

The Wreck That Re-Reckoned.

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An original story written for THE SCRAP BOOK.

IT was dull at Watervale. The male populace lolled listlessly along the sidewalk or the principal thoroughfare, waiting for something of interest to turn up. A yellow dog stood in the doorway of Peter's merchandise store looking down the street at another yellow dog in the doorway of Harding's blacksmith-shop, both dogs waiting for something of interest to turn up.

At the headquarters of the town marshal—a rather small and scantily furnished room located in the rear of the telegraph office—things were particularly dull. Murgan, who had been elected marshal of Watervale by a majority of two—said majority comprising himself and former hired-man—sat with his feet elevated upon his desk and listlessly regarded his assistant. That assistant was Rufus Hicks, Murgan's former hired-man, now patrolman of Watervale.

It was the close of the noon hour, and business was suspended for the time being. Most of Watervale had its hands in its pockets, and Murgan and Hicks appreciated the fact that while the populace kept its hands in its own pockets, it would not likely get them into anybody else's pockets.

Suddenly the sounder in the telegraph office began to click, and a minute later the door of the marshal's headquarters was opened and the telegraph operator entered and handed Murgan a slip of paper, with the terse comment, "Something doing!"

The yellow slip might have been a jolt of golden whisky, by the life it put into the latter's legs. They straightened out with a jerk, and Murgan came upright. Flattening the telegram in his hand, he read:

MARSHAL OF WATERVALE:

Stop automobile number 8196 and arrest occupants.

MARSHAL OF LARKSPUR.

Hicks got to his feet and stood at command while Murgan considered how best to direct his forces. Finally he spoke.

"Hicks, you are detailed to the corner of Washington and Lincoln Streets, with orders to stop automobile bearing the number 8196 and arrest occupants. I will go get a new padlock for the jail."

Hicks hastened to carry out the com-

mands of his superior officer, and soon was seen patrolling the intersection of Washington and Lincoln Streets, where a particularly large flag, attached to a particularly small pole, perennially fanned the flame of patriotism in the hearts of the townspeople.

There was a stern purpose evident in every inch of Hicks' alert figure, which attracted his way the person of more than one loiterer, and when Murgan, having fitted a new padlock to the door of the village jail, appeared on the scene and joined his henchman in patrolling the flagpole corner, the two yellow dogs left their respective doorways and hurried down the street.

Ten minutes passed, when a light steam roadster came into sight over a rise about a quarter of a mile away and shot like an arrow down the slight decline.

Hicks growled, "It's breaking the limit." Murgan nodded grimly, "We'll fine 'em." It was just like money rolling down hill to his feet.

Suddenly the onlookers shouted with astonishment. There came the hoarse rumble of a horn, and over the rise leaped a great black car, which bore down with terrific speed upon the light roadster.

In the forward automobile was a smooth-faced, square-jawed young fellow, his hand shut like a gauntlet of steel on the lever; while by his side, clinging to her seat in pale determination, sat a girl of eighteen.

In the rear car were two men: the chauffeur, coolly engaged with the pilot wheel, and a fat-featured man of about fifty, his hatless head surmounted by a short and scanty growth of corn-silk hair. The latter was half standing, gripping his seat with one hand, while in his other he held a revolver.

Suddenly he gave a hoarse shout of command, the big auto leaped forward like an immense black demon, and pointing his revolver at the steam roadster, now to the left only a few yards ahead, the fat man fired five shots in rapid succession at its tires.

Appreciating the danger of going at high speed with, perhaps, a punctured tire, the young fellow in the roadster shut off his power. Noting the act, the chauffeur of the larger car did the same.

The two machines slackened speed with

a suddenness that all but threw out their occupants, and, clinging to his seat with purple face, the fat man gave a shout of triumph.

"I've got you, you scoundrel! I'll teach you to run off with my ward!"

Before the other could answer, there came a loud report, followed by a blinding flash, like that caused by the blowing out of a fuse. The big auto swerved and clashed into the roadster, there was a groan of machinery, and the occupants of the two cars were hurled into the dusty roadway at the feet of Murgan and Hicks.

A groan from the chauffeur, a cry from the young girl, a shout from her companion, and a squeal from the fat man, and all but the first struggled to their knees and feet.

