ADVENTURE ON WHEELS

The Autobiography of a Road Racing Champion

JOHN FITCH with William F. Nolan

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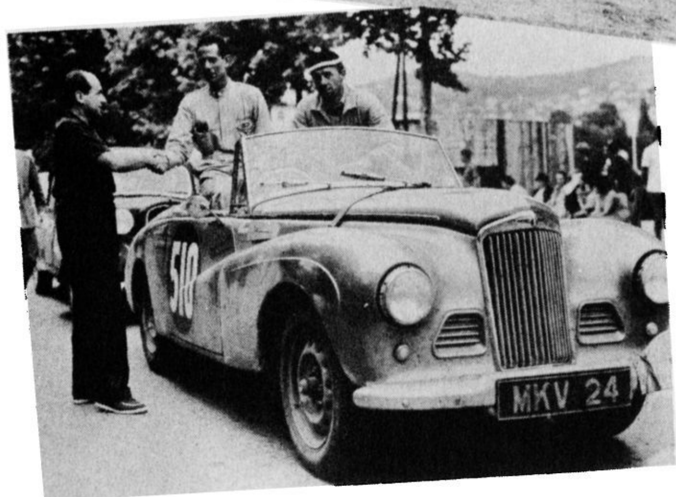
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Adventure

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

NEW YORK

on Wheels

OF A ROAD RACING CHAMPION

John Fitch, with William F. Nolan

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This hook is dedicated to all those
for whom automobiles are forever
fascinating; for those who see
in a turning wheel both the principle
of motion and the promise of other horizons.
!t is for those who see in a fine automobile
an expression of man's will, one form of his art
and the evidence of his longing to move
with precision and grace.

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Preface

I FIRST met John Cooper Filch ill December of 1957, at Nassau, in the British West Indies. We were both there for the same reason: A race was on. I was covering the famous international Bahamas event for a West Coast motoring publication; John was there to drive a fast Italian Maserati. My editor asked me to interview a few of the top drivers attending for subsequent profiles, and I had determined that Fitch would be one of them. I knew that his was one of the most amazing careers in the sport of auto racing. I got my interview, wrote the profile, and it was duly printed. But I was not satisfied. Limited as I had been to a few thousand words, I was not able to really tell the action-packed life story of John Fitch as I felt it deserved to be told. Then I discovered that John had assembled some autobiographical material for a book, though he'd bogged down on the project. A collaboration between us seemed the ideal solution.

In August of 1958, I met John again at his new home in Lime Rock, Connecticut, and we further discussed the story. Much was written, but many important gaps remained to be filled and linking passages supplied. Taking the unfinished manuscript—as well as copious notes—back to California with me, I set to work. It was not unlike attempting to put together an immense jigsaw puzzle with several pieces missing. John revised and added to my rough draft, and we arrived at a collaborative final—the result of which is *Adventure on Wheels*.

Over the past decade—since the rediscovery of the sports car in (his country—John Fitch has successfully competed in dozens of exciting, hard-fought events around the world. In doing so, he has probably handled a greater variety of competition automobiles than any other American driver, having raced the Mercedes, Corvette, Cunningham, Ferrari, Maserati, Jaguar, MG, Allard, Chrysler, Porsche, Sunbeam-Talbot, HWM, Lagonda, Frazer-Nash, Effyh-Jap, Cooper-Bristol, Lotus, Nash-Healey, Fitch Model B and various Specials. He has officially competed on five prominent factory teams: Mercedes, Porsche, Cunningham, Sunbeam-Talbot and Corvette, winning laurels with each. In the case of Mercedes he was the *only* U. S. driver chosen to join this very exclusive organization. He is also the only American to win a coveted Alpine Cup in the famous rally across Europe.

In road races around the globe he has some three-dozen major "firsts" to his credit, having won at Sebring, in the Mille Miglia, the Tourist Trophy, at Nassau, Buenos Aires, Watkins Glen, Bridgehampton, Elkhart Lake, Thompson, March Field, etc. Within two short years he rocketed to the top of the road racing profession, gaining the SCCA National Championship in 1951—and scoring either a first or second in 13 of the 14 races he entered that season.

As team manager for Corvette, he twice led the big blue-and-white cars into combat at Sebring, also serving as a consultant for Chevrolet during that period. As recently as 1958, competing with a 2-liter Maserati, he placed third (for Class E-Modified) in SCCA championship ratings—and took a class second at Sebring in '59 driving for Porsche.

A family man (with a charming wife and three fine sons), Fitch has been a fighter pilot (in Mustangs during World War II), a technical adviser (on a Fox film, *The Racers),* a designer and builder of some very potent Specials, a writer (having sold to a dozen top magazines), an inventor (with patents on several ideas), a circuit director (at beautiful Lime Rock Park) and an unofficial ambassador of good will in

Europe (where the French affectionately call him "Jean Feech").

A lanky, quick-smiling six-footer, with a deliberate, un-ruffled manner of speaking, he is one of the most popular and highly respected drivers in the sport, whose calm, precise style behind the wheel has been a personal trademark for many years. He is smooth, and he is fast. Very, very fast.

