the first—good G—d, yes, the first real time in his life.

"Hey, my friend," said Kerrigan, bending gravely toward him, "where did you go in Peoria?"

"Why, Colonel?" said Hal, grinning.

"You look as though you'd slipped on a million dollars' worth of eternal verities and found your initials stamped on all of 'em."

"Little place around the corner I found on my way from the Klondike," said Hal. "Run by an ex-alde-de-camp to the czar whose life I saved at Port Arthur. Napoleon brandy from original casks at a nickel a goblet. I've no secrets from you, Munchausen."

Kerrigan's eyes danced merrily under their half-mustaches. "You're sure the toke hasn't taken charge?" he said. "Wouldn't like to stop off for a cold shower somewhere down the line?"

"Stop for nothing, huh," said Hal. "I want the Mississippi, what Ring Lardner jokingly called the Father of Waters. It is out here somewhere, isn't it?"

"Was last time I came through," said Kerrigan, the sparkle of his look laughing with and at Hal's.

Hal had a glimpse of Barry's face: her eyes, unpreoccupied, gave him brief, intimate approval, and his heart sang higher.

As each vista gave way to another level run over closely farmed country, Hal grew impatient for

that coming to the rim of a long plateau which he conceived would reveal the Mississippi, flat and blue and broad, lying infinitely off toward the veils of the horizon on either hand. Then, after they had settled down to what seemed another whole country of unwatered farmland, Kerrigan took the dead cigarette end from his lips and leaned forward. "The old fella," he said quietly; and he added, as if he meant it to be all very casual, "Here, let me treat you to your first Mississippi crossing." He reached into his trousers pocket, jingling change.

They went out on the narrow track slowly, each slanted girder flicking a gentle echo at them, and neither Hal nor Kerrigan spoke. Halfway across Mrs. Pulsipher's voice bustled suddenly into the car: "Why, this is the Mississippi river."

"It—it is," said John, as if she'd waked him out of guilty reverie.

"Is it, Mr. Kerrigan?"

"The original, mam."

Hal said to Kerrigan, "Remember Huck Finn and that nigger on the raft; the loaves of bread with mercury in 'em floating down and a cannon booming over the water from the ferry boat, to raise their bodies."

"Gad, sir, wasn't I just thinking of that?" said Kerrigan—half startled, half pleased, as if it were a joint experience which he thought Hal might have forgotten. "I never cross the old rogue without thinking of it. I swear—just that minute—I was nowhere else but there."

"Then there's more than one mind-reader along," said Hal drily, a faint check upon his full pleasure.

"Meaning?" said Kerrigan.

Hal gave a brief shake of his head, aware of Crack sitting behind him, retrospectively aware that he had been there all afternoon. Hal had the curious impulse to recall what he'd thought and said in that time, as you might try to remember what you'd done in a room where you find you've been watched. Then he caught himself and shook off the quick discomfort. Crack might sit there as knowingly, as pleased with private, drowsy thoughts as he liked; he had nothing to do with Hal or the Mississippi or this moment.

Then Kerrigan tossed up a thick finger to indicate the Burlington shore where their bridge ran over the railway. "That belongs," he said. Four white ex-Pullman cars stood on a siding, a patiently suffered curvature to their wooden spines, broad roofs smoothed down over open-end-platforms, window-arches gay with marbled glass. Along their white slides, gold letters were painted: "Davenport Bros. Great World's Fair Shows."

"Gosh," Barry called from the back, "wouldn't it be fun to see their show?"

"It would," said Kerrigan. "It'd be fun to see it, and stow away in those cars afterward."

"It'd be fun," said Hal, "to do almost anything." And in saying that, there was a separate sharing of this moment with both Barry and Kerrigan, a thankful comfort that could put away the uneasiness of a minute ago—almost put it quite away. The night was near now, and his coming to Barry, to the rout of fear from her bravery, and to his hope of Fortune in the world.

