

He tried to summon a careless nonchalance. He'd shown 'em all right! But there was pity instead of admiration in the glances of the other drivers.



Illustrated
by
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"HI THERE, MURPHY!" Jerry Murphy turned his big gaunt person about, grinned shakily, and flung up a thin hand in greeting. "How are ya, Andy?" he cried. "That's Andy—Andy Cooper," he explained to the sweet-faced girl in the roadster beside him. "Gee, it's great to be back again, Marion," as she slowed to a stop. But in spite of his words Jerry's deep, gentle voice lacked its old-time fervor, and his thin legs, not yet steady after two long years spent in an Oakland hospital, shook as he climbed stiffly out of the car.

Ever since the day, long since past, when Jerry Murphy had been a ragged little fellow selling programs in the speedway grandstand for the price of admission, he had worshipped at the shrine of that thrilling devil-god, Speed. And Jerry had come very near to giving up his own life on the speed god's altar only two years before. More than this; he had seen many of his pals—good pals—sacrificed under piles of red hot junk that moments before had been sleek and beautiful racing cars.

During those long months of agony in that hospital bed, he had determined never to look upon another speedway again. He'd had a crazy notion that it would be fun to buy a small garage out in the country somewhere and come home at night to a homey little bungalow, and Marion. Marion was sold on the idea, too.

"Oh, let's do it, Jerry," she had begged, "and not race any more! You promised not to!"

Jerry had sighed. "Garages do cost money, honey." He hadn't expected his hospital expenses and doctor bills to take quite all of his savings. He'd looked for some other kind of work too, but there was none to be had. He'd have to stage

a come-back. There was no other way.

"We'll find some other way," Marion had cried. "I'll open a beauty parlor. I'll do anything, Jerry—"

A ROUSING CHEER from the pits across the smooth oiled track reached Jerry.

"Hi, Murphy! C'mon over, kid!" Jerry's heart leapt to that greeting in spite of his dread. "Go up and sit with Bill Lind's wife, will you, honey?" he whispered excitedly to Marion.

"Yes, but Jerry—"

"I won't race. That is, not today." Old Dad Howitzer wrung Jerry's hands; his faded old eyes blurred with tears, and the fellows descended riotously upon him. Jerry Murphy, deeply touched, warmed to their welcome and told himself that it was good to be back. All he needed was to get hardened to the racket again and to show the backers that he still had what it takes.

Over in the grandstand someone yelled as a red car shot past.

"That's Ernie Tiernan," someone informed him. "He's got your old pit, Jerry, and he's a comer."

SPEED

"Doggone it!" Wild Bill Lind ejaculated. "He's goin' t' beat my time. I did it in thirty-four minutes, forty-five seconds—"

"You—what?" gasped Jerry. Bill laughed indulgently. "That's right. Cars have speeded up since your day, my boy. Watch Babe Miller take that curve. Babe's doing a hundred right now. He's racing Tiernan."

"Gee! And he was just beginning when—" Jerry gulped—"when I cracked—"

There was a sudden dusty blur, a ripping, tearing sound, an agonized cry flung into the air. The white racing car had shot high into the blue and, like a juggler's tiny toy, had turned a complete cartwheel and flashed out of sight.

They were off on the run, the thirty or more of them, across the now deserted track. No one noticed that Jerry Murphy alone did not move. He leaned, shivering, against the pit railing, fighting against a terrible, overwhelming nausea.

THE FELLOWS were straggling back, muttering sympathy and shaking their heads mournfully over Babe.

Two years in the hospital after a bad crack-up didn't help Jerry when he tried to go back to driving in the races. The cars had been made faster, new records had been set, and the drivers said that Jerry was all washed up—but in a tight spot Jerry earned a different kind of reward that was well worth all the records ever made

"He had a darn good chance for tomorrow's big money, too," Wilbur Steele was saying, his voice hoarse with feeling.

Jerry Murphy wet his dry, parched lips. "Say, was he badly—"

"Yep. Babe's done for, I'm afraid." Bill Lind lit a cigaret with big hands that shook. "His skull is crushed, they say."

Done for! An icy finger trickled along Jerry's spine. Poor Babe! He'd probably put his savings of years into that beautiful new white car, too.

"Say, Babe's got a family," Fred Ramor came plodding up. "He's the entire support of seven kid sisters and brothers. Old Howitzer told me."

"That's tough. We oughtta take up a purse," someone suggested.

And then they forgot poor Babe and his sad little family, as Wild Bill Lind climbed into his shining new blue demon for another try-out.

"Gosh," Jerry said to himself, "that boy can drive!" He and Bill had been old-time rivals. And in spite of his apathy over Babe Miller, something of the old thrill of the game shot through him. Gee, wouldn't it be swell—maybe if he'd get in a car—

"That's a bad turn," a young driver interrupted his thoughts. "They oughtta fix it, but they say they can't. Not enough money. Eight cars 've gone over that bank though. It gives me the jitters. And now Babe—"

"They can hardly pay the drivers, y' know," reminded a pitman.

"So we have to be killed," whined the youngster.

"Tiernan and Babe both beat Bill's time," someone remarked. "But it looks as if Bill's goin' t' beat Tiernan's time and get first position for the big race tomorrow."

"That's what he's trying to do," Jerry agreed, trembling with excitement. And curiously enough, he found himself envying Bill. Bill would be the big shot tomorrow. He'd been the big shot—once. He'd like a chance to show Bill Lind and that yelling mob out there what he could do! New speed records! Faster cars . . . Boloney!

BILL GRINNED through his black mask of grime and road oil as Jerry went up to him. "Like to take 'er round a few times, Jerry?" he asked.

All the blood seemed to drain from Jerry's heart. "Sure." He managed a wan grin. "You bet!"

But his fingers were chill as he gripped the wheel of the Bluebird, and the roar of the motor seemed scarcely louder than the roar in Jerry Murphy's own heart. He was off! Aw, what the heck! He'd show 'em! He flung a cocky arm aloft as he passed Bill's pit.

He tried to summon a careless nonchalance of manner as he slowed down at last outside the pit. He guessed he'd