

SPEED

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HERE was no fall at all that year. Winter began toward the close of September and hardly loosened its grip, bringing with it such cold and such hardships as the oldest inhabitant of Port Charles could not remember.

Alice Fayne seldom paid more than passing attention to the weather. She

hadn't paid much attention to anything, really, since her quarrel with Bob Chalmers during the summer. She had gone on as always, defiant, proud, her head held high, and had become engaged to Herman Fallon less than three weeks after Bob had left the city.

But though her love for Bob was dead, she knew that while she had been in love with him everything that went on around her had seemed more interesting. Life had, day after day, been a grand adventure. Now the days were stretches of time to be lived through as painlessly as possible.

There was a heavy blizzard late in October, and a more severe one in November. With the end of the snowfall the thermometer dropped to twenty below zero and stayed there for five days. The harbor froze. The broad lake snapped across and the rubber ice began to thicken.

It was during this cold snap that Bob came back to Port Charles. Alice saw him soon afterward in the post office, and pretended not to see him. When he came across and spoke to her, she tried not to let him see how much his coming had disturbed her.

"Alice," he said, "I want to talk to you. May I come up tonight?"

"I'm sorry," she answered, "I'm busy tonight. Herm Fallon and I are going to a dance."

"Well," he demanded impatiently, "may I see you this afternoon? Or now? Any time, I don't care when. I tell you I've got to talk to you."

She made a date with him for early afternoon.

"If things were the same as always, we'd probably be just starting out to skate or something—together," he said on his arrival.

"You mean," Alice corrected him bitterly, "that I'd be going to skate, and you'd be going skate-sailing. Ordinary skating wouldn't be speedy enough for you. You were never satisfied unless you were traveling sixty miles an hour or more. You always left me the minute we got down to the harbor with our skates, and I never saw you again till—"

"Alice—" reproachfully, "that's not fair. I never left you. You know I didn't."

"Maybe not. But you made me go with you, which was worse."

"I'll admit," Bob said, "I couldn't see why, when we were out driving together, you always wanted to poke along at thirty-five miles an hour."

"You know," Alice told him dully, "that speed terrifies me. It always has. You can't understand the panic I feel because you've never felt that sort of terror. Terror that makes you almost insane. Speed is like wine to you."

"But, Alice, I've told you over and over, that the only way to cure fright like yours, is to go fast. Then you'll get used to it."

"And I've told you—" passionately, "that it's physically impossible to make myself used to speed. It's torture. You knew that was how it affected me, and you deliberately kept on opening up your car wide, or took me ice-boating, and told me you wouldn't go fast. And then you tore along like the wind. Is it any wonder I decided that you either didn't love me, or you were the most selfish man in the world and I was through with you?"

"But it's so childish to spoil our whole lives just over the speed of a car. I was wrong, I'll admit. I didn't realize how real your fear was. Forgive me for the blunders I've made and let's start again."

"Do you think," Alice demanded slowly, "that I could ever forgive you for that last night when I sat there and begged and begged you to go slower, and you just laughed at me and held the car at seventy until I fainted from fright? Do you think I'll ever forgive that? No," Alice slowly shook her head. "There's no use talking about it. I made up my mind then, and I sha'n't change it. You killed any love I had for you that night. And besides, I'm engaged to Herm now."

"But you don't love him. You and I both know you don't love him."

"I do," Alice stormed. "I do love him, and I'm—I'm going to marry him, and I never want to see you again as long as I live!"

BOB was not going on to Montreal until the next night on the sleeper and they met again the next afternoon, the day of the second blizzard.



She was walking now and could only gasp what she had to tell.

"Alice," he said, "will you do me a favor? I happen to know that Herm is out of town today, and he'll never be able to get home tonight unless it stops snowing. Won't you come down to the train to see me off? That's the least you can do."

"All right," she said, "I'll go down. But it won't do any good."

The snow had stopped when Bob called for her. But the mercury had taken a decided drop and a biting wind had come up from the south. A wind which sifted the fine snow, making driving difficult even in the main streets of the town.

"Boy, what a night to be traveling anywhere," Bob shivered. "I'll be lucky if the trains are running."

After almost an hour of waiting they heard the whistle of a train above the noise of the wind. It roared to a stop beside them and at the steps of the Pullman Bob turned to Alice.

"Kiss me goodbye," he begged. Wordlessly she turned her lips up to his, her eyes misty.