The young fellow was by the side of his fiancee.

"Are you hurt, Alice?" he questioned fearfully.

"I think not; only just look at me!"

"Never mind, dear; there are plenty more pretty dresses, but only one Alice Gray!"

"But Mr. Tompkins—is he injured?"—with a look in the direction of the fat man, who was wiping the roadway dust from his expansive and frightened features.

"It seems not," young Waverly answered. "But hurry! We will get away before he misses us, and if we can keep out of his reach until to-morrow, you will be of age. Come!"

The lovers turned, thinking to steal away unregarded, when the fat man gave a shout and started in pursuit.

"Hands off my ward, you scoundrel!" cried Tompkins, seizing the girl by the arm and dragging her from young Waverly. "Come, you unthankful child! Back to the city with you!"

"Oh, please don't!" pleaded the unhappy girl. "I am engaged to Mr. Waverly."

"Engaged to this fellow, you jade?"

The square jaws of young Waverly closed dangerously. "Yes; engaged to me!"

"I am this girl's guardian, sir," fairly shouted the fat man, puffing out his cheeks with rage. "Begone with you!"

The villagers were too wholly preoccupied with the overturned automobiles and the unconscious chauffeur to pay any heed to the little drama being enacted by the unhappy lovers and the irate guardian, and not till Murgan, after a brief command to Hicks, stepped from the crowd, and, going over, laid his hand on Tompkins' shoulder, was the tragic-comedy interrupted.

"You are under arrest, sir!" were the startling words that smote the ears of the fat man.

Tompkins wheeled about with fallen jaw. "Arrest? Me under arrest? What for?"

"For breaking the speed limit," came the cool reply; "for firing off a revolver in the town limits; and for this." Murgan drew a telegram from his pocket, and, hold-

ing it up before the eyes of the other, read:

MARSHAL OF WATERVALE:

Stop automobile number 8196 and arrest occupants.

MARSHAL OF LARKSPUR.

The fat man gasped. "Why, damme, sir, it was me who had the Marshal of Larkspur send that telegram. That's the number of that young scoundrel's car!"—pointing at Waverly.

"You were in the big black machine, were you not?" questioned Murgan.

"I was."

Murgan pointed at the oblong number-plate attached to the rear of the larger auto by a bolt through the center. The plate read:

8196

Tompkins glared for a moment at the condemning object, then turned fiercely upon young Waverly.

"It's some trick of yours, you blackguard! Don't you deny it!"

Paying no heed to these words, the lover continued to stare, like one fascinated, at the number-plate in dispute. Suddenly he seized the marshal of Watervale by the shoulder, and, drawing him aside, whispered hurriedly as he pointed at Tompkins:

"That man is an escaped lunatic from the Larkspur asylum, and the telegram is from the authorities for his arrest. I and my sister there"—designating the young girl—"were quietly jogging along in our roadster, when all of a sudden this fellow and his crazier chauffeur began to chase us in that big car. You saw the rest. Look here."

The lover hurried to the wreck, and, wrenching the number plate from the smaller car, held it up before Murgan's eyes.

"This is the number of my auto, sir."

The plate read, in large white letters against a purple background:

9618

Murgan studied the figures a moment, then turned upon Tompkins.

"Let me see your wrists," he demanded.

"No, the other one. Ah!"

There was a sharp click, and Tompkins gave a howl as he realized that the wily Murgan had handcuffed him. He began to swear, and demand in very unguardian-like terms the meaning of his arrest.

"Look out, officer," warned young Waverly, touching his forehead significantly. "He may grow violent and do somebody harm!"

"I'll see he doesn't," assured Murgan. "Just you take the lady further off." Then he called to Hicks: "How's your man, Hicks?"

"Still unconscious. Guess we ought to carry him into Cobb's till the Doc comes."

"All right," agreed Murgan. "Get some of the boys to lend a hand, and look out the fellow doesn't hurt you when he comes round. He's from the Larkspur asylum. Here, none of that!" This warning was given to Tompkins, who was endeavoring to lift his feet and jump through his handcuffed wrists, under the impression that by such novel means he could free himself of the manacles.

