

The Question

RICHARD H. OWENS

He stood beside his car with one foot resting on the rear tire. A crowd of people were gathered around him looking curiously into his face. They asked questions that he answered automatically — not giving the answers any thought because he had heard them over and over again from people who were trying to form a possible story. They wanted a little personal touch to add in case they got the chance to tell about an ex-midget race driver with whom they had had a little chat once. He did not look at anyone's eyes particularly, but he knew what was there: admiration, excitement and that question that he had never heard, yet knew by heart. He didn't have an answer for it; he didn't want an answer for it. He knew the mechanic had shined his car and that the motor was in perfect condition but something wasn't quite right, something was bothering him.

The blare of the loud speaker announcing the feature event of the evening reached his ears. The crowd faded away from him, back to their seats where they could see the whole track. He reached into the cockpit of his car, picked up his helmet and gazed aimlessly about him as he put it on and adjusted the chin strap. He climbed into the seat and four men pushed him out on the track. The car coasted down the banked turn and toward the starting line. He stopped the car, fastened his safety belt; and as he reached up to adjust his helmet once more, his hands touched his face. His hands were cold and perspiring.

He felt a jar from behind as the tow

truck bumped into him and started his car rolling around the track. The gears whined, the motor coughed, backfired and roared into life. He drove slowly around the track waiting for the other cars to be started. He glanced up at the crowd gazing down like vultures waiting for a meal. The cars were in position; and as they came into the straightaway in front of the starter, the cars leaped forward as if they had been propelled from a gun. His head slammed back against the rest and his neck muscles grew taut as the cars thundered past the starting line. He gripped the brake stick and threw the car into a slide around the first turn. He released the brake and the car shot forward again as he accelerated on the back straightaway.

He glanced down at the gauge on the dash board; it looked like two glassy eyes. He jerked his head up as he heard the screech of tires in front of him; there was a car sideways in the middle of the track. He flipped the wheel and grabbed for his brake; the track and lights began making circles about his head in a crazy pattern; there was a sudden shock and a crash. The lights faded and the noise dimmed, then slowly came back. People were standing around him and another car. It was lying upside down on the track with an inert body pinned beneath it. He looked at the people standing around the cars; they looked at the body with horror in their eyes, then they looked at him and their eyes changed. They changed slowly, but they changed.