



Chapter 7 – A Cruel Sport

(Grosse Point Horse Track, Michigan, September 9, 1903)

Chapter Excerpts

“All right, fine, they want a race, I’ll give ‘em a race,” Oldfield said, “I’ll have a go with Cunningham. Let’s fire this little buggy up.”

Hill turned the crank with three big thrusts before the Pup fired, and he stepped back. The little Winton rolled slowly out on the track to join Cunningham’s dull, dingy Packard Gray Wolf. The twenty-four horsepower Packard motor barked like one of those little dogs that try to assert his presence.

Oldfield studied Picard, who held a pistol in the air. The starter extended one finger, then two, and then popped the gun. A spark appeared at the tip of the barrel. Oldfield released the clutch, but the pedal slipped off his muddy leather sole. The Pup lurched forward before stopping and falling silent. While pounding his fists on the steering wheel, Oldfield watched Cunningham surge ahead.

In the distance, Cunningham skidded smoothly through the first corner as Hill once more cranked the Winton to life. Oldfield again released the clutch, pushing the car into first gear, and the Winton began to roll. It picked up speed toward the first corner, but Cunningham was

so far ahead he was nowhere in sight. Worse, the Winton slowed and stalled as Oldfield neared the turn.

“Goddamn it! I’m sick of this shit!”

Oldfield reached behind his seat for a small box of tools. Jumping from the car, he unfastened the cowling and tossed it over the fence. The sound of heavy breathing came from behind him.

Hill, panting, with a handful of tools and spark plugs, appeared at Oldfield’s side. They went to work replacing the plugs as the Gray Wolf circled the track.

The hopelessness of the situation made Oldfield more determined to fight. Tossing the old plugs over his shoulder, he screwed each new one in by hand and motioned for Hill to follow behind him and cinch them down with a wrench.

Oldfield heard the Gray Wolf coming down the homestretch toward him. Cunningham wrestled with the wheel, spewing dirt with his narrow wire-spoke wheels as he skidded through the corner.

Down by a fucking mile. I’m going to go pass that bastard!

Finished with the plugs, Hill ran to the front of the car to crank the engine but got no response. Another yank and the motor finally fired. Oldfield started to roll his Winton’s wheels, but by that time, Cunningham was coming around again. Down another fucking mile, Oldfield mashed the throttle and fidgeted in his seat as the Winton struggled to come up to speed.

Two miles behind, Oldfield felt a sense of relief combined with an intense desire to attempt the impossible. There was nothing to lose. No one could expect him to overcome such a huge disadvantage, and if he did, he would redeem himself for everything that had happened at the meet.

The Winton hugged the inner fence as it slowly picked up speed around the first corner. Faster. By the time he got down the back-stretch, he was going close to a mile a minute. He flung his car into the next turn, skidding out to the fence in a wild manner he knew the railbirds loved. Two men who sat on the outside track railing briefly zipped through the corner of his eye.

Dumbasses!

Oldfield cut a perfect arc around the outside of the corner and drew the Gray Wolf into view. Gaining on Cunningham, he hunched over his steering wheel, focused his eyes like hooks to draw Cunningham to him like a catfish.

I'll pass him if it's the last thing I do.

The ride grew more jarring as that confounded vibration started up again, violently pounding on his ass. Still, Cunningham grew larger and larger. Onto the home stretch to finish the Gray Wolf's sixth mile, the dueling cars were neck and neck, with the Winton car still two laps behind. Oldfield passed Cunningham in front of the stands, to ignite roars of approval.

Oldfield pulled three car lengths on Cunningham as he went into the first corner. Clearing the fence post and entering the backstretch, he stole a glance back at his rival, who grew smaller still. The biggest dust cloud of the week trailed him, and Oldfield pointed his head forward to see the drying brown road cascading under his wheels. Confident he was going faster than a mile a minute; Oldfield bore down on the second corner.

Throwing the Winton sideways, he powered his arc through the turn. Shockingly, the right front tire exploded. The Winton's steering wheel jerked out of his grasp.

The Pup shook violently and refused to yield to Oldfield's commands. He rushed to the fence like he was strapped to a cannonball. Nothing was in focus because his entire world shook harder than an earthquake.

The constant bouncing slammed his teeth together, and chips broke off in his mouth. Oldfield gripped the steering wheel as if its hard-oak wood could ooze between his fingers like clay. Forget control; now he just struggled to hang on.

The Pup slammed into the fence, shattering boards into splinters and knocking down posts like matchsticks. With a soft thump, the Winton hit a dark object, but nothing made sense as Oldfield tried to sort out images that looked like a man flying in the air and toppling downward.

The absurd blob briefly rode atop the big, creamy-red Winton's nose,

and then fell underneath. The racer thumped and hopped as pieces of the machine broke off around him, flying with the fence splinters in a tornado. Now his car was cascading downward, picking up speed like falling from the sky.

