

INTERPLANE EXPRESS

McFee and Spike hissed down the big four-lane highway. McFee was full of youth and the devil. Spike, being a brand-new Cadillac Eight, was full of hi-test Rocony.

It was a week-day morning and the roads were clear. McFee had been stepping it up to fifty and fifty-five without spotting a state trooper; he was on the tail-end of last night's bust and was still feeling the wine.

Spike was a sweet car. His nose was red and his fenders were glossy; the concealed headlights lifted or vanished as one flicked a button on the dashboard. Speed? They had gone eighty for a couple of reckless minutes on a fine straightaway, and the motor hadn't even worked at it.

He shot past a number of small upstate towns just waking into life. Hearing the clang of a school bell, he slowed down considerably. Whatever his other vices, McFee wasn't a baby-killer. The delights of the highway were manifold; it was one of the latest things laid on the map. The turns were rough-surface concrete, gripping the tires like chewing-gum.

There was a cut-off, and McFee took it in spite of the unfinished look of the road. There were hunks of concrete here and there; some road-building machinery too—tractors and drags. He eased his way along the lumpish surface, noting with approval how Spike's springs cushioned him nicely as they slammed into a sack of gravel or rolled over a smoothing-board.

The end of the rubble was marked by a sign. McFee glanced at the marker as he rolled past, then shook his head and remarked "*Huh?*" just as if he were in the movies. He reversed and stopped before the sign, which said:

INTPL. HWY.
CONN., US
ROUTE ONE

That wasn't all it said, but that was all McFee could read. Because the rest of what it said—right below the English—was in an alphabet he didn't know, stuff that looked like shorthand, but connected. Or like the peak-and-valley code of the language-scrambling machines.

McFee shrugged and went on down the Intl. Hwy. Route One. It was completely deserted; he had the only car on it. But the scenery was swell—the green, rolling hills of New England, sheep here and there. He shot past another road-sign which said:

SPEED UP TO SIXTY-FIVE MPH

and below it more of the peak-and-valley talk. McFee obeyed, though it was a novelty to find such a request. It made sense, though. This was a high-speed road if ever there was one. For, after the speed-sign the highway doubled, it developed a parkway strip down the center and banked heavily on all turns.

There were lots of turns. Some of them didn't make sense at all, being S-shaped when there wasn't any hill to avoid climbing by the S. There were deliberately constructed curving ramps, high piles of concrete. McFee was fighting the wheel, damning the wide play that the late-model cars all had. Not that there was any danger; the road was too scientifically constructed for that, but he had to keep his eyes well on the concrete and miss the scenery. Out of the corner of his eye he sensed that the country was changing ever so slightly. The hills were higher and more bare of foliage. Hell! He couldn't be in the Green Mountains yet—could he?

Another sign flashed by, then another in case he had missed the first. They said:

SPEED UP TO EIGHTY-FIVE MPH

and a third sign following simply added

PLEASE

They were all accompanied by the code, or whatever it was. He stepped down the gas to eighty-five, noticed how ridges of concrete had appeared in the road so as to guide his wheels almost automatically, needing his hand on the wheel only for the more drastic curves and turns.

There were plenty of those after a minute or two. McFee found himself tearing through the most intricate, nerve-wracking series of twists he had ever encountered. It was like two hundred miles of clover-leaf intersections—at eighty-five miles per!

Once, he was sure, he had looped the loop in dare-devil style. Several times he had made flat circles in his own track, all on incredibly sharp banks. But he wasn't sure. All he could see was the onrushing flood of concrete spinning beneath his wheels.

Twice there were tunnels to shoot through, lighted and banked, with simple notices—in two alphabets, he presumed—to KEEP SPEED.

After three hours of this insanity there was the welcome sign: SLOW TO FIFTY MPH. Only in this case the peak-and-valley talk was above the English. He slowed to fifty and heaved a sigh of relief. That Intl. Hwy. had been a gas-cooker!

Concerning the scenery, he was interested, greatly interested. The trees were nice, the grass was nice, everything was very nice. *Then what the hell was wrong?*

He shrugged and lit a cigarette. He was—naturally—jumpy after all that driving. He remembered he hadn't slept last night.