That kiss blotted out the world. For a long moment before the conductor's, "All aboard," tore their lips apart, there was nothing anywhere but Bob. It brought back in poignant reality the sweet ecstasy of the kisses of the past.

Then Bob stumbled up the steps of the already moving train. Alice was alone on the platform, blind from unshed tears, shaken by that kiss as she had never before been shaken. Scarcely knowing what she did, Alice went back into the waiting room and slumped down onto a seat in a corner.

The outside door was flung open letting in a gust of icy wind. A man sprinted for the ticket office.

"Sam," Alice heard the man pant, "the trestle is gone just above Wessex. Stop the sleeper."

"My God," she heard the station agent say, "I can't stop it. The wires are all down." Alice was on her feet. That must be the train Bob was on! The train that was hardly out of the yard limits in its flight up along the shores of Lake Champlain.

"You've got to do something," Alice found herself storming. "You've got to. They'll die. They'll be—"

"But the roads are closed, and the wires are down." The agent was already working with the telephone, trying desperately to dial a dead line. "I can't even get central."

"I know, but there's the lake," Alice said.

"The ice outside the harbor wouldn't hold a car. There's no other way to head them off."

"But there must be—" frantically. "There must be some way. With a skate sail it could be done. The train pulls up grade between here and Eastport."

"It would take too much time to find somebody to do it. There wouldn't—"

"I'll do it. There's a chance, isn't there?" She whistled to the messenger. "You've got a car. Get me down to the yacht club."

"Love Will Find Out the Way," the Poet Said . . . and What a Way it was for Alice . . . Battling with her Fears as She Sped Through the Night . . .

AT the club she was out before the car stopped, running down into the boat-house for her skates. She put on her skate shoes faster than she ever had before. She pulled a heavy sweater out of Herm's locker and dragged it on over her head. At the end of the runway, she took the largest sail, the one Bob had always used. She had never tried one herself. But she had seen others do it hundreds of times—seen them skim across the smooth ice at an unbelievable rate.

She swung the sail into position, and instantly it was as if some invisible hand took hers and began to pull her along, faster and faster. A young moon though hidden then by scudding clouds gave enough light to let her see the snow patches.

She moved out across the harbor at a moderate pace, almost sideways to the wind. Gradually, as she began to angle the sail to get the full benefit of the wind, she made better time. Now, with the wind at her back she picked up speed until she had the feeling that she was hurtling through the air, hardly touching the ice.

And with that increased, blinding speed, came the old fear. She screamed once, but the scream was torn from her mouth and smothered into nothingness by the wind.

Instead of trying to slacken, she tried constantly to go faster. She was so deathly afraid that it seemed as if something in her mind must snap with the strain of it.

The railroad followed the lake, but there was no sign of the train. She had not expected to see it because she had been so far behind. Yet when it was not there she experienced a sharp feeling of disappointment, of despair.

LIGHTS showed on the New York side of the lake, and she knew she was nearing Mullen Brook. It was here that she must catch up with the train or not at all. Mullen Brook flowed into the lake at the foot of a deep bay. The tracks skirted the curve and Alice could cut across its mouth.

Then she caught her first glimpse of the train. A long snake of lights panting up the steep grade, the glow from its firebox reflected on the trees it passed.

She hadn't expected the train to be so far along. She almost gave up then. A feeling of hopelessness assailed her. The car was too slim. Why was she mad enough to believe that she, aided only by the force of the wind, could overtake a train?

As she watched, the train whistled and slowed down a bit for the grade crossing. Alice's terrific speed increased if anything. The train swung left and plunged across a

trestle, and then hit the steep part of the incline when it swung out again.

She was almost even with it. She could see the engineer sitting in the cab, looking ahead. And the fireman's head appearing and disappearing in regular rhythm. It seemed as if they must see her, she was so close. She cried out twice, but the cries were pitifully inadequate.

Suddenly before her she saw open water. It was dark and forbidding, like the ice. But she caught the gleam of reflected moonlight, and knew what it was. She knew she had to cross it.

She gathered herself at the edge and jumped. There was a fleeting sensation of flying through air, and then the toes of her skates caught against something solid, tripped her, sent her body forward, downward, crashing with brutal force against the hard ice. The sail was torn from her grasp and she slid along, spinning like a top, sick with the pain in her right hip.

She lost consciousness for a few seconds and then the cold and the pain brought her to. Well, this was the end. Her hip was broken—anyway so badly battered that she could not use it. She had escaped death in icy water by a miracle. Why tempt Fate further? She sat up, dizzy and nauseated, looked back at the water and shuddered. She couldn't go on now. Nobody could expect her to.

