

Death Rides at Night

ARROW LAWSON

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It is as death to ride Translucent Highway tonight; but a coward's brand was worse!

"ARROW" LAWSON, folded uncomfortably into the tiny "Air Bug," clutched the side of the cockpit tightly and watched the great translucent highway reel backward beneath them. From their perch three thousand feet above the great

truck lane, the glowing stretch of Trans-World Highway was visible for a hundred miles in either direction. Ken Barnes had the Bug floating silently. Suddenly he pointed a finger horizonward toward the lighted towers of East Station. From the flashing minor metropolis a tiny beetle crawled along the surface of the highway. Arrow Lawson nodded grimly, his worried eyes following Ken Barnes' finger.

The beetle was under them now, a mammoth Diesel truck thundering along at two hundred miles an hour. Abruptly it staggered as though a giant hand had grappled with it. A rosebud of flame mushroomed from under its hood.

The "Air Bug" jolted into a mean air pocket and Lawson lunged wildly, clutching at his companion's shoulder for support. Releasing his grasp, he peered down again, his face red. Damn, he could never get used to air travel...

Below them the truck had plunged wildly from the highway. The tractor was bathed in fire; the trailer a twisted, crushed mass of aluminumite. For ten miles to the rear of the accident the translucent lane had changed from its normal glowing green to the angry red of the danger warning. Traffic screamed to a halt and tiny figures swarmed around the blaze. Lawson was sick.

"Take her down," he ordered.

The twin rockets in the Bug's tail exploded behind them, and they shot from the sky. Other patrol scouts were roaring down from all directions. A mob had clustered around the wreck by the time Ken could land.

They fought their way through the crowd, Lawson conscious only of his two buddies who were frying in that cab. A pitiful, charred leg hung at a crazy angle from the crushed metal. The burned boot still clinging to the crushed bone. A rescue attempt was useless. Arrow looked away, his stomach turned by the sight.

The men behind him were talking.

"That's him." The voice wasn't friendly. "Lawson; supposed to be Trans-America's ace driver—"

"Yeah, what about the driving he *ain't* doing, while these other guys are cracking up?"

Lawson turned quickly, but the owners of the voices were hidden. His face reddened, as he realized that these men had been his buddies. Now they thought he was a coward. If he couldn't get a line on this thing pretty soon, there would be a lot more talk. He turned again to the wreck.

HIGHWAY scouts had snuffed out the fire with their small gas guns and one body had been removed and carefully covered. With torches they were at work cutting the other driver free.

Lawson dropped on his haunches and watched them work, a puzzled frown on his face. Eight trucks gone, and he still couldn't find that one little clue. Fifteen drivers, burned and broken corpses and Arrow knew he'd have to get action soon or go nuts. His gray eyes wandered over the mess once more. He studied the hulking death trap carefully, searchingly—The metalode antenna... on his feet in a flash, the long legs carried him like pistons to the side of the upturned cab.

"Ken," he shouted, "I've got it."

A murmur went through the watching crowd. Some of the drivers pushed forward. Ken came on the double.

"What?" he dropped on his knees beside Lawson.

"The antenna," Arrow's voice was hushed in utter disbelief. "The damned thing's *straight*."

For a minute Ken understood, then he shook his head.

"It's no good, fella'," he stood up and stretched wearily, "You're getting to the point where a straw isn't too small to grab at."

Lawson didn't hear him. He was running the tips of his fingers along the straightened rod, mumbling under his breath.

"The cab turned on its right side," he said. "Something straightened that antenna like a match stick from the *left* side."

"Then the same vague *thing* was responsible for the others. We didn't notice the antenna on *them*." Ken's voice was tinged with good natured sarcasm.

"Because the other trucks piled up and destroyed the metalode." Arrow was still on his knees, eyeing the slim metal strand with a puzzled expression. "It's the last thing we'd suspect after all the safety lectures they pound into us about this thing."⁽¹⁾

ARROW eased the dual-controlled tractor of Transport Six down the long ramp to Trans-American's loading dock. The night spent with Barnes cramped into the tiny Sky Bug's cockpit hadn't been helpful to his frame of mind. Unfolding painfully, his long legs touched the ground and almost failed under him. He winced, and a scowl crossed his dark face. Being the longest cuss in the outfit had its drawbacks. The boys had laughed at him that first morning eight years ago. But after the gawky kid, Lawson, had put a few Diesels through their paces, the laughing had been replaced by glances of respect.

He walked toward the main office, thinking about the grab he'd made at Ken the night before, when the plane had dropped sickeningly.

Lawson's father told him it was the fall he'd taken from a crib as a kid that made him fear the air. That was as good as anything. He knew that any place his feet couldn't stretch out and touch solid earth wasn't the place for him, and he thanked Ken silently for shutting up like a clam about the incident. Anyone but the understanding patrol scout would have had the story spread far and wide by daybreak.

Without knocking, Lawson opened the monosteel door to Riley Blackson's glittering office. He folded up slowly in the leather chair beside the desk. Blackson's head was bowed. The owner of Trans-American was a small man, with a large, snow-white head. The stature of his body did not matter beside the keen, eager methods of a clever brain. Forty years of nursing this truck business into the front line had given the man character that more than made up for weak muscles. Without looking up, he spoke.

"I was talking with Barnes on the teloscreen..."

Lawson nodded, understanding the man's anguish. Their eyes met, Blackson's tired--caged.

"He says you found something?"

"Perhaps I'm wrong..." Lawson stood up and strode across the room. Down through the polarized walls he could see the long row of Diesels standing at the freight shed.

"Something has been fooling with those *fool proof* antennas. Every truck is checked before it pulls out. I say *something* because there isn't a living person who could touch a truck while its moving at two-hundred per..."

Riley shook his head dejectedly, the muscles of his mouth twitching.

"Only tremendous force would straighten out those rods. I'm sorry, boy. There just isn't any such force."

ARROW'S eyes were glued to the desk top. Riley had reached unconsciously toward a small metal dog. Drawing it slowly across the glass top, he watched its twin jump to its side, drawn by the magnet in the base. They clung as one under his finger.

"Such a force could be *made*, if the motives were strong enough."

"That's what sticks me," Blackson pushed the metal pups away in a gesture of despair. "How did it get *our* number?"