Spike approached an intersection of three highways. McFee stopped to study the markers. He was still on Intl. Hwy.—again the peak-and-valley talk was above the English. The other roads were marked in peak-and-valley only. McFee drove on, with a worried thought to his gas-tank. There was a town ahead—gabled roofs, chalet-like. There were advertising signs on the road, with terse injunctions on them, all in peak-and-valley.

McFee drove into a gas station, which carried the only English lettering he could see in the place. And scattered about the station were signs not only in English and peak-and-valley but three other alphabets, all unfamiliar.

"Yus, sairrr!" snapped an attendant at McFee, beginning to polish the windshield. He was tall and angular, wore a blue smock.

"Fill 'er up," said McFee faintly, glimpsing the attendant's face. His ears were long and hairy; his eyes were all pupil, no white showing at all. And he didn't have individual teeth—just a white shell like a beak behind his lips, the way commercial artists draw faces. As the attendant filled 'er up McFee noted a bushy tail protruding from beneath the blue smock.

Joe paid him with a five-dollar bill. The attendant, after referring to a little book, gave him a small pile of red and blue and green discs. As Joe took off the hand brake he leaned in and said: "Eef you weesh, sairrr, you may obtain thee smash-fast dorn thee rrrroad." He pointed to a brightly decorated shop-front. "Therrr it speaks Eeingleesh good like me."

"Thanks," said McFee. The attendant presented him, as if by afterthought, with a pamphlet in English and waved at him cheerily as he drove off to the smash-fast shop. There was a sign in the window: "English Spoken Here." It turned out to be a much superior variety to that of the attendant.

A kind-faced person who might possibly have been female seated him at a high table and assured him that she'd see he got real home cooking. Meanwhile, McFee, ignoring the curious ones who were staring at him—Lord, he didn't blame them!—took out the pamphlet he had been handed.

The title page said: "Highway Guide for the Interplane Traveller. Published for the Convenience of Our Patrons by the Winged Wolf Petrol Company. English Edition Published for Distribution on Intl. Hwy. Route One Between Springfield-Earth-VI and Valley Junction (Wiog-a-Wof)-Earth-V (The Swoj)."

McFee devoured the book. It proudly announced the completion of the latest "biplanar spanning

section" of the Interplane Highway into Earth-VI. Earth-V, otherwise known as "The Swoj," was where he was now. The peak-and-valley writing was Swojian, as were all these smocked and hairy people.

He couldn't make much out of the technical details which the book offered in what it called "simplified, easily understandable form for the layman's interest and amusement." It was mostly straight mathematics. The only intelligible part of the section was: "The reader will be interested to learn that the speed-torsion formulae are in the main products of Swojian science, though valuable data were collected by the Officials of Earth. There was as well considerable collaboration between the Swoj and Earth-I."

More intelligible was the "Brief History of the Interplane Highway." There at last McFee found the basis of the whole insane collusion against his peace of mind. There it was explained that "Earth" consists of a large number of coexistent planes. Many years ago the first crossing had been made from Earth-I to Earth-V. Since then the highway had been made commercially practical and been extended to link Earths II, III, IV, and VII.

"—and this new section, due to open April 15, 1943—" McFee gasped. He was three weeks early! He had gone through before—he read on. "—will be an accomplished fact by the time that you, visitor from America, read this. Secret negotiations with the government of the United States have been nearly completed at this stage of writing."

McFee's smash-fast arrived in the hands of the amiable Swojian whom he regarded with new interest as a potential neighbor. She served him bacon and eggs, explaining that they had been raising chickens and hogs in anticipation of a flow of American tourists. English was being taught as a second language to the inhabitants of the border towns.

He ate ravenously, then continued with the booklet. There was a schedule of currencies, a digest of highway markers in Swojian, and an official greeting from the Chamber of Commerce of the Tinkabog Continental Unit in the All-Swoj Federation. He was invited to enjoy himself, see the sights, report any discourtesies and generally to consider himself a public guest.

McFee rose from the hefty breakfast tickled pink at being the first American tourist to see the place, thinking perhaps of writing articles about it in the Halliburton manner: "Through the Swoj With Gun and Camera." "The Poetry of Swoj." "Swoj the Mysterious." Who knows? he reflected, slipping a notch on his belt.

He inspected Spike, shooing away the Swojian urchins, who remarkably resembled puppies, and compared it with a few other machines on the streets and doubted not that it was the best thing in sight.

