

The Calm Chauffeur

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„DO you do much motoring?“

I made a flippant reference to the Arrow and Vanguard services.

„But have you done much motoring—have you owned a car?“ Once upon a time, as I related, I bought a German car with French engines. I also acquired a serious chauffeur and two acetylene lamps.

The car suffered from many ailments, most of which the serious chauffeur—he is a policeman now, poor fellow—was able to diagnose with accuracy, but none of which he was able to cure.

It was a nice-looking car, with a beautiful leather hood, and ran easily with two persons, or without the hood, three.

When I drove down-hill I got up terrific speed, especially if the hood was on, but when it came to climbing hills I used to get out and walk ahead, pretending

that the labouring machine behind and the red-faced chauffeur—more serious than ever—had nothing to do with me.

It was a nice car for the winter, because the works were under the seat, and they kept one's feet warm. Also in the summer the scent of petrol banished the moths from one's clothes.

I used to drive about in motor-goggles, and as people always associate goggles with speed I deceived a man into making me an offer for the car.

The letter containing the offer came by the night post, and I took a cab and drove to his house to accept. I did not take the car, because I wanted to reach him before he changed his mind.

As to motoring...

„But,“ persisted the inquiring enthusiast, „have you any idea of speed—have you ever travelled in a racing car, in a car that doesn't stop to think...“

I cited the cars I had known—the 24-hp Coliseum, the 12-hp Little Wanderer, the 6- or 8- (as the case may be) hp Runaway.

„Very good,“ said the enthusiast, „I will call for you at ten tomorrow morning.“

So he came.

He brought a machine. None of your rough-finished, soap-box seated racing cars painted like a dirty warship, but a sleek green Mercedes „60“ touring-car, all varnish and polished brass and silver fittings, with a fur-coated chauffeur lolling back in an armchair seat, and taking no interest in the proceedings.

„Are we going to a wedding?“ I asked, and regretted that I had not put on a tie to match the car.

Then we started...

THE car was purring like a tame cat, as we played musical chairs with the traffic of Ealing; it made no protest when asked to spring between a brewer's dray and a tramway-car in Brentford High Street. It stopped dead before a nervous lady pedestrian who was standing in the middle of the street debating whether to scream or faint, and reached Hounslow before we—the enthusiast and I—had finished saying what we had to say about nervous pedestrians.

Outside Hounslow we met the Blue Car, and the young man who drove the Blue Car sat without cap or goggles, his hair streaming out behind and a black smut on his nose. His expression was the expression common to all hardened chauffeurs—a reflective, thinking-of-mother expression.

The Blue Car was just ahead of us when we saw It. We did not know it was blue because it trailed a skirt of dust behind it that obscured the landscape. Later we leapt up to it and got ahead. I think our dust must have annoyed the Blue Car very much, for between Hounslow and Basingstoke it sneaked past us at a level crossing.

Then we came to a great stretch of country inhabited by furze bushes and telegraph poles, and the fur-coated young man who sat by my side pulled down his goggles and slowly shifted a small lever on the steering wheel. Then for the first time I was conscious that a high wind blew. A wind that hammered my face and filled my lungs, a wind that roared about my ears till I was deafened. The Blue Car was ahead. Surely it had stopped. As we passed it I got one fleeting glimpse of the smutty-faced young man—supremely indifferent and still thinking of his mother. At the same time I noticed to my amazement that the

Blue Car really was in motion, and that the telegraph poles that lined the road were passing with remarkable rapidity. The enthusiast leant over. „Sixty-five miles an hour,“ said his lips.

There was a village ahead, and we slowed down. Three little boys standing on the pavement displayed an inclination to *run across*, and the chauffeur lifted an admonitory finger. The little boys stopped abashed, and we passed. The little boys who were the pioneers of the *running across* game are no longer with us to encourage the present generation. We passed the outskirts of Basingstoke before we realised that we had left London. On the side path an innocent old gentleman lifted a stick... We stopped in twenty yards, and the chauffeur descended and made an inspection of all his gauges—an earnest inspection that took him several minutes. Not so the chauffeur of the Blue Car who streaked past triumphantly—and was stopped twenty yards further on by a policeman.

The innocent old gentleman with the stick, was one end of a *trap*—the waiting policeman the other. Alas! for the vanity of Blue Cars we passed the group at a funeral pace—a policeman, a notebook, and a chauffeur with a smut on his nose.

Into the open country again. Long, long stretches of white road, a wild deserted world, and a slender spire on the skyline.

Again the high wind, and the buffeting and breathlessness and the whizzing telegraph poles and the throb, throb, throb of the engine as the car flew across Salisbury Plain. A solitary cyclist ahead waved a hand and we slowed.

He came up to us at a tremendous pace, and the tiny engine of his cycle working pipity-pipity-pipity-pip.

He passed like a flash, but the waving hand said *trap* quite plainly so we crawled. This time it was an innocent-looking agricultural labourer—with a walking stick—and his pal was lying on the grass a mile further on—a measured mile. And so the day passed, a procession of long roads, of fresh green hedges, quaint cottages, gardens ablaze with blossom, rivers and wet meadows, gloomy stretches of plain, crooked, narrow streets of country towns, till night came.

By then we were moving towards London, two white beams of light thrown ahead showing the road. Ghostly figures rose from the road and passed; invisible cyclists came into the circle of light and vanished. Lumbering wagons filling up the road—with no light to show their presence—appeared, and were circumvented.

The blasé chauffeur, touching a handle here and a lever there, working with both hands and both feet, sends us along through the darkness—accurately, carefully, unswervingly. Isn't it a little dangerous perhaps for the cyclist, for the pedestrian?

A nervous young man wheeling ahead lost his presence of mind, wobbled, slipped and fell in our track... but the car stopped almost in its own length, and the young man, dazed but voluble, called himself all kinds of a fool, and explained that he was a nervous idiot—hoped he hadn't alarmed us. We expressed our thankfulness that we had been able to pull up in time.

The chauffeur yawned.