"That's what I've got to figure out," Lawson answered slowly. "The motive could be simple. It might even be you... Insurance, perhaps?"

Blackson was on his feet, his chin white with anger.

"Arrow," he spoke evenly, "if you meant to be funny, I fail to see the joke."

Then he slumped down again.

"I—I'm sorry, I know you're kidding. Guess I'm kind of up in the air about this mess."

Arrow didn't answer. He was sorry now that he'd said it. Every man in the outfit was a suspect. Every man was straining his nerves to a raw edge to keep going.

The door opened quietly and Eve Blackson stood just outside. Riley's daughter was startlingly lovely with the anger that had spread across her pink cheeks.

"It takes a *star* driver to sit in the office and accuse Dad of murder, while the other boys are out fighting..."

Her voice broke the silence like a bomb shell. In spite of himself, Law-son jumped. He turned toward the girl, his throat dry and shame slicing any answer short. Every muscle of the girl's smooth body shook with temper. Her eyes burned into his own, full red lips quivering in anger.

"Lawson," Eve said, using his last name with cutting emphasis, "you failed the air exams. If it hadn't been for that yellow streak, you'd be flying with Ken Barnes and the Patrol instead of being a cheap freight pusher. Now you're even worse than that."

She walked to the desk, tossing her white driver's gloves angrily on the glass top. Her step was as graceful as an aroused tigress. The crash helmet dropped back, releasing waves of smooth auburn hair. He watched her, fascinated by the taut, throbbing neck. Her spotless white uniform contrasted sharply against the browned skin.

Over Eve he had no control. For eight years she had taken every opportunity to mentally slap his face. This time the tirade left him without a word to say. Like any normal man, he had loved the girl from the first day he saw her. She handled the great fourteen wheel Diesels like sulky children, an object lesson in itself.

There wasn't a driver in the Trans-American string who hadn't at one time or another returned from a long haul with Eve at the duals, their cheeks and ears

smarting. This angel of the transports was admired and coveted by every freight pusher from one end of the highway to the other.

Every attempt on her part to make what *she* considered a man of Lawson, had failed. He couldn't even with her own love for the road, convince the girl that something fine existed between a man and the throb of mighty Diesels at his finger tips. His place wasn't in the air.

He walked slowly past her, toward the door.

"Riley," his voice was almost gentle, "I'm going through on the night run. I'll take it alone, now that I know what to fight."

"The hell you will," Blackson shot back. "There isn't a truck that will move out of here until the Patrol cleans up this mess. I'm all through losing drivers."

Lawson looked at Eve. Her lips had shut in a hard, white line. No help there. He left quickly, closing the door with the feeling that something wonderful was hopelessly lost to him on the other side of it.

IT was late afternoon. The pounding on the door was faint and far away. Then it drummed louder against his ears. He sat up in bed.

"Huh...?"

"Lawson, you in there?"

It was Erlich, Trans-American's chief dispatcher.

Lawson tossed the covers aside and reached the door in a jump. Erlich was excited.

"Blackson says you're to report at once," he shot out. "Oil fire on the coast—got to haul explosive..." He was gone, down the stairs as though the devil was at his heels.

Lawson dressed hurriedly, grabbed his crash helmet from the chair by the door. In the hall, he took three steps at a time, almost knocked the paper boy over as the kid came up the stairs. The newsboy turned about twice, found a quarter in his palm and a copy of the News missing.

Arrow, driving the platicoupe with one hand, gulped down the headlines.

METEOR OIL FIELD ABLAZE

Now he knew Riley's reason for calling him. Explosives to be hauled. Trans-American still held its exclusive franchise for trucking all government-controlled dyno-glyc. He whipped the plasticoupe into the T-A garage and bounded upstairs to Blackson's office. Riley was pacing up the room's length, under a black cloud of despair. He turned as Lawson entered.

"Three hours ago the Patrol reported that the Meteor wells are burning," his voice was mechanical, measured like the beat of water. "Someone forgot to oil a pump—friction—and hell broke wide open on one of the derricks. In twenty-four hours the whole field will be gone."

"I saw the paper." Arrow waited.

"Twenty contracts canceled today," Blackson came to his side, one arm on the younger man's shoulder. "The All-Country council was on the teloscreen just before you came. I pleaded with them," his eyes faltered, went to the carpeted floor. "We either haul the dyno-glyc, or else."

Lawson was thinking of the boys who had washed up on the road. With a load of the highest test give obtainable, the smallest accident might... Riley was talking to him.

"We got ourselves into this mess, boy," he pleaded. "I can't tell you to make the trip. I'm not young any more, and this outfit means all I have."

"I've been asking for it," Lawson said. "Is she ready to roll?"

TRANSPORT SIX, motors idling, stood at the edge of the main platform. A crew of men was hastily daubing the trailer with luminous red paint. Across the tail gate, stenciled three feet high, was the warning DANGER—DEATH ON WHEELS.

At the parts bench he stopped, searching for something. An extra metalode antenna stood in the corner. He picked it up, also slipped a small wrench into his pocket. Walking around the Diesel he kicked the tires carefully, looking for weak spots. Then he climbed quickly into the left seat. With the triple motors roaring he felt movement at his side. Shorty, dual man for "Six" would go through hell as long as Arrow sat at the controls. Without looking, he gunned the heavy power unit. Twisting the neck cord of the helmet, he adjusted it carefully. With all three speed buttons pressed in, "Six" roared up the incline like a bull elephant, charging toward the Trans-World highway.

The Diesel was hitting the necessary two-hundred per as it approached Translucent Highway. Eyes focused on the main line of traffic, he jerked the vibrator cord sharply. The current broke under the highway, and Trans-World turned a warning red.⁽²⁾

TRAFFIC slowed as they zoomed into position on the left lane. Motioning Shorty to take the controls, Lawson locked his own. He bent over to study the route schedule. His eye caught the flash of white breeches, and roved upward, widening with surprise. Eve Blackson...

"What in—?"

"I know," her face was a mixture of hatred and pride at the little victory. "I'm not the dual man you expected, am I?"

"And why," he asked icily, "am I honored with this unexpected pleasure?"

"It happens, *Mr. Lawson*, that this trip means everything to Dad. I'm going through to the Meteor. I'm not so sure that if I didn't the truck might get frightened and jump the road."