Driving off slowly, keeping to the Intl. Hwy., he surveyed the scenery, noting that dogs were dressed in little jackets and that the principal livestock was a sort of de-horned goat that came in all sizes up to the gigantic.

McFee passed a number of towns, small, rustic and prosperous. He followed the road-map in the brochure out of North-West Tinkabog and thereafter wandered at will. The country was low and rolling, with occasional green hills; there were purple mountains in the far distance. He passed several cars on the highway before coming to a big intersection, slowed down to read the lengthy signpost. It informed him that to stay in the Swoj he must get off the Highway, as it continued into Earth-IV.

What the hell? He drove on into hillier country; again the highway became high-speed and the parkway appeared. There were no more English signs; the speed-up marker was in Swojian and some other language that looked like a cross of braille and hen-tracks.

There was a repetition of the unholy loops, turns, twists, hilly dips, and the whole arsenal of the previous transition into the Swoj. McFee bore it like a man and Spike took it in its stride.

McFee slowed at last to find that Earth-IV wasn't as picturequely old-world as Earth-V. It was mostly sandy waste, with big gopher-holes to accent the monotony of the view. There were people popping out of and into the holes every now and then; McFee couldn't get a straight look at them because of the reflected glare of sun on sand. But there was a gas-station before one of the groups of gopher-holes. McFee sighted it far down the road and pulled in.

The station man looked like a lizard with a coolie hat. But his tail was rat-like rather than scaly, and he had rodent's whiskers. And his smile seemed a little forced.

McFee tried English, getting nowhere; finally he pantomimed filling a gas-tank and got the response.

He held out a fistful of Swojian coins after the cap was hack on; the station man took a discriminating assortment and sped him on his way.

He couldn't read any of the signs, and there was damned little scenery to inspect. But it was plain where he was going when the Swojian disappeared from the markers to he replaced by strings of circles of different sizes.

McFee speeded up again. Signs flashed past, one of them, big and blackly printed, in Swojian. He marvelled, and as the car plunged into a tunnel took out his handbook, turned to the section on highway signs.

Leafing through them, paying little attention to the driving, he murmured: "Ah—looks like it—" and turned to the translation on the next page:

BRIDGE OUT

There was a shattering crash; McFee plunged down, far down, conscious of bodily and mental agony, feeling the steering-wheel come loose and come off in his hand while he wrestled with it. It was like a skid but many times worse. The lights of the tunnel had gone out for him; he wondered if his eyes had been crushed.

No, not that, for patches of roadway were falling up past him; he saw that plainly. For a moment he hung suspended in mid-air, then dropped heavily to the ground. Spike fell beside him at a few yards distance a moment later with a ponderous, crunching noise, then exploded into flames as McFee scrambled for shelter beside a railway trestle's big girders.

Sadly he considered while his car burned into embers. The girders shook in his hand as a train passed overhead. He looked around for markers; he had fallen into some damned gully or other; cars were whizzing past on a hill road half up the side. He mournfully shook his head as the West Virginia State Police bounced a motorcycle over the rocks of the valley and yelled:

"Anybody hurt?"

"Nope," he called hack. "Only me, and I'm all right." The trooper had him make out an accident form and wanted to know what the hell had happened. McFee didn't bother to explain. He went from the highway patrol's cabin to a railroad station and returned to New York only long enough to buy a new Cadillon Eight and shoot up to Springfield.

The Interplane Highway was gone; there was a new road crew there who had been recently transferred to Springfield from Oregon. They didn't know anything except that they were supposed to keep their mouths shut. Also they were being paid by checks on the Department of Justice instead of the Department of Labor.

McFee returned to New York after a fruitless week scouting New England to read in the papers of the arrest for graft of the Connecticut Highway Commission. He observed quietly while the case was jammed through in record time and the Commission sent to Alcatraz.

He noticed also the resignation of the Secretary of State—"for reasons of health." He noticed that the Secretary immediately undertook the running of the utilities system of Los Angeles, a full-time job which he performed to perfection.

Some years later McFee noticed that the Highway Commission, officially in Alcatraz, was seen in Panama having a riotously fine time on brand-new money.

And just the other day McFee was in Washington on business. He noted, in the parking-lot attached to the new State Department building, a car of curious make. On the hood he discerned, imperfectly scratched out, peak-and-valley characters.

"They tried again," he said to himself. "And this time—it went through!"

He was last seen in a new Cadillon Eighteen, studying a road-map to Springfield.