The John Fitch story is a fabulous one. It forms an integral part of motor racing history over the last decade here and abroad. It is filled with international color and incident, triumph and disaster. And above all else, it is just what the title declares it to be: a full and stirring account of one man's incredible *Adventure on Wheels.*

WILLIAM F. NOLAN

Introduction

Horse racing has been often called the sport of kings, but what could be more appropriate in this mechanized age than to consider road racing the very timely sport of nations? Seldom is man's sense of natural employment so completely gratified. He has the hunt, the fight and the adventure all rolled into one experience when he sails off in a welter of noise, wind and intense anxiety to balance a slithering machine, gone headstrong with speed, on a dancing ribbon of road. He strains his memory to retain each bump and feature of the surface, to fix each cutoff point; he forces and cajoles his car, stretches his nerve, pushes his skill, spars for position with the straining machines around him—and frightens himself a dozen times in the course of a single event.

But when he has finished, when he has driven well, no matter his final position, he feels that warm glow of fulfillment reserved for life's rare moments of achievement. He has made an intense effort, as much of the will as of the muscle, an effort in which he exposed both his strength and his pride, and he has satisfied himself.

Road racing is not new in this country, although it languished for many years in the United States after the First World War. Popular in Europe since the invention of the automobile, it was reborn in America in 1948, when the fever struck again on the streets of Watkins Glen, New York. Today there are dozens of major road races and hundreds of minor club events organized and run each year in the United States.

Meets such as those at Sebring in Florida and, more recently, Riverside in California attract the cream of international and Stateside talent each season. And though its rather stern nature precludes any poll winning in the "family-sport" or "togetherness" set, it continues to grow at a phenomenal pace as a spectator sport, firmly based on our nation's almost universal use of the automobile.

To race is to expose oneself, it is true, to physical danger, but also to much more. To race is to engage one's physical and mental powers of endurance, restraint, judgment and discipline with an intensity that renders other enterprise pale in comparison.

The sheer joy of hurling a high-speed racing machine through a perfectly executed series of obstacles can be understood by every skier. Racing, like skiing, seems to embody the sweeping qualities of flight, in which the laboring and wallowing low-speed behavior of a car is completely transformed. Man and machine become a single athletic unit, rushing along in a loud disorder of protesting tires and straining engine under an apparent thread of control. Suspension, wheels, engine and all the other components of the car become extensions of the driver's senses. He *feels* just what it can do, as though man and machine had a nervous system in common. It is largely in the acuteness of this sensitivity to, and unity with, his car that a driver's skill lies. When he is "on form" and he and the car are in tune, he has the thrill of becoming a precisely controlled and disciplined road-consuming creation—an exhilarating experience that completely absorbs and overwhelms the individual personality.

Certainly the urge to compete is fundamental in human nature. And road racing offers direct competition in one of its purest forms: straightforward and immediate, with quick and impartial penalty for foolishness.

But the rewards are great. In the course of one competitive season I made three round trips to Europe, experiencing the incredible climate of Northern Ireland, the tropics of Central

America and the beneficent mildness of a California winter. If a driver is successful in the sport, his life is enriched by travel, many friends—and the intelligent appreciation of other people's customs and ways of life.

I am glad I chose to be a racing driver—and perhaps my reasons for becoming one, and for staying in the game, are pretty much the reasons of all who enter it: the insatiable, hungering ego of every man, his need for self-justification, for recognition; his desire to measure his own courage, to realize a private victory over personal limitations and a mastery over fear; and finally, that which makes us worth all God's trouble: the compulsion to do more than is necessary or wise or prudent in our unending search for individual heights in human achievement.

JOHN C. FITCH

Lime Rock, Conn.

1959

Adventure on Wheels

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A ROAD RACING CHAMPION

CHAPTER ONE

In Enemy Hands

A FEELING of invincibility, however temporary, is a dangerous thing—but on this particular afternoon in the cold winter sky over Germany I felt invincible. The rough fighting was over, and the Allies were virtually supreme in the air, with Nazi opposition sporadic and disorganized. Therefore, my job (Mustang fighter escort for B-17s and B-24s) had now become routine. To offset this routine, once we'd seen our ducks safely home, we often flew out on private hunting expeditions. Nazi steam locomotives were prime targets. A direct hit and their high-pressure boilers exploded like pricked balloons. The gruesome game was an authorized and calculated tactic, with the vital purpose behind it of crippling the enemy's transport system—and we soon became experts at this specialized form of aerial warfare.

Our original mission, on this 20th day of February, 1945, involved a raid on a jet base at Ulm, in the South of Germany, between the Rhine River and Munich. The raid was a success, and after we had shepherded our bombers back to France I obtained permission to lead a flight of four planes on a hunt.

Over Nurnberg, late in the afternoon, with the sky darkly overcast and brittle with cold, we found what we were looking for: trains. I peeled off and went down after the leading

locomotive, aiming for that vulnerable boiler, but missing on my first pass. As I pulled up for a second try I could see the black puffs of antiaircraft flak mushrooming around me, but they were well wide of my Mustang and I was still intent on hitting that locomotive. The next pass, however, was no more successful than the first, and I should not have risked a third. By now the gunners below were beginning to find my range and the sky was filled with bursting flak—like an immense field of suddenly blooming dark flowers.

I had been flying above enemy territory for almost three years by then, and I had absorbed the tactics of survival in an uncompromising school. Yet, circling the locomotive still unharmed below me, my initial judgment was discarded. In a sense, our numerical air superiority and our large reserve of planes and pilots rendered me expendable—while the Nazi rail network was still a vital target. I felt at this stage that the end result was worth the extra risk. So, like many another pilot before me, I banked around for that dangerous third pass.

