

The FLYING MERCURY

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—The story opens on Long Island near New York City, where Miss Emily French, a relative of Ethan French, manufacturer of the celebrated "Mercury" automobile, loses her way. The car has stopped and her cousin Dick French is too muddled with drink to direct it right. They meet another car which is run by a professional racer named Lestrage. Lestrage and Miss French and her cousin Dick French are on their way to a race track. Lestrage is a professional racer and Miss French is a wealthy young woman who has inherited her father's fortune.

CHAPTER II.—Ethan French has disappeared. He is growing old and tells Emily that she is the only one of the family to whom he can leave his wealth. He informs her plainly that he would like to have her marry Dick, who could carry on the business. Dick is a good-natured, but irresponsible fellow.

CHAPTER III.—It appears that a partner of Ethan French, wanting an expert to race with the "Mercury" at auto events, has engaged Lestrage and at the French family Emily encounters the young man. They refer pleasantly to their first meeting when Dick came along and recognizes the young racer.

CHAPTER IV.—Dick likes the way Lestrage ignores their first meeting when he appears to a disadvantage. They become quite friendly and Lestrage tells Emily that he will try to make something out of his indifferent cousin and educate him as an automobile expert.

CHAPTER V.—Dick undertakes his business schooling under the tutelage of Lestrage. Dick is short and fat, and in making a race meets with an accident. Lestrage tries to help him, but Emily disclaims any intention of marrying him.

CHAPTER VI.—Lestrage comes upon Emily in the moonlit garden of the French home. Under an impulse he cannot control he kisses her and she leaves him, confessing in her own heart that she returns his love.

CHAPTER VII.—The uncle of Emily, learning of her attachment to Dick, informs her that the man is his disgraced son, whom she has never seen before being adopted by him. He claims that his son ran away with a disolute actress, refuses to acknowledge him, and orders Emily to think of Dick as her future husband.

CHAPTER VIII.

Six o'clock was the hour set for the start of the Beach race. And it was just seventeen minutes past five when Dick French, hanging in a frenzy of anxiety over the paddock fence circling the inside of the mile oval, uttered something resembling a howl and rushed to the gate to signal his recalcitrant driver. From the opposite side of the track Lestrage waved gayly return, making his way through the officials and friends who pressed around him to shake hands or slap his shoulder caressingly, jesting and questioning, calling directions and advice. A brass band played noisily in the grandstand, where the crowd heaved and surged; the racing machines were roaring in their camps.

"What's the matter? Where were you?" cried Dick, when at last Lestrage crossed the course to the central field. "The cars are going out now for the preliminary run. Rupert's nearly crazy, snarling at everybody, and the other man has been getting ready to start instead of you."

"Well, he can get ready," smiled Lestrage. "Keep cool, French; I've got half an hour and I could start now, I'm ready."

He was ready; clad in the close-fitting khaki costume whose immaculate daintiness gave no hint of the certainty that before the first six hours ended it would be a wreck of yellow dust and oil. As he passed in running an appraising glance down the street-like row of tents, the white-coated driver of a spotted white car shot out on his way to the track, but faced opposite the latest arrival to stretch a cordial hand.

"I hoped a trolley car had bitten you," he shouted. "The rest of us would have more show if you got lost on the way, Darling."

The boyish driver at the next tent looked up as they passed, and came grinning over to give his clasp.

"Get a move on; what you been doin' all day, dear child? You've been givin' your manager sal votable to hold him still." He nodded at the agitated Dick in ironic commiseration.

"Go get out your car, Darling; I want to beat you," chaffed the next in line.

"Strike up the band, here comes a driver," sang another, with an entrancing French accent.

Laughing, retreating, shaking hands with each comrade rival, Lestrage went down the row to his own tent. At his approach a swarm of mechanics from the factory stood back from the long, low, gray car, the driver who was to relieve him during the night and day ordeal slipped down from the seat and unmasked.

"Maybe, Darling," he drawled, and turned to make his own preparations. Fascinated and useless, Dick looked on at the methodical flurry of the next few moments; until Lestrage was in his seat and Rupert swung in beside him. Then a gesture summoned him to the side of the machine.

"I'll run in again before we race, of course," said Lestrage to him, above the deafening noise of the motor. "Be around here; I want to see you."

Rupert leaned out, all good-humor once more as he pointed to the machine. "Got a healthy talk, what?" he exclaimed.

The car darted forward. A long round of applause welcomed Lestrage's swooping advent on the track. Handkerchiefs and scarfs were waved; his name passed from mouth to mouth.