Her lip curled, and she sat very straight, looking ahead again as though the subject were closed. Arrow's mouth snapped shut. Riley Blackson allowed his only offspring to have her own way with everything. Right now. Lawson hoped they *would* get blown sky high. She had it coming to her.

THE plastic was stretching before them, passing speedily, smoothly under the singing wheels of the gigantic truck. Miles climbed on the speed indicator, eating up space between them and Half-way Station. With the cool green of the highway killing the burning heat in his eyes and calming his mind, Arrow admitted secretly that Eve would turn in a better accounting for herself than any

other driver he could have chosen. If only the girl wouldn't be so darn hard to get along with.

He saw the flashing signal of a patrol plane cutting in from the north. Bending over, his fingers switched on the teloscreen. It was Ken Barnes.

"Calling Six—Calling Transport Six," came the droning voice of the crack patrol scout.

"Six answering," Eve broke the silence. "What's new, Ken?"

"You know what's new, you little hell-cat," his voice like an admonishing father's. "You get off the highway and back to the kitchen where you belong."

"Make me," Eve laughed, her voice tinkling teasingly. "I'm going through to West Station, Ken." She was serious again. "There aren't any rules to prevent it, so go peddle your papers, my boy."

"Arrow—"

"It's no use, Barnes," Lawson had long since given up. "If she wants to go, I can't stop her."

"But—"

Eve switched the screen off, abruptly.

"Ken's a sweet kid," she said dreamily, "but why can't you boys realize that I'm a big girl now, and know how to take care of myself?"

There was no doubt in Lawson's mind that she had grown up. He could have kicked himself for loving the rounded face, the cool sweep of her youthful body. Reaching down angrily, he switched the teloscreen on once more, in time to catch Ken sputtering something unfit for listening purposes. He cut the scout short.

"Ken," Arrow's voice had become brittle and curt. "I think that hunch of mine was right. If I'm on the beam, the thing that yanks out those antennas will tear the devil out of your static indicator if it hits it. Get out front and fly low. Cut your lights. Send us a warning if static starts acting up. I'll try and do the rest..."

"Right," the highway scout's shot back like a whip. "But don't blame me if it makes mincemeat out of that little spitfire, after I warned her."

Lawson locked his controls and sat hunched forward, watching Ken's plane. Already the scout was a long distance ahead, tearing along beneath the low clouds.

TRANSPORT SIX nosed ahead past the thousand-mile point. On through the dense blackness of night; up ramps that carried it smoothly over small towns nestled under the glassy surface; into open country once more...

Barnes was always ahead, and Arrow's eyes never left the shadow of plane. He tried to relax a little, his eyes aching from the all-night vigil. Beads of sweat were standing out on his forehead, and he wanted to sleep, for a minute, for hours. Then—against a curtain of black, a tiny red flare burned like a pin-prick of blood, faded.

The signal!

"Lock your wheel," his voice came mechanically. "Lock it and sit tight."

Eve hesitated. He turned on her savagely.

"Do you understand English, or do you want to burn in this tin furnace?" She complied.

Slowly, then with increasing power, they became aware of a humming, an angry drumming on the outside of the cab. Alone at the controls he clung to them grimly, the knuckles of his hands drained of blood. His foot lifted from the fuel feeder and they lost speed slowly. One hundred and ninety, eighty, seventy—At fifty miles they were creeping along. The highway went red. The pounding, sparking sound had become terrific, drowning out the engine. Dry, burning currents of electrified air filled the cab. Their scalps tingled and burned, throats parched. He was riding the brakes with all his strength now, cutting the speed as rapidly as he could. It was stifling hot. In another minute something had to break.

He twisted the wheel gently, bouncing the dyno-glyc laden truck off the highway and onto the smooth shoulder of gravel. At once the heat drained away through the huge wire-woven tires and the engine breathed normally. He looked at the girl. Her face was icy, two small hands clutched tightly in her lap.

"It's all over, kid," he said it kindly. "Switch on and let's get out of here."

DRIVING cautiously with the tractor swaying each foot of the way, Lawson put five miles between them and the scene of the unhuman fight. Then as they stopped, Ken's voice cut over the teloscreen.

"Still with me?" He was jubilant. "I was watching you. For a while I didn't do much breathing. Guess you licked 'em that time, fella!"

The tiny plane was a scant ten feet overhead, hovering like a humming bird. Ken's head came over the side.

"Good God, Arrow," he gasped, "look at the antenna!"

Eve rose up, looking over Lawson's shoulder. The antenna was gone, jerked clear out of the cab body.

"You knew," she whispered. "You knew when it happened, and still you kept your speed up until we hit the center of that magnetic field."

"It was the only way I had of finding out for sure," he answered slowly. "I had a lead on the other boys, with some idea of what to expect."

The Diesel stopped, and he crawled out stiffly. Under the seat he found the extra metalode antenna and swiftly installed it in the empty socket.

"Rotten job," he straightened up, "but it'll have to do for tonight."

Looking up, he saw Ken's sky bug darting away toward the rainbow of light that was Half-way Station. No stop tonight, even for coffee. The fire fighters at Meteor would be waiting.

Hunching over the wheel he gunned the triple motors and snapped the speed buttons into high. The Diesel took the sudden weight without a murmur of protest, lifting the giant load from the shoulder of the road and down the main traffic lane once more.

"Get some sleep, Eve," he said it without looking around. "You'll be needing it before morning."

Without answering, she curled up on the broad leather cushion and closed her eyes.

IT must have been three in the morning when Arrow finally gave the wheel back to the girl. Exhausted with the strain, he hunched forward against the

controls, his head nodding. It dropped to his chest, and Eve thoroughly awakened again, listened to him snore softly, then concentrated on the highway ahead.

At six Lawson still slept and snored peacefully. Suddenly, without warning, the girl jerked with all her weight on the traffic warning vibrator and climbed with both tiny feet on the brakes. The powerful suction of the wheels under pressure screeched the truck to a stop, throwing them both forward in the cab. On the highway a scant ten feet ahead of the halted transport stood a private plasticoupe. Arrow, rudely awakened, was out of the tractor striding toward the car. Eve was at his side, slapping her gloves angrily against her leg as she walked. To park a private car on the Translucent was a capital offense. A woman leaned against the side of the coupe, her face frightened. She was frail, mud-covered, and the coarse, dirty hair that nailed about in the wind gave her a scarecrow appearance.

