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ON THE HIGHWAY

By CARGRAY COOK

MY TWENTY-FIRST birthday. Today I have reached my majority. On this date, in accordance with my late father's will, I, Charles Claiborne, became the absolute master of six millions of money. As much more in cash, a great town house, and the magnificent estate of All-View, remained my mother's, to be mine at her death. And this, too, in accordance with my late father's will. But none of these things meant half as much to me on this wonderful September morning, as the new twelve thousand dollar racing car that had been presented to me the night before by my doting mother.

Think of it! A real Gordon-Rennet, the fastest model in the world, the only car of its kind in America—and mine.

This was Life.

Father had been very liberal, of course. Most fathers are. But with all my allowance he had never permitted me to own a speed car. No imagination, you see. Couldn't understand why a young fellow should want to tear along the highways at ninety miles an hour. No pep to Dad. Too busy making money, I guess.

But mother, now, she was different. She could understand. Anyway, she knew I had had my eyes on this racer for a long time, and for that reason had decided to anticipate my purchase by presenting it to me for my birthday.

And now I was out on the highway, creeping along at a mere warming up of sixty miles an hour. This part of the road was a bit rough yet, and as I

slackened the pace I found time to swear at another racy-looking car ahead of me, as it swerved from side to side in the effort of its driver to avoid the outcropping boulders. A bit farther on, the new highway began, however, and with a sustained shriek from my electric horn, I stepped upon the accelerator, opened my exhaust, and tore past the other car with a grin of derision.

Seventy. . . Seventy-five. Eighty miles I made, and still I pressed upon the feed for more. A kick with my left heel, and the muffler closed, and the ensuing silence seemed to startle the perfect mechanism into a more velvety swiftness. Not a quiver, not a sway, to the wonderful machine, and the blood coursed through my veins with an exhilaration not to be described.

Think of it! Outside of the professional tracks, there was not a car in America that could touch me. On the highway I was king.

Luxuriating in the perfection of this matchless creation of the greatest automobile builders in the world, I softened the pressure on the pedal, thrilling with the consciousness of personal ownership, as the great machine noiselessly reduced its momentum.

"Some boat!" I exclaimed in sheer joy, as I shifted my back to a more upright position. And then I was almost shocked out of this posture by the appalling thunder of an open exhaust immediately behind me. Furiously I pressed upon the gas feed. I didn't turn to look. I felt in my

bones that it was the racy-looking car I had passed so exultingly, away back where the good road began. Well, all the better! If its driver had any sporting blood in him, I would show him a race that would test his game-ness to the limit.

Like a thing unchained, the Gordon-Rennet responded to my touch. I smiled as I felt the rush of air and gave the car more gas. And then I ceased smiling and sank a bit lower in the seat. I was not losing the other. His open exhaust still thundered at my back. I was not gaining an inch.

Not really disturbed, yet a bit irritated at the ability of the unknown to keep pace with me, I pressed upon the gas pedal for a maximum feed to the carburetor, and narrowly watched the climb of the speedometer to eighty, eighty-five, ninety.

But despite the terrific speed with which I flew along the highway, there was no let-up to the thunderous roar of my pursuer's open muffler. I became really nervous then and swore aloud at the unbelievable possibility that the other's car might even *pass* my new Gordon-Rennet.

I WAS just turning to look behind in an angry effort to calculate the unknown racer's chances, when I heard a cry ahead. Like a flash I saw the situation. Two pedestrians had emerged from a wooded path directly upon the highway. They had no time to think. No time to move. No time to escape. They stood paralyzed with fright. And yet I seemed to have plenty of time to consider them and to consider the highway beside them. I realized instantly that it would be impossible for me to pass them on my right. I must swerve to the left, and yet I saw distinctly that this would be a tremendous risk, not alone because that side of the road was in a state of eruption, due to the work of a gas company's ditch dig-

ger, but because of the imminent danger of a collision with the racer coming from behind. I had not seen him, nor had I now time to raise a warning arm; but I knew he was there, for the clamor of his cut-out was at my very heels—I had not gained an inch.

And then I swerved!

There was a cry, a crash—and instinctively my right foot pressed the footbrake, while my left threw out the clutch.

I found myself upon the highway, and with footsteps light as air hastened back to where a racing car was overturned. Even yet one of the front wheels continued spinning, and curiously enough my first thought was a mental comment of approval upon the perfection of that wheel's noiseless bearings.

My foot struck a license tag upon the roadway and I gave an exclamation as I recognized it as my own. With that peculiar human attribute that causes us to touch a freshly painted post, I involuntarily turned to where I thought my own car stood, to see if my license plate was missing. Oddly enough, I did not see the car, and I kicked the license plate aside and approached the group made up of the two pedestrians and a silent form on the ground.

One of the pedestrians was kneeling beside the victim of the wreck, and I could not help giving vent to an exclamation as I saw him place his handkerchief over the face of the silent figure before him.

The other pedestrian was intent on the examination of a card-case, evidently taken from one of the pockets of the motorist.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

The man standing was too preoccupied to hear me, evidently, for he failed to answer me or to observe my presence; and even when I tapped him on the back he did not turn.

"Well, is he dead?" I inquired of the other pedestrian, as he arose from beside the prostrate body. But he, too, vouchsafed no answer.

I LOOKED at the form on the ground. There was something vaguely familiar about his clothing, and one sprawling hand showed a ring I recalled having seen before. I lifted the kerchief from his face, but the features were too mangled to afford recognition; and the dreadful angle of his head showed that the man's neck was broken.

Then I heard the man with the card-case speaking.

"It's that young fool, Claiborne," he said with an oath; and whether his anger was at his own narrow escape from the speeding car, or at this careless prodigality and waste of youth, I could not tell; but I turned to him impatiently.

"Don't be an ass," I cried. "I am Claiborne. This fellow was chasing me when he was wrecked."

But they didn't seem to hear me, and then the other one spoke.

"Yes, it's him, all right. It's a wonder he got out of our way at the

speed he was traveling. Tearing along like a crazy man on the highway, with his muffler wide open, at a hundred miles an hour! You could understand it if he was racing now, but there wasn't another car in sight. Gee, and he was twenty-one today."

I cried out to them again, but they didn't seem to hear me and turned away. I then perceived another of the cards on the ground and picked it up. It was *my* card.

And then I cried out in fright, for now I knew why the dead man's clothing and the dead man's ring seemed so familiar.

They were mine!

Then it was true. There had been no other car. I had accidentally opened the muffler of my own car when shifting my seat, and I had been racing against myself!

This day I had reached my majority.

On this date I had become the absolute master of six millions of money.

Yet this was death.

I was the dead man.

Oh, my God, I *am* the dead man!