"Popular, ain't he?" chuckled a mechanic next to Dick. "You don't forget that Georgia trick, no, sir."

It was not many times that the cars could circle the track. Quarter of six blew from whistles and klaxons, signal flags sent the cars to their camps for the last time before the race.

"Come here," Lestrage beckoned to Dick, as he brought his machine shuddering to a standstill before the tent. "Here, close—we've got a moment while they fill tanks."

He unhooked his goggles and leaned over as Dick came beside the wheel, the face so revealed bright and quiet in the sunset of glow.

"One never can tell what may happen," he said. "I'd rather tell you now than chance your feeling afterward that I didn't treat you quite squarely in keeping still. I hope you won't take it as my father did; we've been good chums, you and I. I am your cousin, David French."

The moment furnished no words, Dick leaned against the car, absolutely limp.

"Of course, I'm not going back to Frenchwood. After this race I shall go to the Duplex company; I used to be with them and they've wanted me back. Your company can get along without me, now all is running well—indeed, Mr. French has dismissed me."

"His firm lip bent a little more firmly. "The work I was doing is in your hands and I won't see it through. Unless you want to break off with me, we'll have more time to talk over this."

"Break off!" Dick straightened his chubby figure. "Break off with you, Les—"

"Go on. My name is Lestrage now and always."

A shriek from the official klaxon summoned the racers, Rupert swung back to his seat. Dick reached up to the tent to the other, the first really dignified moment of his life.

"I'm glad you're my kin, Lestrage," he said. "I've liked you anyhow, but I'm glad, just the same. And I don't care what rot they say of you. Take care of yourself."

Lestrage bared his hand to return the clasp, his warm smile flashing to his cousin; then the swirl of preparation swept between them and Dick next saw him as part of one of the throbbing, flaming row of machines before the judges' stand.

It was not a tranquilizing experience for an amateur to witness the start, when the fourteen powerful cars sprang simultaneously for the first curve, struggling for possession of the narrow track in a wheel to wheel contest where one mistouch meant the wreck of many. After that first view, Dick sat weakly down on an oil barrel and watched the race in a state of fascinated endurance.

The golden and violet sunset melted pearl-like into the black cup of night. The glare of many searchlights made the track a glistening band of white, around which circled the cars, themselves gemmed with white and crimson lamps. The cheers of the people as the lead was taken by one faction or another, the hum of voices and the music and uproar of the machines blended into a web of sound indescribable. The spectacle was at once ultramodern and classic in antiquity of conception.

At eight o'clock Lestrage came flying in, seat off the track to have a lamp relighted.

"Water," he demanded tersely, in the sixty seconds of the stop, and laughed openly at Dick's expression while he took the cup.

"I'll have to come in to rest some, and turn my machine over to the other man. And I won't have him wrecking it for me. I want you, as owner, to give him absolute orders to do no speeding; let him hold a fifty-two mile an hour average until I take the wheel again."

"Me?"

"I can't do it. You, of course."

"You could," Dick answered. "I've been thinking how you and I will run that factory together. It's all stuff about your going away; why should you? You and your father take me as junior partner, you know I'm not big enough for anything else."

"You're man's size," Lestrage assured, a hand on his shoulder. "But—it won't do. I'll not forget the offer, though, never."

"All on!" a dozen voices signaled; men scattered in every direction as Lestrage sprang to his place.

The hours passed on the wheels of excitement and suspense. When Lestrage came in again, only a watch convinced Dick that it was midnight.

"You gave the order?" Lestrage asked.

"Yes."

He descended, taking off his mask and showing a face white with fatigue under the streaks of dust and grime.

"I'll be all right in half an hour," he nodded, in answer to Dick's exclamation. "Send one of the boys for coffee, will you, please? Rupert needs some, too. Here, one of you others, ask one of those idle doctor's apprentices to come over with a fresh bandage; my arm's a trifle untidy."

In fact, his right sleeve was wet and red, where the strain of driving had reopened the injury of the day before. But he would not allow Dick to speak of it.

"I'm going to spend an hour or two resting. Come in, French, and we'll chat in the intervals, if you like."

"And Rupert? Where's he?" Dick wondered, peering into the dark with a vague impression of lurking dangers on every side.

"He's hurried in out of the night air," reassured familiar accents; a small figure lounged across into the light, making vigorous use of a dripping towel. "Tell Darling I feel faint and I'm going over to that grandstand cafe a la car to get some pie. I'll be back in time to read over my last lesson from the chauffeur's correspondence school. Oh, see what's here!"