Our planes were superb for air fighting, but inappropriate for this job. They were overweight (crammed with plumbing to serve the rear-mounted radiator) and both wings were filled with gas, serving as fuel tanks. Almost any hit meant we came down, probably burning. All of which made a third pass extremely risky.

Yet in I went for my final try, feeling invincible and sure of my target, ignoring a small inner voice telling me I was buying trouble.

I should have listened. For, a moment later, as I pulled up over the train I felt the P-51 judder violently. The odor of gunite and hot oil told the story. Incredibly, impossibly, I was hit!

Pulling up as high as I could, in order to give my parachute sufficient time to open, I slid back the canopy and started to bail out. But the chute straps caught and I was wedged halfway out in the whistling slip stream of the falling plane, riding its death plunge to the ground. I twisted and

writhed, desperately trying to loosen the straps. Seemingly at the last possible moment I wrenched free; instantly a stunning blow across the middle almost knocked me unconscious. The tail of my plane had struck me just as I yanked the ripcord. But the chute snapped open as the P-51 exploded into the ice-hard earth below with a concussion that rocked me like a cork at sea.

I barely missed the burning plane, landing beside it with an impact that took all breath from my body. The taste of blood was in my mouth, my right arm was useless (obviously broken) and I was numb with shock. Realizing I could not remain here in the open, I slipped out of my chute and crawled into the surrounding brush. I was deep inside Germany, and escape was a vast improbability. (No "underground" existed on Nazi soil to help downed airmen back to the allied lines.)

The sound of approaching voices reached me. Several farmers, armed with pitchforks and shovels, were moving excitedly toward the burning plane—and I noted that my discarded chute had been ignited by the fire which jumped and snapped as the ammo exploded in the melting snow.

"Pilot *kaput!*' one of the Germans said, pointing to the blackened chute. The others nodded. But one member of the group seemed unconvinced; he began a brief inspection of the area and this brought him very close to my shallow hiding place beneath some low pine branches. I found myself curiously detached, still dazed by the events of the past minutes. I had been very fortunate thus far: The shell that hit my P-51 had not been explosive; I had managed to free myself from the plane before it struck the ground; I had not landed in the burning wreckage. In this fresh crisis, with the German's heavy breathing clearly audible a few feet from me, it seemed unlikely that I could continue to roll sevens against all the laws of chance. However, with the instinct of a wounded animal in hiding, I employed the same defenses: utter silence and immobility.

Again I won. The German moved back to rejoin his com-

panions, and soon their voices faded away. For the moment, at least, I was safe. I picked up a handful of snow (it was pleasantly cool against my skin) and watched the plane reduce it,self to ash. Nothing recognizable remained now but one wing tip, a grotesque finger aimed at the darkening sky. I felt almost as though I had lost a friend.

With the darkness came a chill that forced me to my feet. I got out my emergency escape kit and swallowed a few quick-energy pills and a bit of chocolate. Hunger was not an immediate problem, but with my food supply limited as it was I could not travel any long distance on foot. A check on the cloth map I carried showed me that my only chance was Strasbourg, in France, well over 200 miles from my present position. I set out on a compass course through the pine woods, fighting the tangled underbrush, fording brooks, stumbling through the bitter-cold darkness, my skin and clothes ripped by thickets—until finally, just at dawn, I reached shelter.

At the edge of a small village I found a massive old barn and pushed my way inside. As I entered I could hear animals shifting in their stalls, and a dog began to bark nervously in the outer yard. Soon, however, all was quiet again and I stealthily climbed a ladder and collapsed in the deep, warm hay at the top. I stretched out, favoring my broken arm, and slept soundly, exhausted and totally oblivious of the warring world around me.

I awoke late that afternoon, stiff and sore, my right arm throbbing painfully. Snow had fallen as I slept and from my position at the top of the tall barn I could see the small town spread out before me, covered with a fresh blanket of white and looking very peaceful and serene—in fact, much more like a Christmas painting than an enemy camp.

After eating some chocolate I moved back down into the lower part of the barn—and there my brief attempt at escape ended. A woman saw me, cried out, and ran for the door. Immediately a husky German appeared, though I noted that he carried no weapon. That made us even, for I never carried

a pistol when I flew. (The nature of aerial warfare—conducted almost irrespective of the front lines—made it almost certain we would encounter civilians first when shot down and I did not wish to have a gun; it would have done me more harm than good.)

The big German proved friendly. He smiled, beckoning me in the direction of the house. We reached the kitchen and he and his wife offered me meat and bread in the normal way they might have extended courtesy to any visitor. In return I gave their children candy from my escape kit. We were all simply individuals caught up in a conflict between nations; we had no reason to hate.

Soon a village delegation arrived and I was led to the Burgomaster's house, dogs and children dancing along beside me as we moved through the narrow, cobbled streets. People along the walks chattered excitedly and waved to friends in the impromptu parade, the whole scene taking on a festive holiday air.

The Burgomaster himself was not so friendly. He was a pale, thin-lipped little man with a Nazi party pin displayed openly in his lapel, and he eyed me with unconcealed hatred. He began to fire questions in German, and I could only shake my head and respond with a half-remembered phrase: *"Nicht sprechen Deutsch!"* When I did not understand, he became violent, screaming and threatening. The other men and women in the crowded room watched silently. More shouted questions—and again I responded with a shake of the head. Enraged, the Burgomaster struck me full in the face with his clenched fist and urged the others to join him in the attack. But no one moved.

