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THE LAST FIRST

by Paul Hutchens

Chapter 1

Carleton Graves leaned back wearily against the green plush of his pullman chair and closed his eyes in dreary, painful meditation. The white electric bulb on the ceiling outlined itself clearly against the red-black of the darkness into which his closed eyes were staring. Perhaps if he turned his face toward the window, to the blackness of the night outside, and waited long enough, the spectre light would fade away.

How long he had stared at the bulb on the ceiling, he did not know. His thoughts had been far away and of things in a world which he had left behind--which he was leaving behind forever. For him the light of that world had gone out and only a blurred memory remained to trace its shapeless form upon the canvas of his mind. Soon the night of forgetfulness would close down upon him and he would enter his new world of dreams. What kind of world he could not foresee, but he had dreamed of it before and the dream had been pleasant, strangely fascinating and alluring.

Clickety-click, clickety-click. The wheels of the train flew over the rails. His eyes were still closed and the red-black was giving place to darkest night, while the white of the electric bulb faded into a tiny brown speck. He pulled his hat down lower over his eyes.

Across the car the porter was stirring about. With a final flourishing gesture, the second pillow was pushed into place, and lower five was ready. It was ready at the precise instant that the porter had enveloped the whole stage of Carleton Graves' vision. Now he was ready to dream.

"Yo' berth is ready, suh."

Carleton started, both perturbed and pleased. He was sleepy. He glanced at his watch. It was ten o'clock. The train was due in Denver at ten-thirty tomorrow night, which meant he could sleep late tomorrow morning if he desired. No need to retire for another hour. He rose and placed his traveling bag in his berth and opened it, leaning forward with the curtains half closed behind him. Finding what he sought, he placed it under his coat and made his way to the men's dressing room. The only other occupant of the room was busy with the latest "extra." He hoped the gentleman, whoever he was, would not start any conversation. He was not interested in the weather, nor the latest "story." The man was, of course, a traveling salesman. His neatly fitting, carefully-tailored suit and his nonchalant air made that quite evident.

The fact that the stranger did not glance up from his paper nor show the slightest inclination to talk, pleased Carleton, and when he was about to leave, he turned to say :

"Well, Europe is still boiling. I wonder how long--how much longer--France's new Premier and his ministers can stand the criticisms and political dissensions."

A pair of dark eyes raised to Carleton's and an understanding smile broke over the dark features. "Laval lasted for seven and one-half months. That's a long time for a man to hold office in France in times like these. His was the one hundredth government under the Third Republic to hold power and to be withdrawn since Thiers was President in 1871."