A telegraph messenger boy had come up to Dick.

"Richard French?" he verified.

"Sign, please."

The message was from New York. "All coming down," Dick read. "Limousine making delay. Wire me at St. Royal of race. Bailey."

Far from pleased, young French hurriedly wrote the desired answer and gave it to the boy to be sent. But he thrust the yellow envelope into his pocket before turning to the tent where Lestrage was drinking cheap black coffee while an impatient young surgeon hovered near.

The hour's rest was characteristic of him. Washed, bandaged, and refreshed, Lestrage dropped on a cot in the back of the tent, and pushed a roll of motor garments beneath his head for a pillow. There he intermittently spoke to his companion of what ever the moment suggested; listening to every sound of the race and interspersing acute comment, starting up whenever the voice of his own machine hinted that the driver was disobeying instructions or the shrill klaxon gave warning of trouble. But through it all Dick gathered much of the family story.

hoping his broncho machine puffed him clear from the fireworks."

When the Mercury car swung in, a moment later, Lestrage lingered for a last word to Dick.

"I'm engaged to Emily," he said, gravely. "I don't know what she will hear of me; if anything happens, I've told you the truth. I'm old enough to see it now. And I tried to square things."

CHAPTER IX.

In the delicate, fresh June dawn, the French limousine crept into the Beach enclosure.

"We're here," said Bailey, to his traveling companions. "You can't park the car in front by the fence; Mr. David might see you and kill himself by a misturn. Come up to the grandstand seats."

Mr. French got out in silence and assisted Emily to descend; a pale and wide-eyed Emily behind her veil.

"The boys were calling extras," she suggested faintly. "They said three accidents on the track."

Bailey turned to a blue and gold official passing.

"Number seven all right?" he asked.

"On the track, Lestrage driving," was the prompt response. "Leading by thirty-two miles."

A little of Emily's color rushed back. Satisfied, Bailey led their way to the tier of seats, almost empty at this hour. Pearly, unsubstantial in the young light, lay the huge oval meadow and the track edging it.

"I've sent over for Mr. Dick," Bailey informed the other two. "He's been here, and he can tell what's doing. Four cars are out of the race. There's Mr. David coming!"

A gray machine shot around the track, hurtling roaring down the straight stretch past the stand and crossed before them, the mechanic rising in his seat to catch the pendant linen streamers and wipe the dust from the driver's goggles in preparation for the "death turn" ahead. There was a series of rapid explosions as the driver shut off his motor, the machine sputtered almost facing the infield and skidded round that threw a cloud of soil high in the air. Emily cried out.

"Mr. French half rose in his place. "What's the matter?" he queried Bailey. "He's been doing that all night, and a pretty turn he makes, too. He's been driving alone; Frank went out an hour ago on the second relief, when he went through the paddock fence and broke his leg. It didn't hurt the machine a bit, except tires, but it lost us twenty-six laps. And it leaves Lestrage with thirteen steady hours at the wheel. He says he can do it."

"He's fit?" Bailey questioned.

Dick turned a peevish regard upon him.

"I don't know what you call fit. He says he is. His hands are blistered already, his right arm has been bandaged twice where he hurt it pulling me away from the gear-curtain yesterday, and he's had three hours' rest out of the last eleven. See that heap of junk over there; that's where the Alan car burned up last night and

then blew out in the opening of the first hour of his driving and the twenty-fourth of the race, the great shout of sympathy and encouragement that went up shook the grandstand to its cement foundations.

Neither Lestrage nor Rupert left his seat while that tire was changed. "If we did I ain't sure we'd get back," Rupert explained to Dick, who

The autocast of his little world looked from one rebel to the other, confounded with the unprecedented.

"If I wish to withdraw him, it is to place him out of danger," he retorted with asperity. "Not because I wish to mortify him, naturally. Is that clear? Does he want to pass the next thirteen hours under this ordeal?"

"I'll tell you what he wants," answered Dick. "He wants to be let alone. It seems to me he's earned that."

Fifteen French opened his lips and closed them again without speech. It had not been his life's habit to let people alone and the art was acquired with difficulty.

"I admit I do not comprehend the feelings you describe," he conceded, at last. "But there is one person who has the right to decide whether David shall continue this risk of his life. Emily, do you wish the car withdrawn?"

There was a gasp from the other two men.

"I?" the young girl exclaimed, amazed. "I can call him here—safe—"

Her voice died out as Lestrage's car roared past, overtaking two rivals on the turn and sliding between them with an audacity that provoked rounds of applause from the spectators.