Infuriated at this rebuff, the demented-looking little man hastily fished a knife from his pocket, snapped it open, and stepped toward me, still shouting threats. I moved quickly, throwing my good arm around one of two elderly patrons who spoke a little English (they had asked to see my passport) and pulled him over to the other, so that I had both of them

in front of me. I knew I had only one desperate chance to save my life.

"Stop him!" I commanded in English. "Stop him before it's too late. As a legitimate prisoner surrendered to you I have a right to fair treatment. I radioed my position as I came down and my wing man saw me alive on the fields outside your village. The war is almost over and the Allies will be here any day now. They will look for me here. Protect yourselves against reprisal! Stop this man!" I talked fast and with desperate inspiration—and I was understood.

The Burgomaster hesitated as the two stony-faced old Germans approached him. They argued loudly, my life in the balance. Finally the angry little man was half-led, half-pushed from the room. Again, for the second time in 24 hours, I had escaped almost certain death.

The succeeding weeks blended into a nightmare of Prisoner of War camps, near starvation, exhausting marches and endless interrogations. And I might well have cracked under the strain had it not been for a man named Nettleton, a Canadian in the solitary confinement cell next to mine. We discovered that if we stood on our bunks and placed our ears against the wall we could talk. As we both admitted later, this communication preserved our sanity. We were very careful about discussing restricted military matters, each allowing that the other *could* be a plant, but we talked for hours on end, quietly, about our homes, the war, and the plans we had when it was over. He wanted to know just how I became a fighter pilot, and I told him the story....

It began in the fall of 1939, when I was twenty-two and attempted to join the R.A.F. in England. This was a year before the Nazi conquest of France and the Battle of Britain was still many months away. The storm was clearly approaching and reserves of fighters were being assembled, yet my

application was turned down. For the time being, the R.A.F. had enough pilots.

Returning to the States, I found a lovely, trim 32-foot schooner in Sarasota, Florida, and paid $1500 for her with an inheritance my grandfather had left me. (A sailing friend had assured me she was a good value at that price.) The Coast Guard was holding volunteer courses to back its antisubmarine patrols at the time and I enrolled, learning to properly handle the schooner (which I named *Banshee)* and to "shoot the sun" and take star sightings.

For twelve months I enjoyed a minor modern Odyssey on the boat, sailing in and around the Gulf of Mexico. But the war was fast closing in. Each day's headlines brought it nearer to U. S. shores. So, after a year of nautical meandering, I sold the schooner and enlisted in the Air Force.

The date was April 29, 1941; and by early December of that historic year I obtained leave, reaching New York on the same day the Japanese planes hit Pearl Harbor. I was ordered back to the base immediately. Five days later I was commissioned and received my wings.

In 1942 I went back to England with the 15th Bombardment Squadron, Light, the first U. S. combat unit to reach Europe. On the Fourth of July we had a special Independence Day celebration: the initial American engagement in the European theatre in the form of a raid with A-20 Havocs borrowed from the R.A.F. (We had no planes of our own at this point. Ours had been mistakenly sent to Russia!)

Our squadron moved south in the fall, landing in Algeria at the opening of the African campaign. We began harassing Nazi armor and supply depots on the ground; and in the sky we fought the crack pilots of Hermann Goering's Yellow-Nose Focke-Wulf 190 Squadron.

It was then that General Jimmy Doolittle authorized me to assemble an Air Circus of German planes for purposes of training. I therefore picked up a captured Messerschmitt 110 bomber near Naples and, accompanied by my crew chief, flew it back to Algeria. With the unmistakable Messerschmitt

profile stark against the Mediterranean sky we made a popular antiaircraft target all the way. At our field in Algeria the landing gear refused to function and, after trying everything to shake it down, we were forced to crash-land. As the no came to a grinding halt in a cloud of dust and sand my crew chief and I performed a choice bit of unintentional slapstick. Apprehensive of fire, and absolutely blind in the swirling sand, we both scrambled out of our tandem cockpits and ran along the wing, each to confirm that the other was out. Inevitably, we whacked our heads together and fell off the wing in a heap—to be ignominiously dragged away (feeling very foolish) by a hilarious ground crew.

Shortly after the Normandy Invasion, in June of 1944,1 was sent again to England, now as a member of the Fourth Fighter Group. (They had previously been known as the Eagle Squadron of the R.A.F., composed of volunteer American pilots, and this was the outfit I had always wanted to join.)

Then it was escort work with the B-17S, ending with my crash in Germany....

3.

I told all this to the Canadian, Nettleton, there in that drab, dank-smelling cell in the Nazi POW camp as we talked quietly through the long night. And he told me *his* personal story as well. We didn't know, then, whether we'd be liberated or shot, and it seemed very important, somehow, that we identify one another fully—as if talking about the past would lend permanence to the future.

Shortly thereafter, General Patch's Seventh Army stormed through our camp (treating us to a wild and rather incomprehensible exhibition of ground fighting in which a few of us were shot—and during which the defending SS caused many casualties among the Germans).

Liberation was truly an exhilarating experience. We glutted ourselves on food and cigarettes (a can of thick English condensed milk was nectar), and stood under hot,

steaming showers until we nearly drowned. More than this, all things were now possible again; all our visions of the future *could* be realized, and never mind that most of them were illusions. It was to us what gingerbread castles and Christmas are to children—all one, wild, delicious spree.

