

SERIAL STORY

STANTON WINS

By
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Illustrations by
Frederic Thornburgh

SYNOPSIS.

At the beginning of great automobile race the mechanic of the Mercury, Stanton's machine, drops dead. Strange youth, Jesse Floyd, volunteers, and is accepted. In the rest during the twenty-four hour race Stanton meets a stranger, Miss Carlisle, who introduces herself.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)
"My father is president of a tire company," she idly remarked. "His tires are being used on some of the cars, the Mercury for one, I believe, and he wanted to watch their testing under use. So, after a dinner engagement we could not escape, we motored down here from the city. You see I have not viewed much of the race. I admit this does not look very perilous and I am a bit disappointed. I, again her short crystal laugh, "I shall hope better things of the famous Stanton; I want to admire him very much. But I am detaining you, and you were leaving! Every thanks for your patience."

"Hardly leaving, since the twenty-four hour race is not six hours old," he corrected briefly. "I am glad to have been of any use to you."

She returned his salute; then, upon the cool impulse of one accustomed to doing as she chose, put her question directly:

"Ah—I am Miss Carlisle; I would like to know who has been good enough to aid me in my ignorance."
"My name is Stanton," he replied, and went on.

From the shelter of the obscurity he looked back. She had taken a step forward into the light and her veil had slipped aside as she gazed after him with an expression of acute and eager interest. She could not have been older than twenty-four or five, with a finely cut, beautiful face framed in waves of fair hair.

Floyd was sitting on a camp-stool outside the tent, chatting with a group of men, when Stanton returned. The rest had brought back the mechanic's color and animation; in fact, he looked ridiculously young and irresponsible. But he sprang up readily at the driver's nod.

"Time?" he asked, his gray eyes like burnished steel.

"Yes," Stanton confirmed. And to the nearest man: "Bring in the car."

There was an obedient commotion. Several men ran to flag the other driver; Floyd caught up goggles and cap, and knelt to tighten a legging strap. As Stanton made his own preparations, Mr. Green bustled up to him.

"We're leading," he reminded superfluously. "There isn't, really, any need for extra fast work, Stanton."

Stanton snapped a buckle, saying nothing.

"I telephoned to the office and told Rupert he needn't come. I told him that you had a new man."

"Well?"

"He said, 'Poor mut.'"

The driver straightened to his full height, his firm dark face locking to bronze inflexibility.

"You had better report his sympathy to Floyd, whom it's meant for," he advised harshly. "I'm not interested. If the company doesn't like the way I drive, let them get some one in my place; but while I do drive the car, I drive, and not Rupert or Floyd, or any one else. I'll neither take risks nor shirk them to order."

The assistant manager choked, speechless. He had no way of knowing why Stanton flashed a sullen glance toward the row of automobiles before the grandstand, or who was meant by that "any one else." Meanwhile, he was intractable, he was insubordinate, and he was obstinate—but he was Stanton.

The Mercury rolled in, the two men climbed from their seats, and there was a momentary delay for tank filling. Stanton took his place, experimentally speeding and retarding his motor while he waited for the workmen to finish.

"Stop a minute while I fix the carburetor," requested Floyd, from beside the machine. "It's colder late at night like this. Wait, you've dropped your glove."

Stanton silenced the engine. Something in the fresh voice, the boyish grace of the slight figure, the ready courtesy of the act, stirred him with a strange sensation and pricking shame at his own brutality. "Poor mut," a whisper repeated to his inner ear. When Floyd offered the gauntlet, the other dropped a hand upon his shoulder.

"Are you riding with me because you want the money badly enough to chance anything?" Stanton demanded harshly, "or because you are willing to trust my driving?"

Taken by surprise, open astonishment crossed the younger man's face, but his eyes did not flinch from the ones behind the goggles.

"I think you're the best driver on the track," came the steady answer. "And I'd rather trust myself to your recklessness than to some one else's mistakes, if you want to know. I guess you can steer straight enough for both of us."

Stanton's hand relaxed its hold. "Go fix your carburetor. Yes, I can steer—straight."

Again the blue-black eyes flashed sneering defiance toward the grandstand; for the moment, Miss Carlisle's hope of witnessing desperate feats by the Mercury car seemed far from realization.

But the Mercury had not circled the mile oval four times when the Duplex, its choked feed-pipe cleared at last, burst from the paddock with its master driver at the wheel and bent on the recovery of lost time. The Mercury was on the back stretch of track, running casually near sixty miles at the moment.

"Car comin'," Floyd cautioned suddenly.

Stanton raised his head, alert a fractional second too late, and his closest rival shot past him, roaring down the white path. It was too much; Floyd and Miss Carlisle sank out of memory together, as Stanton reached for throttle and spark. The Mercury snarled and leaped like a startled cat. The dull period was over.

The Mercury car was slightly the faster, but the Duplex held the inside line, and the difference between the drivers was not in skill so much as in daredevilry. Slower machines kept conservatively out of the way as the dangerous rivals fought out their speed-battle. Three times Stanton hunted the Duplex around the track, gaining on each lap, until the last circuit was made with the cars side by side, a flaming team. The spectators, scanty at this hour before dawn, rose, applauding and cheering, as the two passed again, still clinging together.

But gradually it became evident that Stanton, who held the outside, was steadily crowding the Duplex toward the paddock fence. Nor could the Duplex defend itself from the maneuver which must ultimately force it to fall behind at one of the turns or accept destruction by collision. The machines were so close that a swerve on the part of either, the blow-out of a tire or a catch in the ruts cut in the track at certain points, meant ungentle death. Mercilessly, gradually, Stanton pressed his perilous advantage. And at the crucial moment he heard a low, exultant laugh.

"Cut him closer!" urged his mechanic's eager, excited accents at his ear. "We'll get him on this turn—he's weakenin'—Cut him closer!"

The comrade triumph came to Stanton as an unaccustomed cordial. They were passing the grandstand, just ahead lay the worst curve.

It was partly reputation which won. If the Duplex held firm, the Mercury must in self-preservation have yielded room. But the driver knew Stanton, guessed him capable of wrecking both by obstinate persistence in attack, and dared not meet the issue. There came the gun-like reports of a shut-off motor, the Duplex slackened its furious pace, and Stanton hurtled past him on the turn itself, lurching across the ruts, and led the way down the track.

The witnesses in stands and paddock went frantic. Floyd pumped oil. Stanton snatched a glance at the miniature watch strapped on his wrist, over his glove, and slightly reduced speed. The maneuver had been successful, but the driver knew that it might have called down upon him the judges' just censure and have sent him from the track, disqualified.

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