

TALES OF TRAVEL AND SPORT

BY

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TRAVEL AND SPORT

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TO
MY FRIEND AND FELLOW-TRAVELLER
COLONEL L. HAY DUCRÔT

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TALES OF TRAVEL AND SPORT

CHAPTER I

INCIDENTS AND ACCIDENTS OF MOTORING AND A TOUR THROUGH EUROPE

I AM not one of the pioneers of '96, but have driven a car since 1903, while for two years before that I owned a motor bicycle. So my memory goes back a long way.

Besides tours in Belgium, Holland, Germany, France, Austria, Czecho-Slovakia, Switzerland, Italy and Spain with a German, followed by four "De Dions" and two "Napiers," my wife and I made two trips with a "De Dion" in Algeria and Tunisia, and have taken three different cars, including the ubiquitous Ford, to Australia and New Zealand.

We toured New Zealand from north to south and east to west during seven different visits, and covered some thousands of miles in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and West Australia.

We have also hired cars in many other countries such as Russia, India, Burma, China, Japan, South Africa, Java, the Malay States, Ceylon, Tasmania, Canada, Mexico, the United States (especially California and Florida, where I drove a Studebaker for three winters), and South America—a course which is liable to produce more incidents and accidents than driving oneself.

It was an accident with my motor cycle which first caused me to buy a car, though I had long regarded the latter as a safer vehicle, and a far more comfortable one.

I was riding from London to York, and, after leaving Doncaster for Selby, had to skirt a sharp corner at Bentley. A motor-car carrying a man and two ladies overtook me; and, although there was no other traffic of any kind, the driver steered at once towards the near side and struck my front wheel with his back mudguard.

After an appalling wobble I fell headlong on the road, breaking two fingers and spraining my right knee.

Hearing the crash, the ladies turned round; the car was stopped and the driver said: "Hullo! How did you fall off?"

I replied angrily from my prone position :

" You know very well you knocked me off."

" Oh ! did I ? " he rejoined. " I'm very sorry. Send me the bills for your bike and doctor and I'll pay the damages."

Then, helping me up, he supported me to a house, wheeled my battered mount to the door, left a false address, and drove off.

My wounds were tended, but I was in bed for a week, limped for a month, and cannot straighten the two fingers to this day. Automobiles were not numbered then, so I was unable to trace this " gentleman."

Two months later, we purchased a Chelmsford steam car, equipped with solid tyres ; for, in 1903, we could not feel much confidence in petrol, and pneumatics were far from satisfactory.

The car was successfully driven by its inventor through the thousand mile Reliability Trials organized by the R.A.C. that year. It had a tubular boiler similar to those used on locomotives, and required the same head of steam, *i.e.* about 180 lb. per square inch ; but the boiler was heated by an oil burner instead of by coal or wood.

The body was one of the first closed saloons seen on the road. There was room for two persons in front and four or five behind, the entrance being at the rear. As a hill climber, this vehicle was second to none at that time, and it could maintain an average speed of 16-18 miles an hour.

The legal limit was 12, and the push-bike still considered itself the king of the road ; for the Act compelling self-propelled vehicles to be preceded by a man on foot with a red flag had not been long repealed.

Our first experience with this car was a curious one, for it nearly smashed us both up, and itself as well, in a too friendly attempt to mount the front steps and enter the house.

Although the drive up to our residence had been widened, it was necessary to reverse in order to turn round. The wheels of this Juggernaut, which weighed three tons, sank into the soft gravel, and I had to raise nearly 300 lb. of steam before I could move it. Then it started with a rush, dashed madly towards the stone steps where my wife was standing, and knocked a piece off them. In the nick of time I reversed the engine, whereupon the car darted back over the gravel into the shrubs. Again I manipulated the lever, and the car rushed forward menacingly, whilst my wife fled indoors.

Many times I went back and forth, in terror of my life, before the man who had been sent from the Works to instruct me saved the situation. After running to and fro beside the car endeavouring to seize the lever, which I was pushing first backward and then forward

in order to avoid entering the front door or becoming buried in the shrubs, he at last succeeded in placing it in the neutral position and brought the unwieldy vehicle to rest.

The steam had now risen to an alarming pressure, and the safety valve blew off with a terrible noise, so that I thought the boiler had burst, and alighted with fear and trembling.