"If anything happens to him, I hope I die too," she answered, and drew the silk veil across her face.

"Go back, Mr. Dick, you're no good here," advised Bailey, in the pause.

"I guess Miss Emily is right, Mr. French; we've got nothing to do but look on, for David French was wiped out to make Lestrage drive."

Having left the decision to Emily, it was in character that her uncle offered no remonstrance when she disappointed his wish.

When Lestrage came into his camp for oil and gasoline, near eight o'clock, Dick seized the brief halt, the first in three hours.

"Emily's up in the stand," he announced. "Send her a word, old man; don't get reckless in front of her."

"Emily?" echoed Lestrage, too weary for astonishment. "Give me a pencil. No, I can't take off my gauntlet; it's glued fast. I'll manage. Rupert, go take an hour's rest and send me the other mechanic."

"I can't get off my car; it's glued fast," Rupert confided, leaning over the back of the machine to appropriate a sandwich from the basket a man was carrying to the neighboring camp. "Go on with your correspondence, dearest."

Resting the card Dick supplied on the steering wheel, Lestrage wrote a difficult two lines.

He was out again on the track when Dick brought the message to Emily.

"I just told him you were here, cousin," he whispered in her ear, and dropped the card in her lap.

"I'll enjoy this more than ever, with you here," she read. "It's the right place for my girl. I'll give you the cup for our first dinner table, tonight."

"DAVID."

Emily lifted her face. The tragedy of the scene was gone, Lestrage's eyes laughed at her out of a mist. The sky was blue, the sunshine golden; the merry crowds commencing to pour in woke carnival in her heart.

"He said to tell you the machine was running magnificently," supplemented Dick, "and not to insult his veteran reputation by getting nervous. He's coming by—look."

He was coming by; and, although unable to look toward the grandstand he raised his hand in salute as he passed, to the one he knew was watching. Emily flushed rosily, her dark eyes warm and shining.

"I can wait," she sighed, gratefully. "Dickie, I can wait until it ends now."

Dick went back.

The hours passed. One more car went out of the race under the grinding test; there were the usual incidents of blown-out tires and temporary withdrawals for repairs. Twice Mr. French sent his partner and Emily to the restaurant below, tolerating his seat. Perfectly composed, his expression perfectly self-contained, he watched his son.

The day grew unbearably hot toward afternoon, a heat rather of July than June. After a visit to his camp, Lestrage reappeared without the suffocating mask and cap, driving bareheaded, with only the narrow goggles crossing his face. The change left visible the drawn pallor of exhaustion under strains of dust and oil, his rolled-back sleeves disclosed the crimson badge on his right arm and the fact that his left wrist was tightly wound with linen where swollen and strained muscles rebelled at the long trial.

"He's been driving for nineteen hours," said Dick, climbing up to his party through the excited crowd. "Two hours more to six o'clock. Listen to the mob when he passes!"

The injunction was unnecessary. As the sun slanted low the enthusiasm grew to fever. This was a crowd of connoisseurs—motorists, chauffeurs, automobile lovers and drivers—they knew what was being done before them. The word passed that Lestrage was in his twentieth hour; people climbed on seats to cheer him as he passed by. When one of his

tenis, before there came a stir and murmuring in the Mercury camp.

"Don't say, the grounds was swarmed a voice outside the door 'steady!'"

Emily started up. Dick sprang to open the canvas, and Lestrage crossed the threshold. Lestrage, colorless, his right arm in a sling, his left wound with linen from wrist to elbow, and bearing a heavy purple bruise above his temple, but with the brightness of victory flashing about all weariness like a dancing flame.

"Sweetheart!" he laughed, as Emily ran to meet him, headless of all things except that he stood within touch once more. "My dear, I told them not to frighten you. Why, Emily—"

For as he put his one available arm about her, she hid her wet eyes on his shoulder.

"I am so happy," she explained breathlessly. "It is only that."

"You should not have been here at all, my dear. But it is good to see you. Who brought you? Bailey?"

"Catching sight of the man beside Dick. "Good, I wanted some one to help me; Rupert and I have got to find a hotel and we're not very active."

Emily would have slipped away from the clasp, scarlet with returning recollection, but Lestrage detained her to meet his shining eyes.

"The race is over," he reminded, for her ears alone. "I'm going to keep you, if you'll stay."

He turned to take a limping step, offering his hand cordially to the speechless Bailey, and faced for the first time the other man present.

