

The FLYING MERCURY

By
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"The Game and the Candle"

Illustrations By
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(CONTINUED.)

Mr. French put on his place-net, preserving the dignity of outward composure. Emily saw and heard nothing; she was following LeStrange around the far sides of the course, around until again he flashed past her, repeating his former feat with appalling exactitude.

It was hardly more than five minutes before Dick came hurrying toward them; cross, tired, dust-streaked and gasolene-scented.

"I don't see why you wanted to come," he began before he reached them. "I'm busy enough now. We're leading; if LeStrange holds out we'll win. But he's 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 LeStrange 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-cutter 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



"Here Goes Another."

sent its driver and mechanic to the hospital. I suppose if LeStrange 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; LeStrange swears he feels fine and gibes at me for worrying. Don't look like that."

"Richard, you will go down and order our car withdrawn from the race," Mr. French stated, with his most absolute finality. "This has continued long enough. If we had not been arrested in New York for exceeding the speed limit, I should have been here to end this scene at midnight."

Stunned, his nephew stared at him.

"Withdraw!"

"Precisely. And desire David to come here."

"I won't," said Dick flatly. "If you want to rub it into LeStrange that way, send Bailey. And I say it's a confounded shame."

"Richard!"

His round face ablaze, Dick thrust his hands in his pockets, facing his uncle stubbornly.

"After his splendid fight, to stop him now? Do you know how they take being put out, those fellows? Why, when the Italian car went off the track for good, last night, with its chain tangled up with everything underneath, its driver sat down and cried. And you'd come down on LeStrange when he's winning—I won't do it, I won't! Send Bailey; I can't tell him."

"If you want to discredit the car and its driver, Mr. French, you can do it without me," slowly added Bailey. "But it won't be any use to send for Mr. David, because he won't come."

The autocrat 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."

Ethan 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 LeStrange'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. To call him in from that, to have him safe with her—the mere thought was a delight that caught her breath. Yet, she knew LeStrange.

The three men watched her in keen suspense. The Mercury car had passed twice again before she raised her head, and in that space of a hundred seconds Emily reached the final unselfishness.

"What David wants," she said. "Uncle, what David wants."

"You're a brick!" cried Dick, in a passion of relief. "Emily, you're a brick!"

She looked at him with eyes he never forgot.

"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 Darling LeStrange."

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

When LeStrange came into his camp for oil and gasolene, 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; and don't get reckless in front of her."

"Emily?" echoed LeStrange, too weary for astonishment. "Give me a pencil. No, I can't take off my gaud; let's glue it 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."

So resting the card Dick supplied on the steering wheel, LeStrange 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, LeStrange'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 grand-stand 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 LeStrange 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 stains 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 LeStrange was in his twentieth hour; people climbed on seats to cheer him as he passed by. When one of his tires 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 grand-stand to its cement foundations.

Neither LeStrange 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 hovered around him excitedly. "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."

"Well, watch us finish."

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 LeStrange, and after them 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 LeStrange 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 swept on to complete the circle to their camp. LeStrange 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.

"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—LeStrange or his man?"

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

"Take the car off Rupert," he panted, at 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 LeStrange.

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

But it was he who halted before a gesture from LeStrange, 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 LeStrange?" was

repeated without the suffocating mask and cap.

hurling viciously across the silence. "Gee, you're a slow bunch of workaholics! Where's LeStrange?"

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

"Tell Emily I'll come over to her as soon as I'm fit to look at," was the message LeStrange gave Dick. "And when you go back to the factory, have your steering-knuckles strengthened."

Dick exceeded his commission by transmitting the speech entire; repeating the first part to Emily with all affectionate solicitude, and flinging the second cuttingly at his uncle and Bailey.

"The doctors say he ought to be in bed, but he won't go," he concluded. "No, you can't see him until they get through patching him up at the hospital tent; they put every one out except Rupert. He hasn't a scratch, after having a ninety Mercury on top of him. You're to come over to our camp, Emily, and wait for LeStrange. I suppose everybody had better come."

It was a curious and an elevating thing to see Dickie assume command of his family, but no one demurred. An official, recognizing in him LeStrange's manager, cleared a way for the party through the noisy press of departing people and automobiles. The sunset had long faded, night

had settled over the motordrome and the electric lamps had been lit in the tents, before there came a stir and murmur in the Mercury camp.

"Don't skid, the ground's wet," cautioned a voice outside the door. "Steady!"

Emily started up, Dick sprang to open the canvas, and LeStrange crossed the threshold. LeStrange, 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 above all weariness like a dancing flame.

"Sweetheart!" he laughed, as Emily ran to meet him, heedless 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 LeStrange 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 French-wood's hospitality. If you can travel, we will go there."

"No," answered David French, as quietly. "Never. You owe me nothing, sir. 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 French-wood 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 dictatorial spoken, it was an apology which Mr. French had offered and which had been declined. But—he had watched

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"Well, if every joint in my chassis wasn't sore, I'd feel better," he admitted grimly. "But I'm still running. What did you kiss me awake for, when I need my sleep?"

"Did you suppose we could get LeStrange home without you, Jack Rupert?"

"I ain't supposing you could. I'm ready."

The rest of the party were already in the big car, with one exception.

"Take a last look, Rupert," bade David, as he stood in the dark paddock. "We're retired; come help me get up to it."

Rupert passed a glance over the deserted track.

"I guess my sentiment-tank has given out," he sweetly acknowledged. "The Mercury factory sounds pretty good to me, Darling. And I guess we can make a joy ride out of living, on any track, if we enter for it."

"I guess we can," laughed David French. "Get in opposite Emily. We're going home to try."

THE END.

A Log On The Track