But when she thought about Bob, the panic in her heart was forgotten. She gave a little cry and came to her feet.

Her hip wasn't broken. She stood for an instant, and then her head cleared. Painfully, slowly, she skated over and regained the sail which had skidded along far ahead of her body. She held it up to the wind.

SWINGING around the point she could see the lights of the town. She had no possible way of knowing whether she was in time. But she had been only even with the train when she had lost sight of it. And she had fallen down and lost consciousness.

Then she made a grave error of judgment. She cut too close in when she rounded the point, so that the trees on shore cut off the wind from her.

She realized instantly that her speed was slackening, and why. But the damage was done. She swerved out then, but had lost many precious seconds. When she came within sight of the steamboat wharf and the station beyond, the train was standing there. She was still an eighth of a mile away when

she saw it start up, saw its lighted length move on out of the station yard.

She came to a stop, tears streaming down her face. The fear she had borne willingly had been borne in vain. She was too late.

On across the ice toward Wessex, faster and faster she went. She discovered with a will you can go faster at right angles to the wind if you know how, than you can go with it.

Then she rounded the end of the mountain, and the broad lake lay before her in the moonlight. She headed for the lights of the town, tiny, far away, picked up speed in the new course, and shot onward.

She and the train converged on Wessex from different directions and all the time she could see the occasional gleam of the train's firebox, matching her speed, bettering it.

The train beat her at Wessex. She saw it slow down while she was still miles away, creep into the station yards, and come to a dead stop. In a few more minutes it would start and she would lose her last chance. Just outside of Wessex was the broken trestle. Nothing to do now but keep on until the train started.

As she drew nearer and nearer she became aware of something wrong about that train. There was only the engine light. Hope surged in her again. She realized that that was a freight train waiting on the station siding. Waiting for the sleeper which was now approaching from her left.

There was a chance!

SHE reached the ferry slip as the sleeper drew into the station. She tossed the sail aside, and ran through the snow. Her skates made running difficult, bringing exquisite torture to her hip at every step. But she ran with all the strength she had. Her lungs began to ache.

It was only a matter of a hundred yards to the station. She could see the conductor standing beside the day coach. And as she ran she watched him. It seemed as if she made no progress at all. Her tired ankles turned under her again and again.

Then she saw the conductor raise his hand to signal the engineer. She tried to call to him but there was no breath left in her. It was cruel to come so close and then to lose because you hadn't the breath to shout.

As the conductor started to swing his arm, he saw her and stopped, waiting. And then when he saw her falter, he started toward her. She was walking now and could only gasp what she had to tell.

"The trestle just above town is out. You can't go on!"

His face went dead white, but outside of that he showed no emotion. Alice stumbled into the waiting room. She heard the station agent shout to a taxi driver to bring a doctor.

The room was warm; hot it seemed to her. And suddenly she became aware of the pain in her face. People began to crowd into the room. And then Bob was there, pushing through to her side.

"Sweet, are you all right?" he demanded. And Alice could only nod wordlessly and sob.

Then the doctor pushed through the crowd, ordered them all from the room, and took care of Alice's face, her hip.

"You'll be all right," he kept saying. "A girl as brave as you are won't let a little thing like a hip worry her. Your face is frozen and it may be painful when it thaws out. But you're a heroine, young lady."

When he finished with her, he made her comfortable on the bench, until an ambulance should come to take her to the hospital.

An instant later Bob came in alone. "Honey," he said, "I don't know how I can ever thank you. I know how brave you were because I know how frightened you must have been at the speed you had to travel. I feel like a lowdown dog, dear. You deserve to go less than twenty-five miles an hour all the rest of your life if you want to."

"Bob," she whispered, and suddenly she made a great effort to concentrate, to forget her hip, her fatigue, everything. Because she wanted him to understand. "Bob, I found out when you kissed me that I loved you. And that I couldn't live without you. That our love was far above petty things. I had no idea that I was going to lose you forever. There was only one chance and I took it. Not for those people. Not for anything but you, Bob. For us!"

Again she read in his eyes what she had seen when he had kissed her; the overwhelming completeness of his love. He took her in his arms and gently kissed her. She sighed. A blissful, tired sigh, because she knew that never again would anything—speed, fear, or anything else come between them. His life, which she had risked her own to save, would be hers for always.