Although I had lost a good deal of weight I was relieved to learn that whatever internal injuries I had suffered as a result of being struck by the tail of my falling plane had healed completely. My eyes would not focus from lack of proper nourishment, but my disabled right arm, which had been mending slowly, was not structurally damaged.

On May 8, 1945, just eleven weeks after 1 was shot down, we were flown to France. Then, after a brief stay in Paris and London, we sailed for home. The war was suddenly over and the fighting done.

I was glad to still be around, sound of limb, optimistic and with good, even vast, appetites for many things. I had studied architecture at Cambridge when I was stationed nearby; I wanted to build (or rather persuade someone else to build) a resort center for sailors, fliers, fishermen and other sportsmen on a particularly beautiful inlet at Sarasota; my family had acquired a farm—and of course I would like to be a farmer; there were no inexpensive, efficient private seaplanes and I could help someone develop one—had I not doodled such designs for years? Like a few million others, I was a sophomore at life—all optimism and ambition, uninhibited by responsibility, unburdened by experience, except for the war which was now behind me.

In such a mood it is not surprising that three years of trial and error faced me before I would return to an intense enthusiasm for fine and fast automobiles, and in that spring of 1945 I had no conception of the world of motoring adventure awaiting me.

CHAPTER

TWO

At Racing's Threshold

I WAS born in the city of speed, Indianapolis, Indiana, on August 4, 1917—just six years after the first 500-mile classic was run at "The Brickyard." My family, like many families in that part of the country who regarded the race as an annual social affair, attended them faithfully, dragging me along as soon as I could toddle. I don't believe I missed a single Memorial Day race until the year I went away to school, and the sight of the fast cars boring around the big oval was a part of my world from very early childhood. In fact, I can't remember not having been captivated by the intricacies of automotive design and performance.

A direct descendant of the John Fitch (1743-1798) who invented the steamboat,* I suppose this mechanical background came naturally to me. My father, Robert Vanderbilt Fitch, was a contractor and builder. Among his creative accomplishments, he is credited with having designed and produced the first (if not the original) closed body on a horseless carriage.

When I was six, my brother Richard—four years my senior—and I moved to another home. My parents had divorced, and my mother married George Spindler, the head of the Stutz

* **Contrary to schoolbook belief, Robert Fulton was not the man who invented the steamboat but he did *develop* it and successfully promote its use.**

Automotive Sales Division of Indiana. My stepfather made several record assaults in that marque, and one of my most vivid recollections is of a very rapid trip around the oval at Indy in the bucket seat of a thundering Stutz at full throttle, hanging desperately on while my stepfather manhandled the big racing wheel. (He later entered a car of his own in the 500-miler, but the machine didn't place—and our house was like a tomb for days after the event.)

In the early summer of 1938, when I was twenty, I impulsively bought a motorcycle and rode it to New Orleans out of pure wanderlust. I've always had a strong desire to travel, to see new places and meet new people—and the old city with its narrow iron-lace-balcony streets and warm Gulf air was stimulating and exciting. I met some sailors in a bar on Bourbon Street and was introduced rather abruptly to the Bohemian life. Through these fellows I acquired my first automobile of a faintly sporting character, a tiny 500-cc Fiat Topolino (meaning "Little Mouse"). I swapped my motorbike to one sailor for the Fiat, and was so delighted by the peppy little machine and by the qualities it possessed that I drove it nonstop from New Orleans to New York City.

At twenty-one, with a year at Lehigh University behind me, and having inherited a small trust fund, I started out to see the world. I was convinced there was one ideal way to learn about Europe firsthand. How? Why, buy a horse and ride him from Paris to Rome! That way, I reasoned, I'd *have* to meet all kinds of people along the route and learn languages in the process of caring for the horse and stabling him each night.

I booked passage on a Dutch freighter, the *Beemsterdyke,* for England. It was incredibly slow and took a full three weeks to arrive. Once in London I fell in with a lovely little ballet dancer whose friend, Ham Johnson, owned a wheat barge on the Thames. Ham insisted I stay on the barge with him while I was in town, which seemed like a fine idea to me. We talked of all the places we'd like to go—and Ham suggested a trip through the British Isles, Scotland and Wales. Which *also*

seemed like a fine idea to me. (The continent would have been my choice, but the war in Poland had started and visas were unobtainable.)

Pooling our resources, we bought a used MG Magnette sedan for $700—in place of the horse I had originally envisioned—and took off on our journey. Now, this car was not in the best of shape. The engine and gearbox were fine, but the steering and suspension were horrible, and it leaked oil at an alarming rate. Also, the starter was inoperative, and we were forced to push-start the car all through our trip. After several hundred miles, this became routine. At a thousand yards our educated eyes could spot the slightest incline on which to park for a coasting restart.

While we were moving briskly across a Scottish moor, a large buck, giving no signals, charged out of the brush directly into the side of the Magnette. Since he outweighed us by a good 300 pounds the front fender and door panel were badly bent. The collision *did* knock the big fellow down, but he scrambled up, snorted, and walked back into the brush, clearly indicating by his bearing that it had not been *his* fault.

