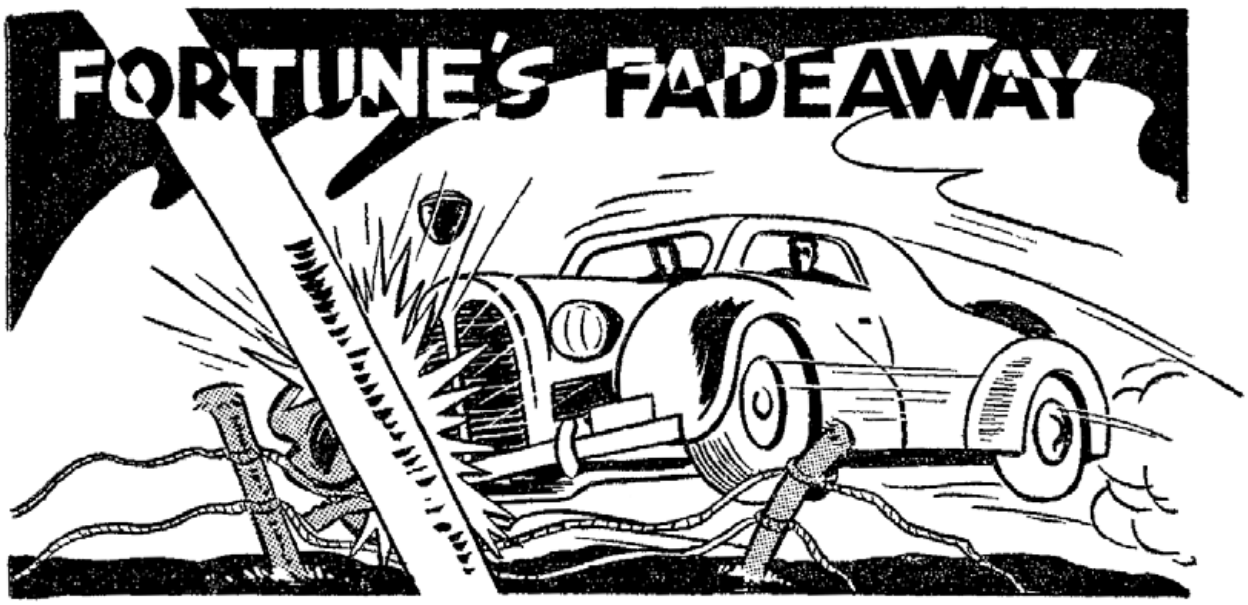
FORTUNE'S FADEAWAY



"The Perfect Jinx!" the headlines named him—and they were right.

By Lawrence Treat

HE HAS to be somewhere. A slight, stoop-shouldered little man, bald, subdued, meek, with thin delicate nostrils and a quiet resignation in his brown eyes. He gives the impression of apologizing for himself, as if he had no right to be with you but just couldn't resist the temptation. He likes people, you see.

If you ever come across anyone like that, ask his name. There's always a chance it may be Bogan. Harley Bogan.

I'd been driving since eight that morning, and I wanted company. The rain was slapping like a miniature barrage on the windshield and the wiper blades couldn't click fast enough. The tires were making a steady swish and I could see their gray disappearing tracks in the mirror.

He was a forlorn, bedraggled figure standing under a tree at the top of the hill. He didn't bother to thumb me. He simply stared, like a dog that wants to come inside the house and knows it can't. So he stared, and I could feel the appeal in him.

He seemed tired and hungry and wet and I was sorry for him, but a few minutes after I'd picked him up I began being sorry for myself. I spouted my piece about how I was on my way to Baltimore for the trial flight of that new plane. My name would be on the select passenger list and the publicity meant cash. I crowed too much, perhaps, but even so, he might have been more sociable.

Instead, he gazed with those wistful, apologetic eyes, and said nothing. I needed distraction, and here I was committed to carry a little wooden puppet for two hundred miles.

After a time, I became conscious of a straining and a concentration radiating from him, almost like a new sound against the monotony of rain and motor and swishing tires. His fists were clenched into little pink bows and his lips were knotted in a bud of repression. Suddenly, as we passed a cross road, he almost jumped out of his seat.

"That's it!" he exclaimed.

"That's what?"

"The place where it started."

I coaxed him with a "Yes?" and waited. I could feel him fighting it, the story he didn't want to tell lest I throw him out in the rain. And for good reason, too.

But it had to come, and it did. In jerks, in sighs, in dropped words as he tried to swallow it down.

"It was years ago," he said. "I had a dog with me. A little brown mutt that used to curl up around my toes and keep my feet warm at night. I like dogs," he added eagerly, "and I liked Lady particularly."

He bit his lips and rubbed them with his fingers as if to massage back the tale, but it had started now and he was powerless.

"I was standing there," he continued, "hoping a truck or a wagon would come along. My clothes were too ragged for anything else. I'd been sleeping in the fields, with Lady to keep my feet

warm. So when the big car came along I didn't even get up. But Lady scampered out on the road and I couldn't help myself. I yelled and then I dived for him and that's all I remember.

