

*Though the little jockey had shattered his nerves in a twelve-horse spill, he had to capture the cup in a two-crook contest or win the urn in the . . .*

# Grim Reaper's Handicap

*By Fergus Truslow*



“CHIPMAN? Room 1228,” the desk clerk purred. “Who is calling, please?”

“D’Argonne – Eddy D’Argonne,” I told him.

My palms were sweating and my stomach twisted up into a knot, I wondered if I’d ever get enough starch back into my knees to stick in the saddle tomorrow.

Don’t laugh. Maybe you’ll understand when I tell you that the hotel’s revolving glass doors bit off pieces of the boom of San Diego’s night traffic outside and churned them into the lobby, so it sounded just like a twelve-horse field coming up behind me, fast.

I had to hold onto the edge of the desk.

“D’Argonne?” the clerk repeats, “Oh, yes.”

His polite smile breaks off at the edges into the ghost of a sneer. Of course anybody getting a good gander at my carrot thatch and freckles can connect the name.

You know, the jockey who lost his nerve after a fall in the middle of the field at Caliente. Remember? Yeah.

I tried to brace myself against the veiled sneer in the desk clerk’s eyes and I couldn’t. I hated myself for it. My eyes met his and turned away.

Deep inside me something was ticking like the fuse on a time bomb. But I couldn’t meet his eyes.

So I pried my fingers loose from the edge of the desk and walked toward the elevators, feeling the clerk’s stare drilling

into my back every step of the way.

It was all right with me if he forgot to phone Chipman I am on my way up. When you want to ask a guy like Van a question like why he hires you to ride a race tomorrow, and then bets against his own nag, you want to walk right in on him without giving him time to think up answers.

I was glad when the elevator doors sliced off the sound that came through from the street. Until I saw the elevator jockey in the red jacket.

“Well, now, if it ain’t Mr. D’Argonne!” he whispered, letting a sly grin slide across his greasy fat face. “Where you working these days?”

That had a barb to it. He’d been a stable boy at Caliente until I caught him stealing sponges and chamois skins from my boss.

That fuse was buzzing, way deep inside me, but I was cold and numb in the chest.

“Naval Hospital, civilian employee,” I told him. “But I’m still in training.”

“Whadda ya do at the hospital? Hand out horse liniment?”

The two or three other passengers in the elevator snickered. I tried to grin, but it felt sick on my face, so I stopped trying.

“Yeah,” I whispered. “Horse liniment.”

THE elevator stopped. I got rattled and thought it was my floor. I saw it wasn’t and started back in. “Wrong floor!” I muttered. They were all grinning.

The elevator doors slammed shut in my face. “Hey!” I said.

I could hear them laughing in the

elevator as it went on up past the floor.

For a minute I just stood there, with both fists balled up against the steel doors. My breath felt taut inside me. It didn't go down all the way into my lungs, but only shallow and short. There was a funny taste in my mouth.

I could feel that fuse ticking slow and deep, and I wondered what's on the other end of it.

So I walked up the stairs to my floor and down the hall, thinking.

I walked right up against a guy's hand, pushing my chest. I realized somebody'd said something just before and that I'd only half heard it. I guess I was dropping a few stitches.

"What?" I asked, in a fog.

A chunky, bald guy in a blue serge business suit blocked the way. He said, "Where d'ya think y' going, Shorty?"

I tried to make myself throw a punch, but a school girl could do better. The guy only grabbed my arm. "Wait a minute, *wait a minute*," he said slow and amused.

He held up a deputy's badge. "House detective," he informed me. "You can't go any further down this wing without an invitation from the movie dame who's taken it. She's throwing a party for a Marine Defense Battalion just back from the South Pacific. Say, where did y'think y'was going, Shorty!"

"1228. Room 1228," I said.

I guess it was the smell of his cheap cigar that made me feel sick. I was hungry—having a hard time to make the weight—and that makes your smell sharp.

"1228 is back the other way," he said, giving me a sharp look. "Down the hall and to the left."

I went back and found it. Outside the door I stopped a minute. My heart flopped like a fish. It was one thing to think about how I'd lay it right on the line. It was

something else to open that door and say it.

Just like it was one thing to dream about a comeback as a reinsman and another to know I had to go through with it tomorrow.

I'd started out walking a tightrope. It had turned into the thin edge of a knife blade way out over the steepest mountainside in the world, with a million people ready to laugh every time I hesitated.

The doorknob of 1228 seemed to get bigger, like a balloon being blown up. It swam at me out of a haze.

