

# Weird Tales

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# The Gray Rider

By CHARLES HILAN CRAIG

**H**IS name was Lear. He was the world's greatest racing driver and it was said of him that he was utterly devoid of nerves.

For three years he had been the leader among the speed demons of the surfaced tracks, and during those three years he had won every race in which his car had finished. Several times accidents had sent him to the pits to stay—again he had been rammed by a driver who lost control—but whenever he finished the race it was in the lead.

Throughout the land he was known to the sporting public as "King Lear"—to his more intimate friends simply as "the king."

He no longer needed the money which came to him through racing, but rather drove for the sheer zest of driving. There was a thrill for him in every turn on any speedway, a double thrill every time he came thundering into the straightaway. As he raced he laughed; and he was a man who still could laugh when he had finished the last lap on the great brick oval at the capital of the racing world—laugh while ready hands unbent the fingers that clutched the wheel in a deathlike grip.

Without nerves was King Lear, they said, and there was little reason to deny that bald statement. For he was a man who went out in front and stayed there till the race was over or something had broken. No tremendous spurts, no sneaking, no jockeying. Lear clamped down the accelera-

tor and held it there. Little wonder he got a thrill from those terrible turns, for he went into them faster than any other living man—and lived: less strange the double thrill from the straightaway, for his car was a weaving phantom when he came from the turns, a gray mist when he went into the next.

Lear was perhaps thirty-five years old at the time of which I write, and had been racing for about ten years. It was nearing the end of the racing season and he was in the next to the last race of the year when he first saw the man whom he intuitively dubbed "the Gray Rider." He had paid little attention to the other entries: it made no difference to him who they were or in what numbers—he would beat them all, barring accident.

He was on the sixtieth lap of the two hundred and fifty mile grind when first his attention was attracted by this gray rider who was to be his chief competitor in the next race.

The car was gray, not the gray which bright enamel usually gives, but a drab gray, a sordid gray. The car was low-slung and apparently awkwardly built. King Lear found himself criticizing as he swung past that car on the sixtieth lap. The man was deep down in the seat, barely showing his head, but he also was gray. And he seemed to be laughing as Lear swept past him: an uncomfortable thought welled up in the mind of the king that there was a sardonic something about this man and his car that he could not fathom.

But he swept the thought away and settled down to finish ahead.

They were on the ninetieth lap when the gray car almost rammed him, and he swung into the fence, splintering it and ripping off a wheel.

With anger in his heart he made ready to protest, but the Gray Rider had swept from the track and was waiting for him, having left the race. "I'm sorry," he said.

Lear's anger dissipated like a mist. He laughed.

"Maybe it wasn't your fault," he said, and took mental stock of the other driver.

Gray dust had settled finely over the driver's face. The hair, just visible under the turned-up helmet, was gray. Under the gray of that face there were many tiny wrinkles. The face was set as though it had come from a mold—granite. Hours of grim intensity at the taped wheel had seen to that.

"What's your name?" asked Lear. He was surprised that he never had seen this man before—perhaps some new chap breaking into the game.

"Gray," answered the Gray Rider, and to Lear it appeared that for a moment a sardonic smile touched the thin lips. He didn't like that smile.

There was something . . .

He had intended to look the man up, to ask Angus about him, but somehow he didn't do it. A reason why he should now want to find out who and what a fellow racer was didn't occur to him—he who had never given a hang what was put against him in a race.

Angus, his team manager, had come a-running.

"What happened?" he had said; and Lear had replied, "I almost got rammed."

"What!" and there had been on the face of Angus a strange expression of wonder and doubt. Lear had

looked about for Gray but the man had gone.

**S**PEED—more speed! That was what was killing Lear. Cars were not built fast enough for him. Time after time in races he had ruined cars, driving them to the ultimate limit of their endurance till they were burned out beneath him. Wrecked many times—but he seemed to have the lives of a cat. He always came through. His god was Speed!

"It'll get you yet," said Angus, again and again. "You can't keep up those stunts and live. Take it from me, boy, if you don't quiet down on the curves you'll go through the big gates some day." This from Angus, who was continuously exhorting his other drivers to show a little pep.

Lear laughed.

But then that was Lear. That was why he was the best-loved driver in America. The crowd came to see speed, and he was there to show it to them. But deep down in his heart he knew that Angus was right. Too near—many times—was death. For now that the great American classic race had been run at an average rate of more than one hundred miles per hour the ultimate speed on wheels was fast being attained. Little more could be expected of a machine which clung to earth.

Yet Lear still asked for speed.

To see him drive in a race was to see something never to be forgotten. He always smiled as he rode: of course the crowd couldn't see that, but they knew, for the press agents had long been busy. All the crowd could see was a blur as the red car swept past the stands. But they knew he was smiling at death as he rode. And from East and West men came to watch him ride like a red whirlwind to victory.

And then the last five hundred mile race of the season—on the new board

track in California. The team managed by Angus was entered, and of course Lear was expected to win.

As the day for the race neared there came into the mind of Lear a question. Would the Gray Rider be in the race? Why he wondered about this he did not know. He never had questioned before. He did not ask Angus about it, for he knew that a query now about the other entries would serve to make the fiery little Scotchman wonder if he were losing his iron nerve. He didn't read the newspapers; he didn't read the bulletins; he never read anything. All he cared to do was race—all he ever desired was to sit under the wheel of his little red *Cannon* and thunder to victory. He never had cared who it was he was racing.