On a particularly twisty stretch through Wales we overtook a brightly painted Model 328 BMW (a phenomenal road car of its day) being driven with enterprise and obvious skill. The driver saw us approaching and accelerated away. I was at the wheel of our MG and set out after him, sliding the turns and using up all of the road to keep him in sight. Johnson was literally green in the seat beside me, and thinking back on the condition of the Magnette's suspension, I can well understand why. But I was having a grand time in my first all-out "dice," too enthralled to be discouraged by Ham's discomfort. Finally, however, the BMW simply outdistanced us and we resumed our trip at a more sedate speed. (Before I am branded an outlaw and a mad dog of society I must point out that these roads were deserted and that no speed limit existed—or exists *now* for that matter—on the open roads in the British Isles. Citizens, and even foreigners, are assumed to possess sufficient judgment to regulate their speed according

to their abilities, without resort to a stifling edict based on the presumption that all cars are of uniformly poor design and bad construction and that all their drivers are equally incompetent. Over there the roads are freely used, uninhibited by such arbitrary socialization of equipment and skill as a speed limit—the result being that driving is a pleasure and the general level of ability exercised by alert and interested drivers is high.)

I'd seen formal road racing (in which cars must compete over real or simulated roads, with sharp turns, high-speed bends and straightaways, testing engine, brakes and suspension to the fullest) for the first time in my life at Brooklands that year and my motoring appetite was whetted by the sight of Prince Bira flying around the high bankings in an ERA. Pushing the crippled Magnette at speed was the closest I had come to realizing my growing ambition to race at the time, but I had already determined to possess a responsive, nimble sports car of my own someday. However, the war intervened, and I was not to achieve this until 1948, three full years after I was liberated from the Nazi POW camp.

2.

On the slow crossing of the Atlantic that spring of 1945, the plan I thought most about was to run my own dairy farm. I already had a part interest in a farm at Brewster, Putnam County, New York, which my stepfather was running, so I joined him and my mother after mustering out of the Air Corps. Working in the fields under the warm sun was excellent rehabilitation. I gained back lost weight and my vision returned to a normal 20-20—but I was getting restless again. Farm life did not offer me the adventure I now seemed to require.

Therefore I bought a Taylorcraft two-seater on pontoons and flew around the country: to the Bahamas, to Indianapolis (in order to see the annual race, of course), to Brewster. Cruising at an easy 100 mph I could run down to Manhattan

from the farm in Brewster in just a few minutes, land on the East River and moor at 23rd St. (It only cost a dollar to leave a plane overnight in New York—actually less than a car!)

The design and construction of educational toys for children kept me busy for some months, but this business suffered from lack of capital. Before I fully appreciated this fact, I used to fly my plane through New England, scouting manufacturers and attempting to set up markets. The best thing that plane ever did for me was to attract the attention of my future wife, Elizabeth Huntley.

She worked for a New York advertising agency and spent her summers at the little pond known as Lost Lake, near Brewster, where I kept my plane, renting a cabin from Harold Kline, a friend of mine from Schenectady. He told me about this lovely redhead and urged me to ask her to a barn dance on an upcoming Saturday night. I'm glad to say I took his good advice—flying the Taylorcraft in and setting down on Lost Lake. Elizabeth promised to go, providing I took her there in the seaplane.

Abandoning the toy effort, but never the Elizabethan effort, I bought my first sports car—on a loan from the National City Bank—early in 1948: a spry, lemon-yellow British MG-TC. And I was so enthusiastic that I immediately set up shop as an automobile dealer, beginning with a few square feet of space in a sporting-goods store in White Plains, New York. The TC sat in the middle of the floor, surrounded by outboard motors, fishing rods and bicycles. MGs were then selling for $2395—and to the average American motorist accustomed to the big six-passenger models it seemed ridiculous to put out this kind of money for a little wire-wheeled "toy" automobile. (In fact, I found only *three* buyers during that first year as an auto dealer in White Plains.)

But I was stubborn about the merits of imported cars. I was sure they would begin to "catch on" within a matter of months, and (although it took a few years instead of months) sales gradually picked up and I was able to expand my business to include my own garage as well as taking on the new

Willys, Riley, Hillman, Renault and, of course, the MG line. Aft^r some three decades, sports cars were entering a renaissance in America, and I found myself a part of this sudden revival. My interest was becoming a solid business—and, though I did not know it then, I was moving closer and closer to active participation in one of the world's greatest and most exciting sports. In just a few short months I would enter my first road race at Bridgehampton, Long Island.

CHAPTER

THREE

Entering the Fray

When I told Elizabeth that I intended to enter a sports car race at Bridgehampton in June she wanted to come along. She'd never seen one and I'd never competed in one, so this made us even. Road racing was being revived in the States after many years, Watkins Glen, New York, having held the initial event the previous fall, and not since the era of Barney Oldfield had sports cars raced on public roads.

In the early days, from around 1915 into the twenties, Bridgehampton had held its annual road race in conjunction with a lavish weekend carnival sponsored by the city firemen. These lusty prewar events were the forerunners of the Bridgehampton Sports Car Road Races, revived for the first time in June of 1949 and sponsored by the SCCA (Sports Car Club of America) and the MG Car Club.

The event was run on a cool spring day in this normally quiet community of socialites and vacationers, located approximately a hundred miles east of New York City. The circuit, some four miles in circumference, resembled, as one observer noted, "a rectangle that has been squashed and not too carefully pushed back into shape." It ran to the edge of town, onto a main street and off past farms and neat houses, incorporating a tricky bridge crossing and several sharp turns.

There was an aura of genuine excitement and anticipation

evident throughout the town as final preparations were made. The local sheriff was the object of a frantic search by the inevitable irate citizens—of which there are always a few. They wanted him to serve an injunction canceling the races, but he was "not available" Along with most of Bridgehampton, he was intrigued by the event and made sure he was not around to serve any such paper.