I took a big breath and grabbed it. The door opened and shut. I was inside.

Two men looked up quickly and moved quickly.

One of them was Chipman. His hand swept across the little dinner table and dropped a napkin on something that sparkled in the light.

The other guy was a blond Marine, about my size. He got halfway out of his chair in one move, and his right hand went to the sleeve of his left.

"Well, well," Van Chipman's suave voice said. His eyes were cold as pale stones in his dark, soft face. "If it isn't that bootin', kickin' jock, Eddy D' Argonne."

The sneer in his voice built that ticking up inside me, speeded it.

"I had to talk to you, Van," I said. My mouth was so dry I had to keep licking my lips.

"Mr. Chipman," said Chipman.

I swallowed it. "OK. Mr. Chipman."

I'D SEEN that blond Marine somewhere. He wore the shoulder patch of a South Pacific unit and the service ribbons to go with it. His thin face with the soft blond hair around it struck something in my memory like a warning gong. But I was too busy with Chipman.

"Listen, Mr. Chipman. I gotta know—"

"Listen, you ill-bred little saddle monkey, what do you mean by slamming into my room without knocking!"

I had a quick remember of the time he introduced me to his friends in the bar of the St. Francis after a day at Bay Meadows and was proud I called him Van.

I spoke up over the smooth, even ticking of that fuse inside me. "Why'd you lay five grand against Zalacain—your own horse—in the third race tomorrow?"

Chipman picked up a broiled lamb chop and took a bite out of it with even white teeth. "One thing at a time, little man," he chuckled.

The way he said it hit me on a numb spot. I took it and yet wondered why I took it. Maybe I'm yellow. It's what I'd been wondering, thinking . . .

The blond Marine never took his cold, washed-out blue eyes off me. He sat there and watched.

Chipman's eyes showed his enjoyment. I was a sort of floor show for him while he ate. He put down the chop bone, picked up another crisp juicy chop and sank his teeth into it. My stomach twisted at the sight of it, I was so hungry.

"I don't mind telling you why, really," he said, chewing. "I'm betting against my own nag, because you're up in the saddle, and you're yellow!"

It was like he sneaked up and soused me with a bucket of ice water. It knocked the breath out of me. I took another step forward, the ticking of that fuse beating against my wishbone, now.

"Chipman . . ." the word tore my throat.

"You see," he grinned. "I only own a fourth of Zalacain, and the other owner will race him come hell or high water. I want to buy the rest of that horse cheap. He'll sell after you lose tomorrow. A yellowbelly jock can't win races."

"I'll win! I'll boot him home!" My mouth was bone dry.

"Will you? I'm a sort of a connoisseur of cowardice. I think you'll remember how it feels to be out in front of a big field when something goes wrong and you have to hit the dirt. You'll hear the rataplan of those hoofs and . . ."

I shuddered. The boom of traffic drifted up to the hotel windows from the street below. To me it was like hoofs pounding, thundering at me, and I was down smelling the dirt, tasting it again, knowing what I was going to get.

"Damn you!" the words stuck in my aching throat and came out in a kind of dry sob. "You dirty, crooked—"

"Oh, come! I'm not essentially prejudiced against honesty, if it's convenient," Chipman chuckled, licking grease off his fingers.

I picked up his napkin off the table and threw it at him. Then I realized what I had done.

A blaze of blue-white light lay there where the napkin had been. Diamonds! And what diamonds!

The smile faded off Chipman's face in a wink. The lines on his face went the other way—up and down.

THE Marine shoved back his chair. A thin-bladed stiletto came out of his sleeve, but the look on his thin face didn't change. It had been there all along, and now it fitted.

I remembered now. At Santa Anita once, somebody'd pointed him out. I didn't know they took cons in the Marines, I thought. *They don't*, the answer came off my own tongue in a mumble.

"Never mind, Smitty. Don't dirty up the floor. It's not necessary," Chipman purred.

"Not necessary?" Smitty's voice was falsetto. He didn't take those washed-out blue eyes off me, and he didn't put away the stiletto.

"He'll play ball," Chipman said sharply.

*Will I?* I thought. *Will I?* Just like I'd been asking myself for days, weeks, months, if I was really yellow.

Inside I can feel that fuse going *tick-tick-tick* and I wonder.

"Since you've cut yourself in on this deal," Chipman remarks in suave tones, "take a gander at that chair over by the window."

It was a big easy chair and the reason I hadn't seen the guy in the grey suit before was that he'd been slumped way down, passed out. His face was a pale, dirty yellow.