"I think," said Ethan French, "that there need be no question of hotels. We have not understood each other, but you have the right to Frenchwood's hospitality. If you can travel, we will go there."

"No," answered David French, as quietly. "Never. You owe me nothing. If I have worked in your factory, I took the workman's wages for it; if I have won honors for your car, I also won the prize-money given to the driver. I never meant so to establish any claim upon Frenchwood or you. I believe we stand even. Dick has taken my place, happily; Emily and I will go on our own road."

They looked at each other, the likeness between them most apparent in the similar determination of mood which wiped laughter and warmth from the younger man's face. However coldly phrased and dictatorially spoken, it was an apology which Mr. French had offered and which had been declined. But he had watched

speed to take the dangerous, deeply furrowed turn for the last time, his car poised for the curving flight under his guidance—then the watching hundreds saw the driver's hands slip from the steering-wheel as he reached for the brake. Straight across the track the machine dashed, instead of following the bend, crashed through the barrier, and rolled over on its side in the green meadow grass.

"The steering-knuckle!" Bailey groaned, as the place burst into uproar around them. "The wheel—I saw it turn uselessly in his hands!"

"They're up!" cried a dozen voices. "No, one's up and one's under!"

"Who's caught in the wreck—Lestrage or his man?"

But before the people who surged over the track, breaking all restraint, before the electric ambulance, Dick French reached the mangled thing that had been the Mercury car. It was Lestrage who had painfully struggled to one knee beside the machine, fighting hard for breath to speak.

"Take the car off Rupert," he panted, as Dick's cry of relief on seeing him. "I'm all right—take the car off Rupert."

The next instant they were surrounded, overwhelmed with eager aid. The ambulance came up and a surgeon precipitated himself toward Lestrage.

"Stand back," the surgeon commanded generally. "Are you trying to smother him? Stand back."

But it was he who halted before a gesture from Lestrage, who leaned on Dick and a comrade from the camp.

"Go over there, to Rupert."

"You first—"

"No."

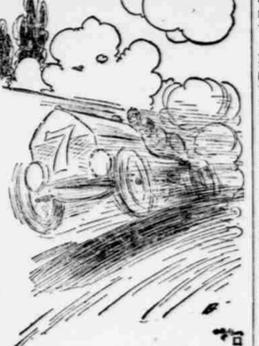
There was nothing to do except yield. Shrugging his shoulders, the surgeon paused the necessary moment. A moment only; there was a no protest, but he himself never left scattering of the hushed workers, a metallic crash.

From the space the car had covered a small figure uncoiled, lizard-like, and staggered unsteadily erect.

"Where's Darling Lestrage?" he hurried viciously across the silence.

"Gee, you're a slow bunch of workers!" Where's Lestrage?"

The tumult that broke loose swept all to confusion. And after all was Lestrage who was put in the surgeon's care, while Rupert rode back to the camp on the driver's seat of the ambulance.



Reappeared Without the Suffocating Mask and Cap.

hovered around them agitatedly. "If I'd thought Darling's mechanic would get in for this, I'd have taken in sewing for a living. How much longer?"

"Half an hour."

A renewed burst of applause greeted the Mercury car's return to the track. Men were standing watch in hand to count the last moments, their eyes on the bulletin board where the reeled-off miles were being registered. Two of the other machines were fighting desperately for second place, hopeless of rivaling Lestrage, and after they sped the rest.

"The finish!" some one suddenly called. "The last lap!"

Dick was hanging over the paddock fence when the car shot by amidst braying, klaxons, motor horns, cheers and the clashing music of the band. Frantic, the people hailed Lestrage as the black and white checked flag dropped before him in proclamation of his victory and the ended race.

Rupert raised his arms above his head in the signal of acknowledgment, as they flew across the line and swopt on to complete the circle to their camp. Lestrage slackened speed to take the dangerous, deeply furrowed turn for the last time, his car poised for the curving flight under his guidance—then the watching hundreds saw the driver's hands slip from the steering-wheel as he reached for the brake. Straight across the track the machine dashed, instead of following the bend, crashed through the barrier, and rolled over on its side in the green meadow grass.

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"Why didn't you light it out there?" asked the novice, infected by the speed fever around him.



"Here Goes Another."

I sent his driver and mechanic to the hospital. I suppose if Lestrage isn't fit and makes a miscue we'll see something like that happen to him and Rupert."

"No!" Emily cried piteously. Remorse clutched Dick.

"I forgot you, cousin," he apologized. "Don't go off; Lestrage swears he feels fine and gibes at me for worrying. Don't look like that."

"Richard, you will go down and