"I—I know I don't belong here," she was anticipating their thoughts, "but—but please help me. I was following the public roads, and became lost." She gestured hopelessly. "I found the Trans-World, and it was the only way. Now my car has stalled and I don't know what to do."

Other drivers were clustering around, muttering angrily. One of them, a Three-country freight driver, stepped forward.

"Let's get the lady's wheelbarrow off the road, boys," he shouted. A half dozen huskys gave him a hand. Lawson helped them.

"We'll tell someone to come back and give you a hand," he told her, not unkindly.

Transport Six nosed ahead again, swiftly. The warning signal released, a caravan of trucks followed at a safe distance from the load of dyno-glyc.

"Funny," Arrow said, "that woman getting on the highway like that."

"You're wonderful," Eve's voice cut like a knife. "When I first saw that car, the woman was crouching in the ditch. She saw I would stop in time, so she ran across the open space and made up a nice little story to tell us. I think she realized she'd never be able to get away before we found her, so she took a chance. That explains the phoney story and all the dirt on her clothes."

"It *could* be your imagination," he said.

"Not with what I know about women," Eve answered. "If they get lost in the middle of the night, they don't get out of the car and go wandering around in the underbrush tearing their clothing and slopping mud all over themselves."

"Guess you're right," he admitted.

"That," Eve grinned at him defiantly, "is why I wanted to be along tonight. You don't seem to think very straight at times, and I'm glad I'm here to help you out."

Lips tight in anger, he turned to the business of guiding the transport and was silent.

THE Meteor Oil Field was a flaming holocaust. Mushrooming out over West Station, black smoke covered the entire country side. The roaring flames could be heard for miles. Viewed from the cab of Transport Six the fire was awe-inspiring.

In spite of himself, Arrow felt a surge of pride as he realized the trailer behind them carried the agent that would conquer this burning hell of oil.

They were both at the controls now, tired out with the events of the long night. The first traffic zones appeared. Lights were flashing on all sides. The sky patrol

was out in full force, patrolling the traffic lane under the leadership of Ken Barnes. All cross traffic had been halted to let Transport Six pass. The atmosphere within the cab was strained to the breaking point. Eve, her body and mind exhausted, was still ready to fight. She refused to speak with Lawson, and he had no choice but to ignore her.

Suddenly Barnes flashed down from the main body of patrol ships and hovered over them.

Arrow switched on the teloscreen. Ken's voice was droning on, endlessly giving instructions.

"Transport Six proceed to Five Mile Point. Cycles will take your load. All traffic entering highway has stopped. You have clear road. No entrance switches open until further notice..."

He trailed off, darting ahead in the sky bug like a swift water beetle. Then he was back again.

"Change instructions--heat growing more intense. Stop at Six Mile Point. That is all..."

Even as he finished, a squad of cycles cut in behind them with a roar and spread out on either side of the speeding transport.

Fifteen Mile Point—

Eve locked her wheel and watched the curious strained faces of the drivers who were waiting for the dangerous load to pass. Every diesel driver in the country knew about Lawson's run with the dyno-glyc. They were holding their breath as the great truck careened by them on the last lap of the long journey against time.

Ten Mile Point—

Arrow started to press gently on the brakes, gradually increasing the pressure as the transport slowed. Nine-eight-seven... A gang of workmen was waiting as the truck halted. Handling the explosive as though in a nursery, they packed it into the cycles, which sped away toward the fire. They were carefully spaced, so that one accident would not destroy the entire load of precious glyc.

The foreman, a scarred-faced, middle-aged man, bronzed with the hard, outdoor life, came forward and took Arrow's hand. His other arm went affectionately around Eve's shoulder.

"Guess I'll be going in, now," he said. "Just thought I'd thank you both for a swell job. You know," his eyes softened for a moment, "This is the toughest blaze I've ever come up against. When I go in this morning, I'll be thinking a lot about the two drivers who made my fight possible."

He turned quickly, and walked away toward the last cycle.

ARROW spoke without looking away from his retreating figure.

"A swell fellow. He wouldn't be so proud of us, if he knew *how* well we work together, would he, *sweetheart*?"

Eve turned away toward the truck.

"Are you going in to the terminal?" she asked tightly.

"Go ahead," he called after her. "Ken will drop me off."

The truck roared into high, and swished past him so close that he stepped back to avoid its wheels. Ken had landed and was standing at his side.

"What's burning her up?" the scout asked.

"I'm not half as worried about her," Lawson answered, "As I am about the next driver who tries to bring a truck through on the Trans-world."

"Right now," Ken said, "you need rest. Let me drop you off at the Transport Club. Sleep for twenty-four hours, then you can tackle the other problem."

Arrow nodded.

"And in twenty-four hours, I'll be right back where I started from. I'll *still* be fighting something I know nothing about."

He felt better when Ken had landed the Sky Bug on top of the roof of the Transport Club. The hands of a kindly attendant had already removed his grimy driving suit.

"Give this guy a bed, and tie him to it for a while," Barnes told the attendant. "He needs rest."

The man chuckled.

"Guess he's earned it," he said. He shook Lawson's hand warmly. "The boys have heard about the fine run you and Miss Blackson made, sir. We're mighty proud of you both."

Lawson followed him down the long flight of steps to the club lobby.

EVE was feeling much better. Slipping out of the bath, she drew the semi-transparent folds of the electric heat-coat about her freshly perfumed body. The soothing current penetrated her skin, relaxing all the tiny, exhausted muscles of her silken back and arms. For the millionth time she thanked Daddy Blackson silently for building this little hideaway atop the terminal at West Station. The apartment was her one retreat from the careening transports and their sweaty, masculine drivers. She whirled swiftly before the big three-dimensional mirror and was quite satisfied with the image of herself.

Somewhere a door clicked loudly. It was the private entrance her father had built to the apartment. She stood stiff with alarm. A footstep sounded in the small back room. She walked smoothly, silently, like a tigress toward the sound. In the doorway she collided with a stout gentleman who was making a bold entrance to her little haven.

"Who...?" she managed to stammer.

"I *beg* your pardon, Miss Blackson," the stout one said, adjusting his clothing after the accident. "You *are* Eve Blackson, are you not?"

