

A Pursuit Race, Ernest Hemingway

A Pursuit Race

WILLIAM CAMPBELL HAD BEEN IN A PURSUIT race with a burlesque show ever since Pittsburgh. In a pursuit race, in bicycle racing, riders start at equal intervals to ride after one another. They ride very fast because the race is usually limited to a short distance and if they slow their riding another rider who maintains his pace will make up the space that separated them equally at the start. As soon as a rider is caught and passed he is out of the race and must get down from his bicycle and leave the track. If none of the riders are caught the winner of the race is the one who has gained the most distance. In most pursuit races, if there are only two riders, one of the riders is caught inside of six miles. The burlesque show caught William Campbell at Kansas City.

William Campbell had hoped to hold a slight lead over the burlesque show until they reached the Pacific coast. As long as he preceded the burlesque show as advance man he was being paid. When the burlesque show caught up with him he was in bed. He was in bed when the manager of the burlesque troupe came into his room and after the manager had gone out he decided that he might as well stay in bed. It was very cold in Kansas City and he was in no hurry to go out. He did not like Kansas City. He reached under the bed for a bottle and drank. It made his stomach feel better. Mr. Turner, the manager of the burlesque show, had refused a drink.

William Campbell's interview with Mr. Turner had been a little strange. Mr. Turner had knocked on the door. Campbell had said: "Come in!" When Mr. Turner came into the room he saw clothing on a chair, an open suitcase, the bottle on a chair beside the bed, and some one lying in the bed completely covered by the bed-clothes.

"Mister Campbell," Mr. Turner said.

"You can't fire me," William Campbell said from underneath the covers. It was warm and white and close under the covers. "You can't fire me because I've got down off my bicycle."

"You're drunk," Mr. Turner said.

"Oh, yes," William Campbell said, speaking directly against the sheet and feeling the texture with his lips.

"You're a fool," Mr. Turner said. He turned off the electric light. The electric light had been burning all night. It was now ten o'clock in the morning. "You're a drunken fool. When did you get into this town?"

"I got into this town last night," William Campbell said, speaking against the sheet. He found he liked to talk through a sheet. "Did you ever talk through a sheet?"

"Don't try to be funny. You aren't funny."

"I'm not being funny. I'm just talking through a sheet."

"You're talking through a sheet all right."

"You can go now, Mr. Turner," Campbell said. "I don't work for you any more."

"You know that anyway."

"I know a lot," William Campbell said. He pulled down the sheet and looked at Mr. Turner. "I know enough so I don't mind looking at you at all. Do you want to hear what I know?"

"No."

"Good," said William Campbell. "Because really I don't know anything at all. I was just talking." He pulled the sheet up over his face again. "I love it under a sheet," he said. Mr. Turner stood beside the bed. He was a middle-aged man with a large stomach and a bald head and he had many things to do. "You ought to stop off here, Billy, and take a cure," he said. "I'll fix it up if you want to do it."

"I don't want to take a cure," William Campbell said. "I don't want to take a cure at all. I am perfectly happy. All my life I have been perfectly happy."

"How long have you been this way?"

"What a question!" William Campbell breathed in and out through the sheet.

"How long have you been stewed, Billy?"

"Haven't I done my work?"

"Sure. I just asked you how long you've been stewed, Billy."

"I don't know. But I've got my wolf back," he touched the sheet with his tongue. "I've had him for a week."

"The hell you have."

"Oh, yes. My dear wolf. Every time I take a drink he goes outside the room. He can't stand alcohol. The poor little fellow." He moved his tongue round and round on the sheet. "He's a lovely wolf. He's just like he always was." William Campbell shut his eyes and took a deep breath. "You got to take a cure, Billy," Mr. Turner said. "You won't mind the Keeley. It isn't bad."

"The Keeley," William Campbell said. "It isn't far from London." He shut his eyes and opened them, moving the eyelashes against the sheet. "I just love sheets," he said. He looked at Mr. Turner.

"Listen, you think I'm drunk."

"You are drunk."

"No, I'm not."

"You're drunk and you've had D.T.'s."

"No." William Campbell held the sheet around his head. "Dear sheet," he said. He breathed against it gently. "Pretty sheet. You love me, don't you, sheet? It's all in the price of the room. Just like in Japan. No," he said. "Listen Billy, dear Sliding Billy, I have a surprise for you. I'm not drunk. I'm hopped to the eyes."

"No," said Mr. Turner.

"Take a look." William Campbell pulled up the right sleeve of his pyjama jacket under the sheet, then shoved the right forearm out. "Look at that." On the forearm, from just above the wrist to the elbow, were small blue circles around tiny dark blue punctures. The circles almost touched one another. "That's trie new development," William Campbell said. "I drink a little now once in a while, just to drive the wolf out of the room."

"They got a cure for that," "Sliding Billy" Turner said.

"No," William Campbell said. "They haven't got a cure for anything."

"You can't just quit like that, Billy," Turner said. He sat on the bed.

"Be careful of my sheet," William Campbell said.

"You can't just quit at your age and take to pumping yourself full of that stuff just because you got in a jam."

"There's a law against it. If that's what you mean."

"No, I mean you got to fight it out."

Billy Campbell caressed the sheet with his lips and his tongue. "Dear sheet," he said. "I can kiss this sheet and see right through it at the same time."

"Cut it out about the sheet. You can't just take to that stuff, Billy."

William Campbell shut his eyes. He was beginning to feel a slight nausea. He knew that this nausea would increase steadily, without there ever being the relief of sickness, until something were done against it. It was at this point that he suggested that Mr. Turner have a drink. Mr. Turner declined. William Campbell took a drink from the bottle. It was a temporary measure. Mr. Turner watched him. Mr. Turner had been in this room much longer than he should have been, he had many things to do; although living in daily association with people who used drugs, he had a horror of drugs, and he was very fond of William Campbell; he did not wish to leave him. He was very sorry for him and he felt a cure might help. He knew there were good cures in Kansas City. But he had to go. He stood up.

"Listen, Billy," William Campbell said, "I want to tell you something. You're called 'Sliding Billy.' That's because you can slide. I'm called just Billy. That's because I never could slide at all. I can't slide, Billy. I can't slide. It just catches. Every time I try it, it catches." He shut his eyes. "I can't slide, Billy. It's awful when you can't slide."

"Yes," said "Sliding Billy" Turner.

"Yes, what?" William Campbell looked at him.

"You were saying."

"No," said William Campbell. "I wasn't saying. It must have been a mistake."

"You were saying about sliding."

"No. It couldn't have been about sliding. But listen, Billy, and I'll tell you a secret. Stick to sheets, Billy. Keep away from women and horses and, and—" he stopped—"eagles, Billy. If you love horses you'll get horse-shit, and if you love eagles you'll get eagle-shit." He stopped and put his head under the sheet.

"I got to go," said "Sliding Billy" Turner.

"If you love women you'll get a dose," William Campbell said. "If you love horses—"

"Yes, you said that."

"Said what?"

"About horses and eagles."

"Oh, yes. And if you love sheets." He breathed on the sheet and stroked his nose against it. "I don't know about sheets," he said. "I just started to love this sheet."

"I have to go," Mr. Turner said. "I got a lot to do."

"That's all right," William Campbell said. "Everybody's got to go."

"I better go."

"All right, you go."

"Are you all right, Billy?"

"I was never so happy in my life."

"And you're all right?"

"I'm fine. You go along. I'll just lie here for a little while. Around noon I'll get up."

But when Mr. Turner came up to William Campbell's room at noon William Campbell was sleeping and as Mr. Turner was a man who knew what things in life were very valuable he did not wake him.

The End