

The Leap of Revelation

by



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THE death-car slowed sickeningly around the curve in the dirt track, lurching and pitching perilously as Norton stepped down hard on the accelerator to pull her out of the skid. The green-striped racer—the other Apex car—thundered, hood with hood, on the inside of the turn.

It was all over before Norton had a chance to think. The hooded and begoggled figure in the sister Apex car shot a sinister, calculating glance across the track. Then, deliberately, with a covert shift of his wheel to the right, he crowded Norton into the railing.

There came a sputtering crash. It was over before the most alert of the crowd could grasp what had happened. The death-car had lunged into the fence, snapping three of the solid eight-by-eight posts at the roots as a man might break a toothpick between his fingers, shattering the fence for twenty yards into tiny shreds. Then it had plunged up onto its nose, spinning like a top. The air was full of the pungent smell of burned gasoline, freshly plowed-up earth, and hot metal.

For a full second there came only the receding clamor of Mashburn's open exhaust as he whirled away down the dirt track, and the rising din of the other cars as they shut off and slid into the turn.

A woman's frantic scream cut the

silence sharply. Then came the *thud-thud* of running feet; the confused, dull brushing of bodies of men speeding to the piled-up wreckage.

It was soon over. The gray ambulance nosed its way ruthlessly through the crowd. A few deft movements, and the big, gray wagon was clanging its way through the gates toward the hospital.

One thing lingered. When they dug Norton from the wreckage he was insensible. But in his unconsciousness, his hand had crept inside his race-stained shirt; and, clutched so tightly that the slim gold links were fairly cutting into the flesh, was a slender gold chain.

The surgeon's face relaxed from its rigid, machinelike mask into tired lines as the inert, etherized form was wheeled out of the operating-room.

"Sheer waste of energy," he grumbled to his assistant. "That 'n' 'll live about twelve hours. Oh, he might possibly live a day 'r so, maybe. But he hasn't a chance."

The assistant nodded agreement, as assistants always do. This time, however, he really thought his chief was right.

"D'you know who that was?" he asked, seizing an opportunity to interest his

superior.

“Nope,” languidly. “Who?”

“Norton—Alan Norton.”

“Norton! The driver?”

“Yep; one that married the banker’s daughter over at Ashton. Remember the newspaper talk, don t you?”

“Devil he is! I should say I do remember it! ‘Love at first sight!’ ‘banker’s daughter, wild about racing game, elopes with driver!’ And the Sunday supplements when they had their row and divorce. Whe-ew! Well, the poor devil’s a goner now.”

Again the assistant nodded agreement. Then they passed on and forgot it all.

But the surgeon was wrong; and the assistant was wrong. Alan Norton did not die in twelve hours. He did not die in a couple of days. Three days, four, five passed: and he was still in the land of the living.

Burning up with fever, constantly delirious and raving, by some unknown something alone he clung to life. Flat on his back, eyes blazing up at the ceiling, he mouthed broken sentences, hour after hour, weakly, disconnectedly, always his voice full of either the utmost hate or the tenderest love. But he simply would not die.

Nor did he.

Alan Norton, conscious, was as taciturn as Alan Norton, delirious, had raved. Inch by inch, back from the valley of the shadow, he crept by something that was not of the body but of the spirit.

Never did he smile. Almost never did he speak. His only diversion was having the auto-racing news read to him from the papers. The only time he showed emotion was when some chance item happened to mention the name of the Apex driver, Mashburn. For an hour afterward the veins stood out on his temples.

There were long periods when he would lie flat on his back, teeth set grimly,

glaring at one spot on the ceiling. But he never made any explanation of these moods.

Nurses, as any man engaged in the late well-known war will testify, are, first of all, nurses. But next they are women.

Norton had been asleep, and was still supposed to be. A chance sentence from a low conversation just outside the open door roused him into attention.

“Just pitiful. I’d read all about it in the papers, and so of course I could tell what he was raving about: seems he met her after the races at Ashton—just as romantic—eloped; they were wildly happy until she got to plaguing him to let her ride in a real race at Ashton. I gathered that he must have been afraid to take her with him there because there was a deep ditch or cut right at a turn. They must both have had fierce tempers, ’cause they broke up about it: then she must have gone to running with some fellow named Washburn, or—”

There was a scrambling noise and the nurse came hurriedly into the room, newspapers in hand, just as a calm step passed outside.

“Incidentally,” Norton remarked grimly, with a flash of temper and the air of a man finishing a conversation. “will you please read the dope on the Ashton races?”

Her face flamed red as she opened the paper. “There is a persistent rumor from reliable sources,” she was reading, ten minutes later, “that the Apex will make its last appearance on dirt tracks, day after to-morrow at Ashton. Henceforth it will appear only on the big tracks. One of the drivers is to be picked as sole Apex driver; in all probability, Mashburn. Since the accident to Norton, no one has really driven the Apex death-car. Mashburn’s friends are already congratulating him on the promotion—”

“How soon, nurse,” interrupted Norton, “will I be well enough to leave?”

