

The Pierce-Arrow Stalled, and ... a short story by Kim Newman

...rolled a dozen yards, then settled into dusty ruts. North of San Luis Obispo, the coast road was primitive, many sections still unpaved. As the wheel wrenched in his hands, Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle felt the engine under the sleek hood choke and die. Long as a truck, the Pierce-Arrow was newly-delivered, a \$25,000 custom-built toy with full bar and solid silver accessories. 'Of course the car's four times the size of anyone else's,' he'd explained, 'I'm four times as big as the average guy.'

The jolt woke up Lowell Sherman. In jauntily rude tones, the actor said, 'These *special* jobs are *less* reliable than *factory* models. All the attention to *fripperies* means *essentials*, like *wheels* and *engines*, get neglected.'

The motor strangled again. 'She won't turn over,' he complained.

Fischbach, the other passenger, slumped gloomily against thousand-dollar upholstery. The director, a last-minute addition to the expedition, had been fidgety ever since they left Los Angeles.

'There are no coyotes out here, are there?' Fischbach asked.

For a minute, they just sat. After four hours, the leather seats were hot and greasy as fresh-fried bacon. Roscoe felt a layer of gritty sweat between his bulk and his clothes; fat was his fortune, but it literally weighed him down. He tried again, turning the key with deliberate smoothness. The engine didn't even choke.

They were many miles from the nearest town. Here, where the desert met the sea, there was nothing. They hadn't seen another automobile for nearly an hour.

He opened his door and squeezed out. His belly hung like an anvil from his spine, pulling him towards the dirt as he bent over the hood. Fishbach and Sherman stood around. The metal catch seared his fat fingers. As the hood sprang up, bad-tasting smoke belched. If this were one of his features, his face would be blacked like a minstrel's.

'Looks like we won't be making the party in San Francisco,' said Sherman. Roscoe had to agree.

Fischbach muttered, as if he'd known the trip would end in disaster.

By 1921, Hollywood was generally conceded to be Sodom and Gomorrah re-erected among orange groves. Now America was dry, the attention of the professionally moral was drawn to the last bastion of sin, motion pictures. There was confusion in pulpit and editorial as to whether the vociferously condemned immorality was found on the screen in the heated embraces of Rudolph Valentino and Agnes Ayres in *The Sheik*, or at wild parties hosted by the stars, where passions were reputed to be even more heated. The true cause of censorious ire was indeed the off-screen activities of young men and women

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