"It's none of your business who I am. Whoever *you* are, get out before I ring the alarm."

By now the over-weighted, bald-headed one had regained his composure.

"Don't be hasty," he dipped his shoulders in a courtly bow, looking very foolish in his attempt to appear humble. "I have a message from Mr. Lawson."

"I might *know* it would be him," she said. "What is it and then get out."

"One at a time, in their proper sequence." He drew a card from the pocket of the badly creased gray trousers and held it for her to read. "A *very* nasty dispatcher you have downstairs," he said.

She glanced at the card. JOHN CHESTERTON, TRANSPORT CLUB. A little more at ease now, she smiled at his ruddy, excited face. Dispatch had evidently questioned his entrance a bit roughly.

"What does Lawson want?"

"Mr. Lawson send his regards, and asks that you drive back to East Station alone. He plans to stay until the fire is under control."

A loud pounding sounded on the outer door.

"Eve, are you all right?"

Dispatch sounded very out of sorts.

She pushed the door open and Dispatch stood there, anger written in hard lines on his browned face. With one hand he nursed a bulging head as he glared at Chesterton with murder in his eye.

"You'd better go now," she turned to the bearer of the message. "I won't vouch for your safety here much longer."

"I *did* hit him a rather nasty crack on the head," Chesterton admitted, making a hurried exit. Outside Dispatch evidently went into action. Eve slipped out of the robe. Why did Law-son always have to let her down? Ken didn't seem the type to pull a dirty trick like this on any girl, much less on her. She decided to waste no time in putting miles between herself and the man who loved fires so much he was willing to let her take a chance alone on the highway.

AT seven thirty, Arrow emerged from his room at the Transport Club, dressed in a fresh driver's outfit. He ate at the counter in the small lunch room, then entered the teloscreen booth. The closing door established contact with the operator.

"Station Please."

"Trans-American office, zone one," he directed.

Parts of screen pictures flashed before him. Then Dispatch appeared, a sour grin on his face.

"Hello, my pretty one," he greeted Lawson. "So you ain't fightin' fires after all?"

"Let me speak to Eve." Arrow wondered what had come over Dispatch.

The man studied him carefully for a minute.

"You'll have a tough time doing that, after sending her back to East Station alone."

"Sending her?" Arrow's face turned white. "Get this straight. I haven't sent Eve anywhere. If she's headed for home, you'd better have a transport ready to roll when I get there, or I'll scuttle you."

He slammed the door of the booth and rushed from the lobby.

Lawson was there before Dispatch could finish refueling. With the last of the oil draining in to the tank, he heard the whole story of Chesterton from Dispatch's willing lips. Eve was somewhere between West Station and Halfway, thinking that Lawson had willingly sent her out to death and even worse. He yanked the hose from the truck and sprang behind the controls.

For the second time that night a huge empty transport leaped from the yard of Trans-American's West Terminal and gained speed like a cumbersome hippo up the long ramp to Translucent Highway. With the truck out of sight, Dispatch went to the teloscreen and established contact with Riley Blackson at East Station.

HOPING the girl hadn't gained too much of a start, Arrow fed the transport all the fuel it could gulp down. Topping a rise on the prairie he spotted another truck just ahead. Could it be Eve? With the tail gate in sight, he could make out

the words splashed across it. THREE-COUNTRY FREIGHT. This was the outfit at whose feet Riley Blackson was laying the blame for all his troubles. Why should Three-Country be pushing a dead head across country tonight, with every dock on the west coast overflowing with merchandise? He could tell from the sway of the truck it was empty. Follow the fellow for a few hundred miles and see what's up? That was the idea. He stepped hard on the fuel control and caught up.

After a few minutes the truck ahead started to act queerly. With each burst of speed, he could see the other driver increase his own as though to pull away. Racing on Trans-world was bad business. He sped on, keeping just behind Three-Country. It was speedily becoming a situation entirely unfunny to Arrow's latent sense of humor. The diesel roared wildly as he looked at the dial. Two hundred and seventy; seventy-five; two hundred eighty m.p.h. Well over the speed limit on normal runs, and yet he had to go faster to keep those vanishing tail lights in sight. At three hundred he had given the transport all it would take. The wheels sang like maddened hornets and every fiber of the big trailer groaned and twisted behind him. Something was bound to snap at this speed. He kept his foot tight to the floor and clung to the controls. Sweat beaded on his chin and dripped from the end of his nose. Then, with his eyes stuck to the lights ahead he realized the other driver had cracked.

The truck, barely visible through the heated, fogged glass seemed to double up like a jack rabbit and jump from the highway. The driver was making a desperate attempt to right it, as the red warning flash of the road bed spelled disaster. Three-Country, whoever he might be, had jerked too hard on the pressure brakes. Hitting the road shoulder, the truck staggered, jumped high in the air and toppled end over end into a field. Flames burst from it, and Lawson, working with his own brakes, saw the mass fall like a slaughtered animal in the open farm land.

The transport under control, he stopped far down the road, and backed to where Three-Country had left the traffic lane. The body of the driver had been thrown clear of the wreckage. Crushed to a pulpy mess, it lay twisted completely around a big fence post. He walked toward it, knowing there was no hurry. The head of the corpse, large and bald, had been flattened and crushed by the impact. Turning away, Lawson saw a slip of paper projecting from the coat pocket. Steeling himself against the sight he bent over and drew the blood-soaked note from the coat. A card fell from his fingers and floated to the earth. He picked it up and read, *John Chesterton, Transport Club.*

SINCE Eve had left the freight yard at West Station, the strange feeling of impending disaster had clung over her. Something had been strangely familiar about the face of the man, John Chesterton; a face that she had seen somewhere before. Perhaps another, but like it in a manner that gave her the creeps. With Transport Six well out of the last protection zone she began to watch the Trans-World closely.

It was funny about Lawson. He wasn't usually *that* much of a heel. Perhaps she'd have better Waited to hear from Lawson himself. Then high above her, Eve saw for the first time, the speck of a patrol ship that dogged her speeding truck. She switched on the teloscreen.

"That you, Ken?"

"Hello Jinx," Barnes answered promptly. "I had a hunch you'd be trying something smart. Reported back to Half-way, got bored with the wine and women, and what not, so here I am again."

