



Chapter 6 – Man About Town

(Grosse Pointe Horse Track, Michigan, Monday, September 7, 1903)

Thick grayness drained the color out of the world as a dreary, persistent mist melted the earth and washed away the day's racing at the Grosse Pointe, Michigan track. Bored, Barney Oldfield drove his Winton touring car the ten miles out to the loading docks along the Detroit River. He wanted those same guys who saw him a year earlier to see what the world champion race driver looked like in person. Combing the area for the old lunch wagon, he wondered if "Red Hot" John had stuck out the crappy weather or went home.

Oldfield was conscious of his navy-blue custom-fit suit. A matching felt hat, a cream with crimson print vest, and a peach ascot tie were touches Oldfield was convinced established him in society. The dockhands pointing at him probably thought he owned a shipping company.

Puffing on a snugly rolled Monte Cristo, Oldfield steered with his left knee when he needed to manage the cigar and his umbrella at the same time. The diamond-sapphire gold ring on his right pinky had turned inward to the palm of his damp hand. He rotated it around again with his thumb. John should see every detail of his success.

Stopping his Winton touring car near the old wooden lunch wagon, Oldfield stepped out and sauntered over to John. Bursting with the thrill of his position in the world, he anticipated the fat vendor's reaction to his conspicuous wealth and importance.

But John just wiped mucus from his nose on his sleeve. Residue from his cooking sausages coated his face, and Oldfield thought it gave his skin an unhealthy shine. John coughed and looked faint as he wobbled on his feet. The grill's smoke rose only a foot or so before it blended into the day's dullness and disappeared. Oldfield guessed John saw him but was ignoring him.

"Hey, Red Hot...you still selling this horsemeat?"

"Big shot."

"World champion big shot," Oldfield said with a smile.

"What the Hell are you doing on this side of town? Nobody down here gives a damn what kind of champeen you think you are."

"You aren't too good to sell me a red hot, are you?"

Big John wheezed and coughed.

"You okay, Red Hot?"

"Yeah, yeah. Sandwich, huh? You a big enough deal to pay for your own nowadays?"

"Plenty big enough. I'm just not sure those hot dogs will taste as good as when you gave 'em away, though."

Finally, "Red Hot" John smiled.

"I'll tell you what. I'll make you the last red hot of the day. I'm tired, I'm sick as Hell, and I want to go home to that dump apartment and get some sleep."

"You need some whiskey," Oldfield offered. "That'll cure what ails you."

Oldfield extracted a jeweled, pewter flask from his coat inside pocket, but the big man waved him off. Red Hot plucked a sausage off his grill and stuffed it into a sliced bun with a fork. He picked it up with a piece of newspaper and handed it to Oldfield. John asked the driver what he had been up to as he cleaned his grill.

Oldfield wallowed the meat and bread around in this mouth as he told John about Empire City, Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Alexander Winton. He liked the way John encouraged his reports as if the fat man took pride in the younger man's achievements.

"We're running out at Grosse Pointe tomorrow, Red Hot. You ought to come out and see us."

"Some of us have to work, Barney."

"Well, you know what you got to do," Oldfield said. "But John, this time, I am paying you for the food."

Red Hot continued cleaning his grill. Oldfield stuffed a bill into the older man's breast pocket. As John pulled at the cash, the driver backed away quickly.

"You keep it Red Hot. I owe you more than that. Come on out to the track tomorrow. Hell, you could set up your rat trap out at the track."

Red Hot's eyes bulged, and his jaw slackened, examining the money, he blinked to re-focus.

"A hundred dollars! Have you lost your mind, son?"

"I wouldn't yell that too loud around here, old man, you got all kinds of toughs on these docks. Take a few days off and get over that cold. You don't want to get the consumption!"