“Oh, very soon. The doctor says he

never saw any one improve as rapidly. Not over a fortnight; perhaps in a week."

He did not reply. Her eyes lingered on him a moment, then she resumed: "A little bird also whispers that Mashburn is receiving congratulations doubly: that his gift from the factory comes to him also as an engagement present. The other entries in the twenty-five mile classic—"

"I'm tired, nurse; I'm going to sleep. But—but will you leave me the paper?"

A half-hour later she looked in, and Alan Norton's bed was empty. He was not in the room. Excited investigation showed he was nowhere in the hospital.

The only clue seemed to be that the orderly told six different and conflicting tales about his own knowledge of the affair. But Norton had simply vanished.

And on the floor lay a newspaper, with a hole where an item had been torn out.

The short races at Ashton went over. Up in the stands the crowd stretched, then settled down again nervously for the last race: the twenty-five-mile classic, the only race in which the Apex cars had been entered.

Alan Norton, pale and a bit wobbly on his legs, fastened down the hood of the death-car.

"Send her around to warm her up, Jimmy, lad," he said to the mechanic. "Like you used to for me."

"Old Steele is up in the stand," protested Jimmy, doglike eyes of devotion clinging to Norton's face.

"I know. But Jimmy, what does a mere corporation president matter? He said he'd be here when I er—persuaded him to let me have her this afternoon. Go to it, lad! Oh, by the way, when you get back, remind me to give you an envelope to keep for me. Keep it till after this race. If anything happens—you know there's always the bare chance—take it up on Fourteenth Street and give it to my—to Bess. It's a sort of will. Don't look so startled,

lad," Norton laughed. "even a racing driver ought to make a will, you know. But don't forget to hand it back to me after this race. Now send her around, lad; warm her up good."

He smiled queerly as Jimmy began letting out the death-car. "If anything happens—"

Unfolding the paper he reread it a last time. It began very curiously for a will:

MY SWEETHEART—MY WIFE:

I expert that I am foolish to write this. Most men are, you know, about the one woman. I just want to say good-by; and this is—the only way I can.

Our disagreement, Bess, is going too far—has gone too far. I will not have it go further. I know how much, exactly how much, you care for Mashburn. I will not let you complete the ruining of your life.

I know this track, dear. I met you here. It was here that I refused to let you ride with me in a race. I am afraid, dear, that an accident is going to happen about the eleventh lap to-day.

If I thought that either Mashburn or I had any chance of coming out of that cut alive, I would not write this. But there isn't a chance; not the slightest.

Good-by, Bess, sweetheart. God bless you. You are still young, dear. Find yourself some clean man, not like Mashburn—or me—and forget your past unhappiness as soon as you can.

I love you.

ALAN.

Carefully Norton sealed the envelope. "Take good care of this, Jimmy," he instructed as the latter came up. "Give it back as soon as the race is over. By the way, though, you know where Bess lives, don't you?"

"Sure. Where she used to. I won't forget."

There was a solid cloud of smoke in front of the stand. The roar of many open exhausts was deafening. The starter walked out.

Down flashed the red flag. The roar of exhausts reached a hellish crescendo. Out of the fog flashed car after car, sputtering and snorting, roaring away.

It was like all dirt-track races: the lunging, roaring spurt down the straightaway, the shut-off for the turn; the lurching skid and side-slip: and the leap into the straightaway again.

The first laps passed quickly.

Ninth lap. Norton had spurred to within fifty yards of Mashburn's green-striped racer, and there had stuck like a leech. The latter was driving like a fiend. The two Apex cars were half a lap ahead of the field.

Time after time Norton had plunged into the solid mass of dust in Mashburn's wake, steering by sheer feel alone. As they passed on the tenth lap the spot in the track where only a railing separated the course from the ravine, Norton stepped down hard upon the accelerator. The death-car jumped under him in earnest.

What had gone before was play; this was deadly serious. On the curve at the upper end of the track he caught Mashburn. Side by side the two Apex cars thundered down the straightaway, the death-car on the inside.

As if chained together they began to skid into the turn. The cut was just ahead. Norton shifted his wheel ever so slightly to the right. The death-car leaped straight for the cut.

There was nothing between him and the-railing. Mashburn, losing nerve, had shut off completely, dropping behind barely in time.

With a sharp wrench Norton twisted the wheel back, fighting desperately to turn the death-car out of the cut. He realized fully what he had let himself in for; he wondered if he could undo his work. The racer skidded half around, bumping perilously, threatening every instant in start a series of somersaults through the railing.

Clamped onto the wheel like grim death, Norton's hands held her to the track. His foot slammed down, pressing the accelerator-pedal into the floor-boards. Within a scant inch of the railing the death-car quivered, shook herself like a dog coming out of water, then scooted down the track.

Norton's teeth were clenched tightly. So the cur was afraid to drive neck and neck with him! Never mind, then, within three laps he would come up from behind, give him not the slightest chance, and slam him into that cut.