"Arrow didn't like my company," Eve pouted a little. "So I'm just going home alone. Brave, aren't I?"

"Like the sweet dope you are," Ken shot back. "You'd better go back and wait for your boy friend."

"No can do," her voice hardened. "I'm heading for Dad Blackson, and fast, too."

She switched the screen off as Ken started to lecture. It would be no use to go limping back to Lawson with a thorn in her heart. He'd laugh at her, coming west again like a whipped puppy dog.

Once, a long time after she talked with Ken, she saw the bug again, winging along ahead of her. If it could only be Arrow up there watching out for her safety. She decided the lanky truck cow-boy was the most good for nothing man she'd ever bothered to fight with.

Half-way station loomed ahead with its magnificent luminous towers reaching upward from the flat countryside. Shaft upon shaft of multi-colored glassine buildings reaching toward the heavens. The haven of rest and amusement broke in two the long night drive from West to East Station. She cut the fuel and switched off all three motors.

DRIFTING as through a cloud, Transport Six silently coasted on the smooth highway into the heart of the rainbow city. Turning from the traffic lane she let it follow the mechanically controlled line of flashing "spot signals" down a maze of parking ramps and into its stall. Robot brakes eased Six to a halt and locked the wheel securely.

Easing her bone-tired body into a comfortable counter chair Eve watched the assortment of foods pass her on the conveyor. Coffee and sinkers, the old standby. She inserted the proper coins into the counter slot and released the steaming Java. With hot food inside, she felt better. Resting, she brooded over the strange Mr. Chesterton once more. More and more it seemed odd that Arrow would send a messenger, and not come to her himself. Half rising, she decided to call him on the telo. Then she slumped down again, picturing him grinning at her fears. Once before they had safely driven through that crazy magnetic field of death. She could do it again. The road ahead seemed to draw her. If there was to be a fight, get it over with.

Shrugging her shoulders decisively she arose. The odor of hot food followed her into the night air. Then, away from the warmth and security of the building her old fears multiplied. Tossing her head almost savagely, Eve strode straight to Transport Six.

LAWSON hadn't thought about Eve stopping at Half-way. Realizing the girl would be wild with anger, he felt that she would roll straight on to East Station, and home, without a stop.

Now, just east of the throbbing color of Half-way Station he was giving the truck all it could handle. Eve, pulling onto the highway a scant fifteen minutes behind him, gripped the wheel and settled down for the test, should it come.

The blood-soaked note on Chesterton's body told Lawson a lot of things he'd been wanting to know. If he couldn't overtake the girl very soon now, he might live to regret the day he'd *ever* see her face again.

He knew it was Ken before he switched the screen on. The way that little bug came flashing down from the eastern sky told him that no one but Barnes would be at the controls. Ken seemed surprised to find Lawson in this truck.

"Hi, Cowboy," the scout greeted him. "Thought you were sleeping it off back at West Station. I had a lead on Eve. Guess she must have stopped off at Half-way. Came back to pick her up."

Arrow sighed in relief.

"That's the best news I've heard tonight," he said.

Ken grinned.

"Don't worry about *that* little girl, at least not as long as I'm around."

Lawson had slowed the diesel down, idling along under Ken's plane.

"Think I should drop back and find her?" he questioned.

"Might have a tough time getting near her the way she feels right now."

"Guess you're right," Arrow gunned the transport again. "I'll keep my eyes open, and you help Eve along, will you?"

"Right."

The telo went dark, and Lawson watched the bug turn off and slip behind.

The Trans-world, pleasant at any other time, held a horror tonight that he'd have to face alone. The fact that he knew what might happen didn't make death seem any more pleasant.

There's a way of rolling a truck into the ditch, his mind pounded out. A way of tipping it over so the tractor will ride clear of the crushing weight behind. Perhaps a cool head and strong arms will do it. Perhaps—

WHEN the hell crashed in upon him, his mind worked like a smoothly licking watch. With nerves turned to ice he carefully nursed the small dyno-glyc bomb on the cushion at his side. *Pull out the firing pin and compressed hell will bust wide open.*

At first the electro current hit the tractor gently like the sound of two live wires sputtering against each other. Increasing steadily the thing, whatever it was, seemed to come closer within range. Slowing down as much as he dared, Lawson drove steadily ahead, resisting the urge to leave the highway. To escape. That would save him once more, and leave the others to go on dying in vain. He clung grimly to the controls, rolling straight down the highway. The prickly, burning heat filled the cab and pulled at his hair. His head began to buzz wildly under the pressure. From the corner of his eye he watched the metalode antenna as it straightened out toward the edge of the highway. Hold on. He kept whispering it over and over, brushing the sweat from his eyes. *Hold on for a minute, two minutes more.*

The center of disturbance must be very close. His breath jerked out of him with difficulty, arms turned to lead against the wheel.

NOW!

His right arm pulled gently against the wheel, and the truck bounced from the highway. A red flash of the highway signal and he was tearing down a long, sharp

incline toward the deep ditch. Pushing the door with his foot, he stepped to the running board, holding the glyc bomb in his right hand, the wheel with his left. Hanging there for seconds, he knew the time was near. He gripped the firing pin in his teeth and pulled savagely, at the same time twisting the wheel quickly under his hand.

With all the strength he could muster Lawson leaped headlong into the darkness. His legs like long pistons carried him clear of the cab as it skidded side-wise on the hard gravel. Panting and half dead with pain, he felt rather than saw, the big trailer roll by, missing his body by inches. Hugging the dirt, his arm and legs shredded painfully by the sharp stones, he saw the truck hit the bottom of the incline. Then a great flare of orange light lashed over him, the explosion deadening his ears.

The transport seemed to lift up, parts of it flying high in the air, then settle down again. A sigh escaped his lips as the darkness settled in. Somewhere on the ridge behind him a twig snapped. The highway was deserted, and laying stretched on the side of the hard bank he wondered dully if the scene had been convincing.

THREE people saw the explosion against the night sky. Eve Blackson, hurtling east, shuddered as the flash of light covered the highway ahead. Ken, above her, knew who was in the wrecked truck. His face didn't betray him as he switched on the teloscreen.

"Turn that crate around," he shouted at the girl. "Get back to Half-way, and wait. I'm going up and find out what happened."

"You know darn well what happened," Eve's lips were white. "I'm going along for the ride."