Speed—more speed! He would shatter that five hundred mile record to fragments. He would show them that his red *Cannon* could show its heels to any car ever built. And as he thought of it in his last trial spin before the big race he involuntarily increased his pace till the other cars, the fence, the empty stands became gray blurs. Faster, faster, faster! Round the curve, into the long straightaway past the stands again. Faster, faster. And then he knew instinctively as Angus flagged him in that he had ridden at a pace never before equaled by man.

THE day came; the hour was at hand—the time for the big race. Car after car drew up to the pits for final adjustments; car after car was trundled to the starting line. Drivers smoking a last cigarette. Mechanics pottering about. The drone of a car ready to go.

The officials lined them up. Lear and his red wagon in the first tier. The others stretched to the side and behind. The Gray Rider?

Lear looked about. Yes, there he was at the outside of the first tier:

and Lear was puzzled: that made an extra car in the first row—not safe.

An official was beside him.

“What's the idea of the extra car there?” he asked.

“Which car?” asked the official.

“Gray one—number thirty-one—outside.”

The official looked where he pointed and laughed; said something which Lear did not catch.

But Lear laughed too. He had never been accused of lack of sportsmanship. What did he care if the first tier was jammed from pole to stand? He was going to burn them all up: win!

But as he sat there looking at the Gray Rider there came over him a sensation he never had known before—a scarcely felt impression of impending disaster. Somehow, deep down within him, he felt that this would be his last race. But he shook off the feeling with a laugh of disdain, lighted a cigarette and waited.

There sounded the last preliminary signal. The track was cleared. A sputtering roar and they were off. Round the track—a droning string of angry motors, following the pacer. A vast thunder of sound. They passed the starting line and the flag dropped down and up again.

A dull roar from the crowd; screaming of exhausts; whining throb of motors; gray film of smoke; gray cloud of dust. Speed—more speed!

Mile after mile, lap after lap—and the Gray Rider had nosed up and was running close to Lear. A gray shadow stalking him, urging him on; and he responded. His car changed from a red streak to a misty blur as he thundered around the track. A hundred and ten—twenty—thirty—forty. Speed. And the gray shadow still stalked him, lacking the necessary spurt to go around.

A car went through the fence on the death curve. Another went over

and over when a tire blew out, but by superb skill Lear and the Gray Rider missed the wreckage, went on and on. Speed—speed to the utmost!

Into the pit for new tires and gas: then back to the grind: back to the race with the gray shadow which was challenging his superior skill.

They passed the hundred and eightieth lap. The hundred and ninetieth. Ten laps to go. And on the straightaway the Gray Rider passed Lear. The smile left Lear's face. His teeth set hard. His dark face was a mass of tiny wrinkles. He leaned forward.

But his car did not respond. He held grimly at the rear wheel of the gray car, but could do no better. Wildly reckless on the curves, a raging demon in the stretch—it availed nothing. The Gray Rider was just as reckless, just as superb in his handling of the gray car.

Five laps to go—three laps—two laps—one lap, and the spring on his foot-feed broke. He could feel it go. Wide open his car thundered on. He reached over to shut off the power, but at that moment the Gray Rider's eyes looked into his. He could feel rather than see the sardonic challenge in those eyes. He gripped again the wheel, careened wildly into the curve.

How he made it he did not know, but he came out. A mere touch would send him tumbling into the fence.

At the rear wheel of the gray car. He wanted speed and couldn't get it. Speed! Down the stretch he roared like the wind, and then he began to gain, gain, gain. His radiator was even with the driver's seat of the leading car. A little more, a little more! He did not hear the roar of the race, had no ears for the thunder of the hundred thousand people mad with the thrill of speed. He could think of nothing but the sardonic smile which he felt must be on the face of the Gray Rider.

Slowly he gained, but too late! Too late! The checkered flag went down—but the Gray Rider had drawn it.

A low snarl escaped Lear's lips as he realized that he had lost. Then the snarl changed to an exclamation of horror as the Gray Rider shot in front of him. He started to slow up, forgetting that his foot-feed was no longer working. Sharply he twisted the wheel, went broadside into the Gray Rider. He heard a tremendous roaring, the clang of steel on steel; smelt the odor of blazing gasoline; felt its wrath sear his lungs; saw stars shoot across his vision; saw, too—no, felt—the sardonic smile of the man who had beaten him. . .

**L**EAR regained consciousness for only a few minutes at the hospital. Angus was there with him, firmly solicitous.

"Lost!" gasped Lear.

"Lost, hell," said Angus. "You won."

"But the gray car—thirty-one—beat me out just before I crashed into him."

Angus looked puzzled.

"There wasn't any thirty-one in the race," he said. "And you didn't crash anybody. You hit the fence."

"But the Gray Rider?"

"There wasn't any Gray Rider!"

"But—*there must have been!*"

Lear knew that Angus was lying. No Gray Rider! The fool! Why, look, there was the Gray Rider beside Angus now, his hand on Angus' shoulder. The Gray Rider—gray with dust, gray with sternness. A sardonic smile was upon his face, but the gray eyes which shone through the goggles held no mirth. They were cold—as death!

"He's beside you," cried Lear, hoarsely. "Look, Angus!"

Angus turned all around in utter amazement. There was no one there.

"Why, Lear——"

Lear was dead.