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Title: Hard Guy

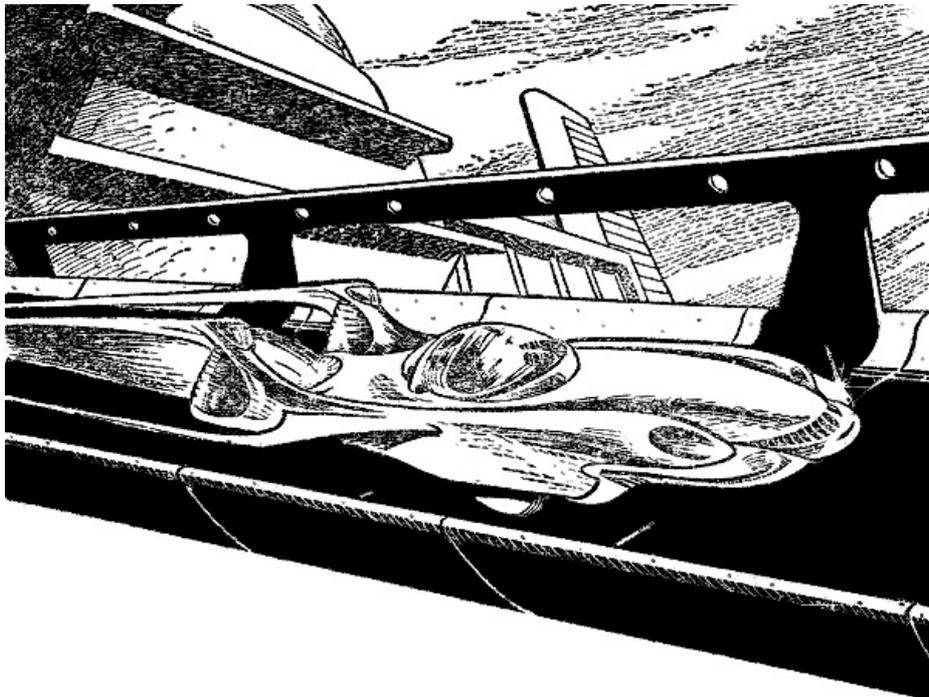
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HARD GUY \*\*\*



*There will be fine, glittering, streamlined automobiles in 2000 A.D. Possibly they will run themselves while the driver sits back with an old-fashioned in his hands. Perhaps they will carry folks down the highways at ninety miles an hour in perfect safety. But picking up a hitch-hiker will still be as dangerous as it is today.*

## HARD GUY

By H. B. CARLETON

HE WAS standing at the side of the glassite super-highway, his arm half-raised, thumb pointed in the same direction as that of the approaching rocket car. Ordinarily Frederick Marden would have passed a hitch-hiker without stopping, but there was something in the bearing and appearance of this one that caused him to apply his brakes.

Marden opened the door next to the vacant seat beside him.

"Going my way?" he asked.

A pair of steady, unsmiling blue eyes looked him over. "Yeah."

"All right, then. Hop in."

The hitch-hiker took his time. He slid into the seat with casual deliberateness and slammed the car door shut. The rocket car got under way once more.

They rode in silence for half a mile or so. Finally Marden glanced questioningly at his companion's expressionless profile.

"Where are you headed for?" he asked.

"Dentonville." He spoke from the corner of his mouth, without turning his head.

"Oh, yes. That's the next town, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Not very communicative, reflected Marden, noticing the rather ragged condition of the other's celo-lex clothing.

"Have much trouble getting rides?"

The passenger turned his head, his blue eyes without emotion.

"Yeah. Most guys are leery about pickin' up hitch-hikers. Scared they'll get robbed."

Marden pursed his lips, nodded.

"Something to that, all right. I'm usually pretty careful myself; but I figured you looked okay."

"Can't always tell by looks," was the calm reply. "'Course us guys mostly pick out some guy with a swell atomic-mobile if we're goin' to pull a stick-up. When we see a old heap like this one there's usually not enough dough to make it pay."

Marden felt his jaw drop.

"Say, you sound, like you go in for that sort of thing! I'm telling you right now, I haven't enough cash on me to make it worth your while. I'm just a salesman, trying to get along."

"You got nothin' to worry about," his passenger assured him. "Stick-ups ain't my racket."

An audible sigh of relief escaped Marden.

"I'm certainly glad to hear that! What is your—er—racket, anyway?"

The blue eyes frosted over.

"Look, chum, sometimes it ain't exactly healthy to ask questions like that."

"Pardon me," Marden said hastily. "I didn't mean anything. It's none of my business, of course."

The calm eyes flicked over his contrite expression.

"Skip it, pal. You look like a right guy. I'll put you next to somethin'. Only keep your lip buttoned, see?"

"Oh, absolutely."

"I'm Mike Eagen—head of the Strato Rovers."

"No!" Marden was plainly awed. "The Strato Rovers, eh? I've heard of them, all right."

The other nodded complacently.

"Yeah. We're about the toughest mob this side of Mars. We don't bother honest people, though. We get ours from the crooks and racketeers. They can't squeal to the Interplanetary Police."

"There's a lot in what you say," agreed Marden. "And of course that puts your ... mob in the Robin Hood class."

"Robin Hood—nuts! That guy was a dope! Runnin' around with bows and arrows. Why, we got a mystery ray that paralyzes anybody that starts up with us. They're all right when it wears off, but by that time we get away."

Marden was properly impressed.

"A mystery ray! With a weapon like that, you should be able to walk into a bank and clean it out without any trouble."

His passenger's lips curled.

"I told you, we don't bother honest people. We even help the S.P. sometimes. Right now we're workin' with the Earth-Mars G-men in roundin' up a gang of fifth-columnists that are plannin' on takin' over the gov'ment. They're led by the Black Hornet. This Black Hornet goes around pretendin' like he's a big business man, but he's really a internatural spy."

"A—what?"

"A internatural spy," repeated Marden's companion, shortly. "The E-M G-men say he's the most dangerous man in the country. But he won't last long with the Strato Rovers on his trail."

Marden nodded.

"I can believe that. Tell me, Eagen, what are you doing out here around a small Earth town like Dentonville?"

"The gov'ment's buildin' some kind of a ammution place near here, and I understand the Black Hornet's figurin' on wreckin' everything. 'Course he won't get away with it."

Scattered plasticade houses on either side of the road indicated they had reached the outskirts of Dentonville. Mike Eagen pointed ahead to a small white house set back among a cluster of trees.

"There's where I'm holed up. Drop me off in front."

A young woman in a faded blue satin-glass house-dress was standing at the gate of the white picket fence. She watched in silence as the passenger stepped from the rocket car and lifted his hand to the driver in careless farewell.

"Thanks for the lift, chum," said Mike Eagen.

"Not at all," replied Marden. "Glad to have been of service to Mike Eagen."

The woman smiled to him.

"He's told you his name, I see."

Marden lifted his hat.

"Indeed he has."

"Michael is all right," she said. "I do think, though, that he reads too many Buck Gordon Interplanetary comic books for a boy of eleven."

## THE END

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