Ken swore loudly.

"Eve," he pleaded, "I can't be responsible any longer. I'm doing my best to keep you out of a jam. Now, turn back."

He was talking to a dead screen. Eve was already far ahead.

ON the little oak ridge, just above the spot where Lawson had cracked up, stood the third interested party. The woman looked just as bedraggled as she had the night before when Trans-World drivers had pushed her plasticoupe from the highway. The coat, covered with dried mud flapped around her gaunt frame with a scarecrow attitude of disinterest. Her face was chalky with determination as she studied the road toward the west.

Bony hands clutched a queer, boxlike contraption close to her breast. Not unlike a huge aerial camera, it had a large glassine lens pointing away from her body, crossed hair lines etched across its surface. She held the box to her body with two large handles, a trigger release buried under her right finger.

She looked down for an instant at the smouldering ruins of the wrecked truck, then studied the highway once more. Her ears had picked up the hum of Transport Six coming over the divide a few miles away. Over the oncoming truck, hanging high in air, a tiny flare, red as a drop of blood, flickered then died.

She lifted the box higher and inside it, tiny motors began to hum softly. Six had dipped down a slope in the Trans-world and roared onward toward her hiding

place. She aimed down the length of the machine and sighted the crossed hairs on the barrel sight.

The metalode antenna on the truck cab was plainly visible in the sight.

Something crushed down on her head, and a blinding stab of light raced through her brain. The box dropped to the ground and the woman sagged slowly and went limp among the damp leaves. Transport Six flashed past.

Lawson stepped back and tossed the huge cudgel from him in disgust. With his foot he rolled the woman over on her back. There was something unclean about her, like a rattlesnake crushed under a farmer's boot.

Six was slowing. Evidently Eve had seen the still burning truck, and stopped as soon as she could apply the full force of the brakes. He stood on the ridge, listening as the truck went into reverse and rolled back along the side of the road. It was the sky bug that demanded his attention, He watched another flare drop from it, and smiled softly as still another dripped red against the low clouds.

Eve had stopped now, and he heard her plainly as she cried out. The Trans-American insignia was still visible on its crushed side. Her feet slid down the gravel bank. The woman on the ground stirred and sat up feebly. A string of soft oaths escaped her lips.

"You dirty skunk," she muttered, glaring at him. "Hitting a lady with a club."

The footsteps below them stopped abruptly. Eve must have heard the sound.

"I wouldn't use anything *but* a club on a snake." He almost whispered it, in his hatred for her. "Get up." The words cut from his lips like the raw edge of a saw.

He bent over and grasped the magnetizing machine with one hand.

"Start walking," Lawson motioned toward the road.

"Eve," he shouted, his voice rocketing back and forth across the quiet woodland. "It's me, Arrow. Get back to the truck and wait. Ken's coming down."

The sky bug had nosed toward them swiftly. Ken would meet them on the highway.

Eve's voice floated back, all the fear and horror gone from it.

"Arrow," she called, "are you all right?"

It seemed the most natural thing in the world, after the terrors of the all night run, to find him here and to be glad he was safe.

THEY made a strange party, huddled ill at ease beside the great cross-nation truck. Lawson was still covered with the blood and dirt from his terrific fall from the truck. The woman of the plasticoupe stood to one side, her head hanging dejectedly, like a sulky child. Now and then her eyes darted from one side to the other, seeking an avenue of escape. Ken was having trouble trying to contact East Station on the truck's teloscreen.

"East Station—Calling East Station," he repeated over and over to the dead screen. Traffic had stopped on the highway. Many drivers on the run east had seen the explosion from Halfway station. They weren't anxious to follow. Ken's hands searched the controls of the telo.

"Try the screen in the sky bug," Arrow suggested.

"No good," Ken answered laconically. "It runs on the engine fuel. Tanks went dry as I landed."

The woman had waited patiently, sliding inch by inch toward the outer circle of the group. Suddenly a tiny nitro pistol flashed into her hand. She waved it hysterically.

"Run for it, Barnes," she shouted. "It's been a good show, but you'll never get through it."

Ken turned with an odd look of surprise. Then, with Arrow staring at him, he smiled. His features slightly reddened, he relaxed once more against the cushions of the seat.

"She's not only crazy," he said, "but she's got us in a hellish spot."

Lawson ignored him, turning with pin point eyes to the woman. He moved toward her slowly, his body stretching smoothly, stealthily, as though approaching a cobra.

"Stand back," the pistol poked at him savagely. "I'll blow that frame of yours to the moon."

Eve dashed between them, throwing herself against Arrow chest. Pressing her body close to his she looked up into Lawson's determined eyes.

"Leave her alone, darling," she pleaded. "She'll kill us all if you don't."

His gaze dropped to hers, and his heart skipped a beat at what he saw there. Then he looked away.

"You told Ken Barnes to run for it," he asked the woman. "What did you mean?"

EVE stepped back. The new hardness in his voice puzzled her. She was searching for something—anything to cling to.

The gun wavered a bit.

"Nothin'," the woman stammered. "Nothin', only I—"

Lawson forced her hand.

"Are you trying to get him out of this mess, now that your brothers failed to show up?"

Ken stood up abruptly. He walked away from the truck and behind the protection of the wavering nitro gun.

"Give up the ghost, Lawson," his voice had gone harsh, bitter. "What do you know about her brother."

A look of fright had crept over his handsome face.

Eve, wide-eyed at this turn of events, pressed her body against the smooth protection of the truck's side.

"Nothing much," Arrow said. "I found his body wrapped around a fence post back on the west run. There was a paper in his pocket that set me straight on a lot of things." The words came slowly, as he sought the effect of them on the faces of the pair before him.

The gun dropped with a thud by the roadside, and the woman started to cry softly. Arrow sprang for it, but too late. Ken beat him to the weapon, kicking Arrow a wicked blow on the shoulder with his heavy boot. Lawson fell back. The gun, steady this time, trained on his chest. Eve cried out, straining back as though to hide from these two facing each other with bursting hatred.

"Now, stay there," Ken snarled, "or *I'll* blast you, and quick."

He turned toward Eve.

"Why *sweetheart*," the words dripped sarcasm, "you're not disappointed with your hero of the sky patrol?"

She stared straight at him, disgust welling into her eyes.