In an MG-TC borrowed from one of my customers (I'd sold out my stock of new TCs by then), I lined up with the other drivers, many of whom also drove MGs. I was well to the rear of the starting grid, but soon found to my amazement that I was moving up car by car through the pack as I grew accustomed to the speed and the road. I write this calmly, but I was anything but calm in the dizzy whirl of initial impressions in my first race. Remember, there were no driving schools in those days and no probation period under the wing of seasoned observers. There *were* observers, but they lacked experience themselves; we were all learning our new roles together, and no one knew quite what was expected. Most of us stayed on the road somehow and generally kept out of one another's way.

I actually recall very little about the race itself beyond this: that I was able, for the first time in my motoring life, to extend a car to its fullest, to go as fast as I wished without regard to anything but a worthy effort, and without incurring the wrath of the law. In fact, during the roar and confusion, a single phrase kept running through my head: "Now you may go, can go, *must* go!" It was certainly exhilarating, almost a kind of liberation.

My judgment, naturally, was terrible. I took all the wrong lines through the corners and had no idea of how to shift down smoothly for greater power out of the tight spots. I simply *went*!

When I crossed the finish line into fifth over-all, Elizabeth (my pit crew) was happy for me, and joined in my obvious delight in having finished the race. We celebrated that evening with dinner and vintage champagne—and I charged into

a proposal of marriage as wildly as I had charged into those turns on the Bridgehampton circuit, but to infinitely better purpose. And she said yes. (This was *the* momentous day for one John C. Fitch. Ten years, a kaleidoscope of places, races, impromptu picnics and pleasures—and three boys-later, I can say it with conviction!)

More new MGs arrived from England and I picked out a gleaming little black beauty for our honeymoon trip through Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire. The TC was to serve double duty, for in early July I got wind of another race being held at Linden Field, New Jersey—and I couldn't resist asking Elizabeth if she'd mind a quick detour. When she agreed we took off in a cold rain for Linden, the top down all the way.

2.

Industrial New Jersey is a highly unromantic spot to end a honeymoon: a place of bleak warehouses, gasoline refineries and immense oil storage tanks. But at the Linden airport a race was offered—and I badly wanted the chance to better my fifth over-all of the previous month against an even hotter field of cars.

We arrived at the last possible moment, meaning I had no opportunity for even a single practice lap. The other competitors were already lined up behind the starting flag as I apologetically dumped Elizabeth on a hay bale, hurriedly unstrapped our luggage from the TC's rack, and roared out to the rear of the grid—just as the dissonant chorus of engines rose and the pack skittered off in a cloud of blue exhaust smoke.

I had no helmet (safety regulations were practically nonexistent in '49), no numbers on my car, and I had not gone through any form of technical inspection to verify that my machine was sound. In fact, I had not even signed an entry blank; I'd simply put my cap on backward and taken off for the 50-lap main event.

Shortly after the contest began I was amazed to see from

Elizabeth's pit signals that I was leading the pack on handicap; the little TC seemed to be right at home on the five-turn 1.8-mile circuit. My main competition, George Weaver in a very rapid Grand Prix Maserati, was knocked out of serious contention by engine troubles, and by the 10th lap I'd built up a solid quarter-mile lead, averaging 65 mph around the airport course. But my luck was too good to last and with only five laps remaining I was forced to slow considerably with an overheating engine. Three cars got by and I finished in fourth position, trailing a supercharged Bugatti (driven by Harry Grey) and two other MGs across the line. Still, despite the acute disappointment of losing the lead, I *had* finished one position better than Bridgehampton. (Actually I won a third in class—behind the pair of MGs—since the Bugatti was a 2.3-liter machine. As today, engine size determined the classes in which we competed.)

I continued to improve my record with the TC in my final race of the season, at Watkins Glen, in September when I nabbed second over-all behind Tom Cole's HRG—and I capped this by a class first at Palm Beach Shores, Florida, in January of 1950.

By then Elizabeth and I had moved into a walk-up apartment in Greenwich Village, and I had further expanded my auto agency in White Plains.

3-

For the upcoming Bridgehampton race in June I decided to field a car of my own design. It was dubbed the "Fitch Model B" and consisted of a Ford V-60 engine mounted on a Fiat 1100 chassis housed in a modified Crosley body. A rather strange combination, but one that produced excellent results. To this day, the Model B remains one of the best-handling machines I've driven—but we were plagued with endless minor engine bugs from the day she was completed.

I got a third in class D (2000-cc to 3000-cc displacement) at Bridgehampton behind a Healey Silverstone and an Alfa

Romeo, having no time to road-test the Special. (We had finished her just two days before the race.) At Westhampton, Long Island, the following month I managed a second in class with "The Fitch Bitch" (as she came to be known), and took another class second at Watkins Glen in September. Somewhat wearied with changing broken piston rings and leaking oil seals, I sold the B to Paul O'Shea and entered the Mount Equinox Hill Climb in a borrowed Lagonda-Mercury.

Td driven this model—a ponderous, overheavy hybrid—on a previous occasion earlier in the year at Linden, where I had placed second. I felt I knew the car's major shortcomings: a 120-inch wheelbase and old age; but I was certainly surprised when the steering wheel came off in my hands on a particularly vicious turn near the top of the climb. We stopped at the absolute edge of a steep drop. As it was a narrow gravel road I felt very fortunate that the whole contraption didn't slide over the edge.