Oldfield froze, his hands locked on his wooden wheel as he took an interminable ride of launches into the air and slams back against the Earth. Surreal sounds of the car's wood frame snapping and crackling filled his ears.

Beyond the track, Oldfield couldn't believe where he was. Downward, he rode this bucking beast as another fence appeared, and he punched through it like it was Paper Mache.

Horrified, Oldfield saw a large rock flash into his path, and he braced himself. His eyes closed as a sudden, powerful jolt ripped the steering wheel away and launched him into feeling insignificant.

Sensations came and left quickly as something new and terrible was happening to him faster than he could think. He thumped to the Earth. Eyes closed; his body became a cocoon. From the darkness of his mind, he couldn't tell what was happening to him other than he was being scraped, poked, and stabbed.

Tumbling downhill, shrouded in darkness, Oldfield finally had a sensation that lasted long enough for his mind to process. Incessant, probing scrapes tore at his skin. Grasping at the straw he was mowing through, he felt it rip through his hands and slice his skin. Mercifully, at long last, everything stopped.

Breathless and swallowing back burning vomit at the back of his tongue, Oldfield moaned and grunted. He instinctively filled his hands full of weeds and yanked handfuls from the Earth as if that could give him a handle on the world. Wondering if this was what it felt like to die, he panicked and gasped for air. Cycling his legs like the futile flailing of a deer being devoured by a grizzly, he searched pointlessly for comfort. When he opened his eyes, he couldn't see anything but the brittle, yellowing weeds he floundered in.

A voice in the distance yelling at people to stay clear overcame the ringing in Oldfield's ears. As he lay in the grass, he felt the warmth of

oozing blood pasting his shirt to a spot on his back.

Another blood leak emerged, then a third, expanding like ripples in a pond formed by a tossed stone. Oldfield's chest heaved as he fought to extend his short breaths to a controlled pace. Slowly, as he lay on his back, looking up at soft clouds, he realized that rocks and sticks had pierced his skin as he tumbled out of control.

Finally, Oldfield pushed up with his hands, feeling a sharp pain in his ribs and stinging in his palms, cut by grasping at the weeds. Dizzy and unsure, he stumbled to stand above the tall grass and spat out bloody chips of broken teeth. His inner cheek and tongue stung, feeling like pulp exposed after losing teeth as a kid. Stunned, Oldfield stood at the bottom of a ditch and wondered if he possibly could have rolled down such a hill. A mounted policeman pulled his horse near.

“You okay, Barney?”

Oldfield couldn't find the breath to speak, but nodded and waved to indicate that he was. At least he thought he was. Around him were red fragments of metal and wood that used to be part of his car. He scanned the immediate area, foolishly holding out hope that the Pup wouldn't be too beat up, but he couldn't find it.

A twisted, red lump rested against the boulder. The wreckage was like a memory from the previous night's drunk. All the wheels were knocked off the crushed hulk, and the shattered wooden spokes of one rim were about twelve feet from where he landed.

“Oh, shit,” he murmured in resignation.

Stumbling up the hill, Oldfield emerged from the weeds to notice the astonished expressions of dozens of people who seemed stunned into silence that he was still alive. Not giving a damn to talk to anyone, he just wanted to sort out what all this meant for himself.

People shouted his name and asked if he was okay. Oldfield only nodded as his mind took an inventory of the pains that sprang up and became more acute as the minutes passed. The throbbing in his rib cage made him wince through every step, and the holes in his back stung relentlessly.

The new white shirt he had ruined the day before with mud splat-

ters in the front, was now soaked with blood in the back. As he shuffled past people, he heard shouts for a doctor. Oldfield pushed his way out onto the track and sensed the awe of everyone around him. Stumbling down the center of the homestretch, Oldfield came into view of the grandstands and heard the crowd begin to cheer. The blood-drenched white shirt was now matted to his back and felt heavy and sticky like it was soaked with glue.

The more time people had to absorb Oldfield's image, the cheers turned to gasps and screams. Scanning the stands, he saw a woman faint into the arms of her companion. Cooper, Spider, and Hill ran out onto the track to him.

"Jesus, Barney, are you okay?" Cooper shouted. "Goddamn, I never saw anything like it."

The cacophony from the grandstands and the people surrounding him suffocated Oldfield. He searched Cooper's eyes.

"I never had the crap kicked out of me like this."

John Jack drove a Winton Touring Car to where the three men stood. People swarmed around them, pointing to the bloody shirt and yelling.

"Barney, let's get you out of here," Jack said, for the first time not sounding like an asshole. "George, talk to the Triple-A guys and let them know we'll be at the hospital or the hotel. See what we need to do about the car. I'll come back and help you later."

Hill nodded, and Jack looked at Cooper.

"Do you want to come?"

Cooper and Oldfield stepped up into the tonneau, and the people who had poured out onto the track parted to make way for the Winton car.