"Lawson," Barnes spoke evenly, "you weren't so dense after all. So you found John Sargent and the devil's contract I signed with him!"

"John Sargent—or Chesterton." Arrow answered. "One and the same to me."

"Chesterton," Eve's astonished voice broke in. "Why, he's the man—"

"Yes," Arrow walked to her, putting an arm about her slim waist. "The man who sent you out to die. Sargent, owner of Three-Country Freight, and part owner of Ken Barnes' life."

FOR a minute Barnes seemed to soften as he watched them. "You're right," his voice was tired. "Sargent and this no-good sister of his had me on the spot. Years ago I bought stock in the outfit. They were going broke. I was going to lose every cent I had. They made me a part of this scheme to get Trans-American's business. My part was easy. This miserable excuse for a human being," he looked at Sargent's sister, weeping miserably with the news of her brother's death, "did the dirty work. Sargent developed the magnetic gun, and spotted your trucks as they left East Station. I picked them up on the highway and dropped a warning flare when they approached her hiding place. She did the rest of it."

He paused, making sure the gun was still trained on Lawson's body, then continued. "After the first time, I realized I was a murderer. After that it was too late to back out. They had me hooked."

"Which makes good talking," Law-son cut in, "but what are we going to do about it?"

"That's the hard part to decide." Ken relaxed a bit with the story off his mind, and grinned at his old friend. "I've always liked you two. As for Eve, if things had been different—"

"Leave Eve out of this."

"Okay," Ken agreed. "But I *do* like you. I hate like the devil to kill you unless it's necessary. The sky bug is dry. Give me fifteen minutes start in the transport, and you don't have much choice, and I'll cut off into strange country where you'll never see me again. Agreed?"

Arrow looked down at the girl clinging to him.

"We haven't a thing to say about it," she said, quietly.

"So, that's that."

Ken climbed quickly into the cab of Six, then saw the woman, her eyes pleading with him for escape.

"Come on," he said, disgustedly. "I might as well take my misery with me."

Transport Six caught the fuel eagerly, lunging forward on the highway. Standing close together they watched it carry from them what had been the ideal man. Eve's lips parted slightly, her mind seemingly undergoing a terrific strain.

"I'm afraid," she said, clutching his big hand.

"Of what?" He took her in his arms, pushing her small chin up with a firm finger. "Somehow, I guess Ken will get the pay-off when the time catches up with him."

A shudder coursed through her small body. They listened to the roar of the diesel as it topped a distant hill.

THE sound floated back to them through the clear air, louder and louder as Six gathered momentum. Transport Six had reached its maximum speed when the explosion came. A great flash of orange light swept high in the air. The top of the world flew off. All that remained of the big truck shuddered apart and blundered its way into the ditch. Ripped apart by the blast, it toppled into a pitiful heap at the side of Trans-world.

Eve buried her head in the smoothness of Lawson's tunic and sobbed. For an instant his eyes widened with amazement. Hadn't they, after all, found the thing that had wrecked Trans-American's trucks? Then he looked at her face, and realized. Pushing her away at an arm's length he stared admiringly.

She brushed the tears from her face.

"It was terrible," she said. "But last night I made up my mind to help you somehow. When Ken was talking with you I backed against the antenna."

From her pocket she drew the small wrench he had used on the west bound trip.

"It wasn't much of a trick to bend the antenna away from ground contact with this," she said simply. "I hope it makes up for some of the terrible things I've said to you."

Lawson didn't answer at once. His lips were busy finding something that had troubled him from the first. Yes! Eve could be a firebrand of affection when she wanted to be.

Under their feet the highway had once more flashed its warning. He wondered vaguely if the red plastic was glowing because of the accident ahead, or did Eve's torrid lips have something to do with the blushing scarlet of Translucent Trans-World.



⁽¹⁾ The metalode antenna was developed during the latter part of the twenty-third century. A fuller understanding of its use will be made clear by the history of Translucent Trans-World Highways. Plastic highways were in use as early as 2144. With the puny efforts of twentieth century scientists exhausted, more advanced students of plastic attempted to study its practical uses. Professor James T. Flannigan of East Station Metal-Lab, caused the first slabs of plastic to be laid over the route of the ancient Pennsylvania turnpike. The run made a splendid proving ground.

Plastica (trade name for highway plastic) could be applied in semi-fluid form at the rate of two hundred miles a day. After solidifying, Plastica became adaptable to heavy, fast truck traffic with no further worries about upkeep.

Plastica, however, like the plastic comb when drawn through your hair, generated dangerous amounts of static electricity. Before the high speeds of two and three hundred miles per hour could be reached safely, this problem had to be conquered. During the early days many trucks were destroyed by this invisible agent of death.

In 2385, John Williamson, traffic expert had solved the problem with a simple metalode antenna. This antenna, its metal a thousand times stronger than steel, projected from the left side of the tractor for three feet and turned a ninety degree angle to contact the highway edge. With the end of this "Columbus and the Egg" mystery, no further accidents were reported.

Translucent highways were undermined by a series of almost human electric switches. Electri-glow lamps caused the surface to glow a dull green color when traffic was moving. If any disturbance occurred (stalled truck, entering traffic, etc.), the highway's color would change, like the wily chameleon, to a bright, warning red for a distance of ten miles to the rear of the disturbance. All country rules forced drivers in this zone to halt at once until the emerald go-ahead signal re-appeared.

Translucent highways at first connected the two great cities of East Station on the Atlantic Coast and West Station on the opposite side of America. Its only stop in this long run was Halfway Point, situated for the comfort of highway drivers in the center of the country, a half-day journey from either starting point.

With world peace as its objective, the highway was later stretched on aluminumite, gyroscopically stabilized pontoons across the oceans. Translucent Trans-World carried billions of tons of freight to all corners of All Country Union.

⁽²⁾ Because of intense speeds maintained on Translucent Trans-World Highway, the warning signal must be used when entering and leaving the traffic lane. Naturally there is a chance of collisions occurring if the traffic flow is interrupted in any way. This traffic warning is controlled by a vibrator cord hung from the roof of each cab. When pulled, this cord makes electrical contact through vibration against an exposed cable on the surface of the highway at all entering points. The cable leads to the master switch, throwing off the green lights and causing the highway to turn red for a distance of ten miles to the rear.