Iowa rolled in tireless undulations, the road taped over them like the fat-healed scar of a careful cut, the coming loops visible from each rise. They crossed the Skunk river, and rolled on over the dips and rises toward the sinking sun. Ottumwa was close beyond, and they found clean tourist cabins in a grove of trees beside the Des Moines river.

The proprietor said that, given time, his old lady would throw together as good a feed, and better, and cheaper, than any they could get in them places uptown. Hal took Rasputin to a garage and supervised his priming for tomorrow. And when he got back, the others were halfway through a meal that had even such intrepid appetites as the Pulsiphers' working uphill. The full buoyancy that Hal had carried through the afternoon still refused to take account of hunger. He did the swift best he could, so that the proprietor's old lady shouldn't be hurt; but when Barry pushed her chair back from the long table and squeaked her lips at Doc, he abandoned the business abruptly and followed her outdoors.

Fresh eagerness exulted in his blood, tried to lift his body with a hundred different excitements, urged him to leap and shout out his joy for these hints of immortality. He stopped her walking with his hand, turned her to him and held her while he said, "Barry, we've got to go somewhere—quickly."

In the light from her cabin under the trees, he saw that her smile was slow, the droop of her eyelids slow, weary. "Hal, we can't," she said, as if he had been urging her for a long time. "I couldn't—couldn't tell you what I have to. I'm too tired to be strong. I shouldn't tell you it's hoping, wishing, praying about you that's made me so tired, but I want to tell you. Because I—I—Hal, we can't go; I've got to go in."

She moved a little, as if she were going to let her head go against his shoulder. But she stopped herself, and her low, lovely voice murmured, "My darling."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Seek Fiery Death in Famous Mihara Crater

Curling up in the smoke which rises from the crater of Mihara, Japan's famous suicide volcano, the ghostly images of three girls were seen by terror-stricken villagers on the island of Oshima. Remembering that Mihara rose to fame as a lovers' death tray following suicides of three high school girls, the villagers said the specter of the girls was an ill omen.

Frightened, the superstitious said the volcano's "nushi" (master) was about to "rise from the land of fire" to lure visitors to "Jigoku" (the abode of the devil).

Three days later visitors from Tokyo, just across the bay, swarmed to the island, partly out of curiosity and partly because it was Sunday and the island's natural beauty and warmth attracted them.

At 10:30 a. m. about 100 spectators were gathered on the spot from which persons committing suicide plunge to their death. Suddenly a young man, scarcely twenty-five, ran forward and flung himself headlong into the crater. As the spectators, horrified and speechless, looked at each other, another man, a few years older, came out from the throng and, without saying a word, walked as though in a trance and dropped into the fiery pit.

Nervously the spectators moved away, afraid that some unseen hand might pull them into the smoldering inferno. Suddenly another youth, about twenty-three, ran to the edge of the crater, stripped himself of his kimono and, with nothing on except shorts, stepped over the brink into the world beyond.

Hardly had the talk of these suicides died down when, two days later, three more men flung themselves into the fire-emitting abyss, one after another, as many spectators looked on.

The police have decided that here-

after all visitors to the island will be questioned before being permitted to land. Those suspected of suicide intentions will be barred from landing. All visitors must buy round-trip fares.

Officials of the home office in Tokyo are frankly pessimistic.

Last year more than 800 persons lost their lives in Mihara's crater despite every effort to put a stop to the suicide craze. The crater is seven miles around and it is not humanly possible to net-in this vast territory as have been other suicide-trysting places.

BOYS! GIRLS!

Read the Grape Nuts ad in another column of this paper and learn how to join the Dizzy Dean Winners and win valuable free prizes.—Adv.

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Formosa, or Taiwan, as the Japanese call it, is an island nearly half the size of Ireland, situated where the Pacific ocean merges into the China sea. It is one of the loveliest islands of the Far East, and was named Iha Formosa, or Beautiful Island, by early Portuguese explorers.

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