As he shot around the curve at the upper end of the track he saw ahead the long stretch of the straightaway. At the pit was, Jimmy, frantically flagging him down.

"What?" snapped Norton, sliding the death-car to a standstill.

"W'at t'ell s'maller with you?" snapped back Jimmy. "You know what a hog she is for oil. You haven't pumped a stroke in a year. W'tcher wanner to do—bind and spew engine all over the track?"

Norton angrily slammed her into low and began to speed up his engine.

"And," added Jimmy, "quit drivin' so damned close to Mashburn. Your—his fiancee's ridin' with him as his mechanician. You don't wanner go killin' no woman—" the rest was lost behind.

The hands that gripped the wheel were trembling. Sweat was soaking into the wood

from the tense palms. Pure hell filled Alan Norton's soul. He was one mass of rage: pure, black, cold, diabolical rage. Driving like an arch-demon possessed with all the fiends of hell, he tore around the track. Car after car he passed, flirting with death half a dozen times, and never knew it. His mind held but one thought, he was hunting that green-striped racer.

There it was! Ahead of him, in perfect position to be slammed into the cut, the Apex racer flashed into view, two figures in it. The figure on the right, looking back, turned with a familiar gesture and shouted into Mashburn's ear. Coming up from behind, Norton could see the other driver's frantic efforts to outrun the death-car.

Norton smiled grimly, a queer, twisted, sarcastic smile. Then he acted.

His left foot went down—hard. Deliberately he checked the speed of the death-car to let the others pass in safety. Then, driving like a suicide, he roared past them on the straightaway.

His smile had been at himself. He had found Jimmy was right. He didn't "want to go killin' no woman"—not that woman. He had found there were limits, even to his temper.

Then Alan Norton settled himself down to drive.

They talk yet about the driving that followed, every time racing enthusiasts congregate. The bored and blasé mechanics in the repair pits fought wildly over each others' shoulders to perch on the fences and watch him take his turns, profanely pounding each other on the back each time he snapped his fingers under Death's nose. The stands were one wild mass of yelling lunatics.

That record for the last ten laps is still hanging for dirt-track drivers to shoot at.

Norton took the checkered flag on the fly, flames shooting a yard from his open exhaust. Without slackening, he shot around again, to skid to a stop at his pit.

President Steele, of the Apex plant, hoarse from shouting, excited as a child, sprang to help him from the bucket seat.

"Never saw driving like that in my whole life, Norton!" he fairly yelled. "Never in my life! If you just drive like that for us on the big tracks—"

"Sorry," responded Norton curtly. "If you're offering me the job. I've quit."

"What?"

"I—have quit the game."

"Quit the game? Quit?"

A silent nod.

"But Norton! You can't quit! You can't mean it! Why we simply won't take no for an answer."

"Sorry, sir."

"Ye gods! Man, don't you realize that to-day has made you? Why all this talk about quitting?"

Norton's weary eyes strayed to the track, where a green-striped racer was coming to a halt, then settled on his excited face.

"Why?" he repeated blankly. "Oh, make him take her and keep her, that's hell for 'em both."

"What? What'd you say? I didn't catch that."

"It just doesn't seem worth while now, sir. Then, I was intending—to take—a long journey—this afternoon. And I may—I may yet."

"You need rest, Norton. Take a day to think it over. You're tired now. We're going to ask you again."

Disconsolately Norton turned and left him. He knew full well that neither a day nor a month could change his decision. Something far deeper than whim lay beneath his answer. Almost unconsciously he turned to watch the two figures in racing togs as they left the green-striped racer and crossed the track.

He strode wearily behind a refreshment-booth. The reaction from the strain had left him barely able to stand.

Everything looked strangely unreal: the world was blurring.

Suddenly he came to a wobbly halt. Coming straight to him—not in greasy, race-stained togs, but in the sheerest of dainty feminine creations—was Bess. Her eyes were fastened on him as she came up, nearly at a run.

“Alan!” she panted, grasping his greasy, dusty sleeve in her tense little hands. “I—I—Alan!” Her voice choked. The clear-cut face upturned to his held the one look: the dusky pools of her wide, raised eyes held her whole soul.

“Alan! How could you? Don’t shake your head—I got that letter—that horrible letter Jimmy got suspicious—oh, Alan!” She

was on the verge of tremulous tears.

Manlike. Norton choked down the lump in his throat. “Oh, I didn’t really mean to do it, Bess.” he attempted to lie easily. “I was just running a big bluff. Can’t you see? I didn’t do it.”

“Alan! It was not! Don’t you think I know? I realized you must have heard that silly engagement tale. I made Jimmy flag you and tell you I was riding with Mr. Mashburn as mechanic. I knew my boy, Alan, my boy, even if he wanted to hurt himself, wouldn’t hurt me. And then—then—I just sat—and watched you—win. Alan—oh, don’t, Alan! The public! They’ll see!”

The public be damned! Norton tightened his arm about his wife.