I put my hand to his forehead. Not dead. A glass on a side table gives me the idea. I poured a couple of drops into my hands, rubbed them together and sniffed.

"Mickeyed," I whispered.

"Just a little bad ice in his drink," Chipman said cynically. "We want you to get rid of him for us."

I faced them, my lungs working hard for air. I wondered if they could hear that buzzing inside me. It was loud, now.

Van Chipman was grinning. Smitty stood there with his shiv glittering palely under a rich floor lamp.

"Just leave him on a bench in the Plaza, Eddy," Chipman told me. "Take him out the back way."

"What if I don't?" My voice sounded like it belonged to somebody else.

Chipman closed in, licking his lips. "Pick him up."

I found myself reaching over to pick the guy up out of the chair. It was a funny feeling, wondering if I was going to do it and finding myself doing it at the same time.

With one corner of my mind I noticed a funny thing about the set-up. The guy's shirt wasn't buttoned and he looked like his clothes were thrown at him.

Instead of picking the guy up I pulled open the unbuttoned shirt. His belly was a dirty yellow color!

It did something to me. That yellow belly!

The fuse inside me stopped ticking and there was a long pause.

One step I took toward Chipman. Two, three, and it blasted, welling up out of me like a depth charge of T.N.T.

"You dirty pair of heels!" I yelled. "I'll see you in hell first!"

Smitty came gliding across the floor with his stiletto balanced like a toy.

"You hooked those diamonds from the movie queen throwing the party down the hall!" I snarled. "You've got a record a mile long. Jewel thief and killer!"

The traffic below sounded like a twelve-horse field coming up behind me all right, but I loved it!

A breath of air hit my lungs and went all the way to my toes. It's the first in a long time!

WITH one hand I tipped the dinner table over in front of Smitty as he closed. With the other I grabbed a wine bottle and swung on Chipman.

It caught him a glancing blow. He went down. I gave my undivided attention to Smitty, who was weaving around the corner of the messed-up table like a blond weasel, with the cold-looking shiv in his grip.

"You're no Marine!" I sneered at him. "Come on, mix it!"

Smitty shook himself, blinked his pale eyes, and dived at me.

With one hand I clamped down on his knife wrist and with the other I crossed hard to the mouth. Blood spattered. Smitty whimpered. Yeah. Whimpered.

This cold-blooded little killer didn't like being pushed around by a jock ten pounds under his own weight.

I slammed home a couple of hard rights. The stiletto clinked on the floor. A left straightened him up. Another right put him away for keeps.

I sucked in a breath of that swell new air I seemed to be breathing, and turned.

Chipman was up and snarling like a mad dog while he fumbled in a desk drawer. He swung around with a little black automatic.

I saw his face twisted with the thoughts that were in him and I knew I was going to get it, but I rushed.

One, two, three—I charged across that room at him feeling like a giant inside.

A gun shot crashed against the walls, stunned my ears, but I didn't feel hurt. I kept going, wondering if it didn't hurt to be shot like this.

Then I saw. Chipman dropped his gun and crumpled into a chair.

The house dick stood in the doorway, a whiff of cordite spilling from the business end of his gun.

I pulled up short. "These guys swiped some diamonds," I began.

"Yeh, yeh," he cut in. "I heard the whole thing. I followed you to the door and listened outside."

So I sat down in a chair and what do you think? Right beside me was all that food messed around on the floor. Lamb

chops, and potatoes with cheese melted all over them and everything.

I'd had a hard time making the weight. The smell of it hit me and I passed out.

When I came to, the house dick was pouring brandy into me. "Get away from me with those calories," I said, shoving him. "I got a race to ride tomorrow!"

The old zip and zest was back in life. I knew the thundering hoofs of a twelve-horse field was going to sound like music to me.

The dick is talking. "Huh?" I said.

"I said—how'd ya know the guy had mickeyed the Marine and swapped clothes so's he could get into the movie dame's suite?"

I walked past Chipman, who sat groaning in a chair, and pulled back the mickeyed man's shirt and pointed at his belly.

"Whew!" whewed the house dick. "Yellow as gold!"

"It's the atabrin they take for malaria in the tropics," I explained. "I work at Naval Hospital. You see a lot of Marines like that when they first come back."

"It was the yellow belly that upset the deal then," the house dick chuckled.

"Yeah," I grinned. "The yellowbelly!"

My eyes met Van Chipman's, and Chipman's dropped first.