Our next adventure was on a lonely road in the Eastern Counties, where the " Chelmsford " refused to budge an inch because the oil-burner had become clogged up and ceased to heat the water. Whilst the man and I burnt wood and rags beneath the car in a vain attempt to raise sufficient steam to move to the next village, my wife and a friend walked on in search of assistance.

The first place they struck was a lunatic asylum, and my wife was rather upset when the woman who opened the door jerked a finger towards her and said to her friend in a stage whisper : " Do you want to put her in ? "

They left in a hurry and found a public-house. The proprietor, who was drunk, drove them home in a pony-cart. All three sat on a board in front, and the driver became very familiar and talkative, his first words being :

" Where do you think I was, my dears, when you called ? Why, in the bar-parlour—always a favourite place of mine."

In spite of nearly scalding us with steam when the water-gauge broke at Askern, near Selby, and smashing a hind wheel in a bad skid on a greasy street in Cambridge, the Chelmsford served us well for three years till she came to grief on Sutton Bank, a very steep, dangerous hill in Yorkshire. The gradient is 1 in 4 for some distance, the surface was bad and rocky, and a horseshoe corner half-way down completed our discomfiture.

The approach to the hill was concealed by a thickly-wooded bend, and there was no warning board till our accident caused the North Yorkshire Automobile Club to have one erected.

Also, in those days, brakes were attached by wires instead of steel rods, and the wires stretched.

I was driving early in August, by way of Helmsley and Thirsk, to the North for some grouse shooting, so there were a chauffeur and retriever inside, and my wife was sitting beside me.

On rounding the bend at about twelve miles an hour, we instantly plunged down the steep descent, and I soon realized that I should not be able to hold the car, for, in spite of putting on the brakes to their full pressure, we still gathered speed. There were nearly 200 lb. of steam in the boiler, and I moved the lever notch by notch till the engine was fully reversed ; but even this appeared to have little effect. I looked from side to side to see if there were any place of safety into

which I could turn the car, but saw none, for there was a high bank on one side and a precipice on the other.

By this time my wife was alarmed and said: "Aren't we going a little too fast?"

I replied: "Yes, a bit, but I think I can steer her down."

The speed of the vehicle continually increased till we reached the horseshoe corner, where I wrenched the steering wheel round with all the force at my command; for, if we had kept straight on, we should have plunged into an abyss.

I managed to turn the car, but the effort was too great for her; and the tyres and the rims of the wheels on the near side came off, leaving only the thick, wooden spokes.

These partly broke her fall; fortunately, we were close to the side and the corner was banked up. The near wing, radiator, and boiler struck this bank with such force as to hurl the vehicle completely over, so that it fell on the off side in the middle of the road. This smashed the two remaining wheels and stopped our wild career.

My wife was thrown out on the near side with the first lurch, the dog leapt out of the window, and the chauffeur, according to his own account, was sent flying through the roof, for the body broke in half. The guns and luggage were thrown all over the grass, and one bag was squashed flat.

I struck my chest violently against the steering wheel, which knocked me out for a second, and then I found myself lying on the ground amongst the wreckage staring at the sky. My hands were still on the wheel, which undoubtedly saved my life.

There was now an awful silence except for the hissing of steam, and I thought the others had been killed. To my great relief I heard my wife call out: "Are you hurt?" and walk across the road, from which I concluded she had no bones broken.

I first turned the steam and oil off, fearing I might be scalded or burnt alive, then climbed out and saw the man limping down the hill, unconscious of what he was doing, and my wife lying in a fainting condition beside the dog.

Two men came running up, and, after placing my wife on the ladder which we used when unloading luggage from the roof of the car, they carried her into a cottage close by.

Then one of them said: "Lay the bier down gently." And an old woman invited us to have "some tea and pastry." We both felt like nothing on earth, but tried to express our thanks, and one of the men rendered first aid as my wife was bleeding.

Here I managed to hire a cart, the bottom of which was covered with bracken, and we were driven six miles to Thirsk; for, although I had broken nothing but my watch, and had only sprained a wrist,



THE "CHELMSFORD" IN 1903.



WRECK OF THE "CHELMSFORD" ON SUTTON BANK, YORKSHIRE, SEPTEMBER 2, 1906.