"I learnt later on that the fender had struck me and the car had swerved and gone into a ditch. It's the only time in my life I was ever hurt. We were both rushed to the hospital and put in adjoining beds. Me and Warrington Dodd.

"I guess you've read about him. His genius for the theatre, his knack of creating types. He could reach into anybody, find an acting personality and develop it. He did with me, though I'd never even thought of the stage. I'd always had too many things on my mind."

It was a peculiar remark and I followed it up. "What sort of things?" I asked.

He muttered something that I didn't catch. If I had, I think I'd have stopped the car then and there and thrown him out. We were passing through a collection of shacks that I suppose you could call a village, but it was such a poverty-stricken little settlement that I doubt whether he could have hurt it.

"It was on account of a fly," he said. "A fly that lit on the end of my nose. My arms were strapped down and I couldn't brush the thing off. I sort of switched my nose, like this, and Dodd was watching."

I looked. His brown eyes were sad, doleful, and when he moved the muscles at the side of his face, drawing up and distorting his mouth, the effect was so horrific, so ineffably tragic, that I can still see it. Agony, grief, suffering—his face was the complete expression.

His story began to wander, but the drift was plain. Dodd regarded that accident as fate's presentation of the born tragedian. Dodd offered him a part, taking him to New York, finding a play, casting it, building up the publicity.

With a shock, I remembered. Harley Bogan, the perfect jinx. After the thing happened, he became a ten days' sensation. The press publicized him as the absolute in hard luck. Flood, earthquake, tornado dogged his path. Seventeen motor accidents, two train wrecks, a fallen elevator, a house that collapsed. The list was prodigious and fantastic and incredible and true. No one person could have survived it all. But Bogan had.

I remembered the untimely end of Warrington Dodd. Asphyxiated by carbon monoxide from a furnace flue that backed up. They blamed it on Bogan, too. You see, he himself never suffered. It was always his companion, the other man in the car.

I looked ahead. We were passing a desolate stretch of swamp and I couldn't put him out here. Not this mild meek little fellow who was pouring out his heart. But at the next town—

I wished I didn't have that plane flight ahead of me. I slowed up. The road wasn't slippery, but I might blow a tire or hit an obstruction or have to jam on my brakes, and I didn't want to take chances. Not with Harley Bogan beside me.

He began telling about the thing itself, the event that had catapulted him into a fame so grotesque that it earned him a night club engagement where he was billed as "The Original Jinx: If You're Superstitious, Don't Come!" A bright idea, though it hadn't worked out.

"With the play about to open," he said docilely, "I thought my luck had changed. I had a career and a good job and Warrington Dodd. And I was in love."

I didn't dare look. The pathos of his meek, sensitive face would have been too much.

"She's Libby Lubelle, of the movies," he went on. "But at that time she was just a dreamy, ambitious little kid with a small part in the show. We were in love, and the day before the opening we celebrated by going out to the country. But we got drenched in the rain and caught cold, both of us."

I knew the rest of it. Bogan had played the kindly old father, the defeated in life, and the climax of the play was his reception of his wayward daughter. But as he stretched out his arm towards her, that first night, Fate dealt its master stroke.

He had acted smoothly, deftly, despite a slightly hoarse voice. He reached his cue line, raised his arms and extended them in a gesture of pardon. He was about to speak.

His head lifted up, hesitated; his nostrils twitched. Involuntarily Bogan opened his mouth and drew in his breath. Than his face contorted as never before had been seen in the glare of footlights. His arms and body cried dramatically "My daughter!" while the rest of him reacted to the overweening power of a mighty sneeze.

For a second there was complete silence. Then someone in the front row tittered. The titter caught

on, traveled through the house, swept to the rear of the orchestra and bounded to the balcony. The wave rose, grew, reached the state of hysteria and subsided to redouble in force. It ignored the fall of the curtain and dashed itself relentlessly against the asbestos drop. It roared steadily on, like some great headless monster reveling in its own decapitation. And long after the miserable figure of Harley Bogan had quit the theatre, the laughter-worn audience lifted itself weakly from its seats and left the auditorium. It ruined the show and made Bogan.

"If I could break my luck just once," he said, "I'd be all right. But it's always the other person, and it scares me. Like Libby, that night. She could never have gotten over it if we'd married."

"She couldn't?" I asked. "I don't see how it affected her."

"Without her," he explained mildly, "everything would have been all right. You see, I never sneezed at all. It was she, watching from the wing. She sneezed."

I turned in amazement. I must have jerked the steering gear. Bogan yelled, pointed, and I yanked at the wheel.

But it was too late. The car was in a skid and there was nothing to do but wait for the crash.

I was knocked unconscious. Not badly hurt, but I'd lost my chance to reach Baltimore in time. And Bogan was gone. Somebody told me the little man had left uninjured and had said he was sorry.

Sorry! That plane trip meant about twenty-thousand dollars to me, in publicity.

So, if you should ever come across a meek little man with humble brown eyes, ask him if his name is Bogan. And if it is, tell him what a *mascot* he is.

Why? Don't you remember that trial flight? It ended in a crash, with all passengers killed—except me.

Bogan saved me.