"Take off these things! It's that young scoundrel that's crazy, and that girl there! And you are crazy, too, you pettifogging loafer!" raved the guardian.

Murgan smiled grimly.

"That's the way with you asylum people; you think every one crazy but yourself. Come along; be quiet and you won't get hurt. Easy now!"

He gripped his man by the arm and led him off down Lincoln Street toward the town jail. As he went he thought: "I can't fine a crazy man for speeding or shooting off firearms in the town limits, but danged if I don't get a good reward from the asylum for his capture."

If ever a sane man acted like one in the last stages of moria, the fat Mr. Tompkins was that man, and when he was unceremoniously locked in the little jail by the imperturbable marshal, he all but became a fit candidate for the asylum.

"I tell you," he shouted at Murgan as the latter was serenely taking his leave, "I am as sane as you are, you crazy fool, and if that young scoundrel marries my ward before I get out of here, I'll have you quartered and hanged!"

Murgan turned back.

"What did you say is the number of the auto you were in?"

"I don't know. I hired it in a hurry at Larkspur to chase this pair of runaways."

"Were you in the big black car?"

"Yes; but look here, you——"

"That'll do," waved Murgan. "I can read. Number 8196 is bolted on the big auto, and I've a telegram here in my pocket to stop 8196 and arrest occupants."

"But I'm a fool to argue with a crazy man," he muttered to himself as he left the outer cell of the jail to return to the scene of accident.

There he was informed that the two young folks had engaged a rig and hurried away to the nearest railway station, the lady having developed symptoms of hysteria and begged to be taken home to her people. He gave his attention to the still unconscious chauffeur, who a little later came from his daze like a diver up from deep water.

"Me crazy!" he cried, as he caught a bystander's whisper. "Not on your sweet life!" He kicked himself upright. "Where's the captain?"

"You mean the man who was in the car with you?" questioned Murgan.

"Yes, the fat commodore. He owes me fifty for bagging the larks. Hated like sin to spoil their fun, but I needed the money."

"He doesn't look crazy," commented a bystander to his neighbor.

The chauffeur caught the comment.

"Crazy! What are you giving us? Say, does the fat boy call me crazy to cheat me out of my fifty?" He stared about him. "Why don't some of you tanks loosen a tap?"

Murgan studied the man. "What was the number of your car?" he finally demanded.

"Number of my car? Why, 9618. Can't you read the number-plate?"

"Yes; but the number-plate reads 8196."

"The devil it does!" was the irreverent reply.

"Come outside and look," advised Murgan, who felt the lapping of deep waters.

Outside at the scene of accident, the chauffeur stared at the number-plate bolted at the rear of the larger auto. Suddenly he swore.

"You fatheads! Don't you see the plate has been twisted upside down by the spill?"

He gave the oblong plate bearing the figures 8196 a kick, inverting it.

"There you are—9618."

Murgan stared a moment at the transformation, then looked about for the number plate that young Waverly had wrenching from the steam roadster. But it was nowhere to be found.

"The devil!" said the marshal of Watervale.

Without another word he turned and hurried into the telegraph station and wrote out a telegram to the marshal of Larkspur notifying him to "stop rig bearing young man and woman and place occupants under arrest." Then he recalled the sweet face of Alice Gray and the square jaws of young Waverly, then the fat, selfish face of his prisoner, and meditatively tearing up the telegram he lighted a cigar and left the office.

The next morning after a leisurely breakfast, Murgan made an official call on the fat Mr. Tompkins in his cell, and while the latter raved, the marshal calmly detailed the facts.

"You see, my dear sir, the number plate on your machine was turned upside down by the spill, and the figures 9618, upside down, make a perfect 8196, which was the number of the automobile whose occupants I was duly authorized by telegraph to place under arrest."

Tompkins was black with rage.

"But the number of that young scoundrel's car was 8196, too. Why didn't you arrest him as well as me?"

Murgan studied the ash of his cigar.

"You see, my dear sir, the number-plate per of the other car was 8196, but you see that number-plate got turned upside down, too, and 8196, upside down, makes a pretty fair 9618. And I had no authority to hold 9618."

The guardian shook his fists at the marshal.