4.

In the fall of 1950 we had moved from our Greenwich walk-up into a charming old two-story Dutch Colonial house in Stamford, Connecticut. My final race for that year, the Sam Collier Memorial Grand Prix at Sebring, Florida, on December 31, was a hectic affair. From Stamford, Elizabeth and I drove all the way down to Florida in Coby Whitmore's stock XK-129 Jaguar roadster, the car I was to share in the race itself.

Coby, a well-known illustrator as well as an incorrigible enthusiast, wanted me to take the wheel during the kickoff session of the 6-hour race. This race ran from 3 **P.M.** to 9 **P.M.** over the airport runways and roads still in use today.

I lined up with the other drivers for the Le Mans-type start (in which you sprint to your waiting machine, pile in, start the engine and accelerate away). Before the 10-to-1 countdown had been completed I saw one driver break for his car, and I remember thinking: So *that's* the kind of people

I'm up against out here! (The driver was Phil Walters, who was to become one of my closest friends as well as my co-driver in many events around the world. Phil later explained that he had mistaken the signal and apologized for his early start.)

Walters was first away in his big blue Cadillac-Healey and I got off the mark second in the Whitmore XK Jag, managing to keep Phil in sight for a few laps. Then an Allard passed me and I dropped into third, a few hundred feet behind the two leaders. But they gradually pulled away and I settled down to finish the car in the 6-hour grind.

We lost a great amount of time in the pits, adjusting the brakes and so on, but still easily won our class. The over-all winner was decided on a handicap basis, and turned out to be the smallest car in the event, a Crosley, briskly driven by the team of Koster and Deshon. (In actual distance covered, the Crosley had finished nine laps behind our Jaguar.) "Gentleman Jim" Kimberly took second in his 2-liter Ferrari; and an old friend, Fred Wacker, won on distance—for which he was never properly credited.

My greatest racing opportunity to date came in the form of an invitation to compete, with seven other Americans, at the international sports car meet in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in March of 1951. I happily accepted, then realized that I had no car capable of putting on any kind of winning show. The Englishman Tom Cole had recently wrecked his Cadillac-powered British Allard at Watkins Glen and was driving his new one in Argentina. I therefore asked Tom if he'd consent to my handling his old Allard, providing I could get it rebuilt in time for the race. He agreed, and I went frantically to work on the beast.

I drove the sputtering, badly bent machine from Long Island to our shop in White Plains and generally beat the frame back into shape. Then, after a very brief check all around, it was time to take off for Buenos Aires.

Elizabeth was less than delighted with the whole business, being six months pregnant and having little or no faith in the battered racing car I was to drive. But she wished me well

as I threw in a spare tire and a box of tools and drove down to the docks where the Allard was to be loaded. Once I had seen it safely away I packed a suitcase (including some accelerator linkage and a few odd parts I had not had time to install) and flew down to Argentina.

The race there was to be a memorable one.

CHAPTER FOUR

With the Cunningham Team

I SPENT a full week in Argentina getting the Allard ready for the 40-lap General Peron Grand Prix, doing most of the work myself despite the fact that the government (through the Auto Club) offered to place as many mechanics as we needed at our disposal. I couldn't speak a word of Spanish and it took me longer to make myself understood than to go ahead with the work on my own. (Part of Peron's popularity was based on his role of patron of all sports, and being fond of racing, he did not hesitate to use a dictator's prerogatives to insure our convenience.)

I didn't get much sleep that week prior to the race. Each night some kind of party was in full swing at The Burnt Rod, a bar in the heart of Buenos Aires where *aficionados* met every evening. And during the day, when I wasn't sweating over the car, the American contingent was expected to attend various state functions in which a minister of something-or-other would deliver an endless eulogy to Peron (in Spanish, of course). But the Peronistas were then firmly in power and political protocol had to be observed. *La Prensa,* one of the world's best newspapers, was forcibly closed while we were in Argentina, under transparently rigged conditions. Feeling ran high and it was dangerous to express an anti-Peron opinion without being certain the wrong person did not over-

hear it. (We were later told that dossiers were assembled on several of us.)

City driving down there astounded me, as this was my first experience with the motorized exuberance of the Latins. Big Allards would come bellowing along the main street at full throttle, to the smiling approval of the local police. It was up to pedestrians to fend for themselves. After all, this *was* one of the General's enthusiasms.

As race day approached I ran into difficulty getting parts for the car. I made some air scoops and drilled the backing plates to help cool the brakes, and was very glad to have brought along a spare set of carbs and a manifold. Little by little, the Allard was beginning to behave like a racing car, and I was more confident of my prospects.

I expected the main competition to come from a 2.3-liter Alfa Romeo in the hands of Adolfo Cruz, and the hot new Cad-Allard of Fred Wacker. Of course, I also had Tom Cole's new Allard to worry about, and Jim Kimberly and Bill Spear both had their Ferraris entered.

The circuit, running through the streets of Buenos Aires, was extremely bumpy. There was one really rough section over which my Allard literally danced, seeming about to burst into a shower of separate parts. But I was happy to learn that I had turned third fastest practice time behind Wacker and Cruz, nosing out Tom Cole, whose new car appeared to handle poorly.

With a huge crowd lining the course on Sunday, the preliminary events were run off smoothly. Then we all lined up for the Le Mans sprint start under the General's box and in front of the judge's stand. I was second away just after Roberto Mieres' Jaguar, but at the end of that initial lap I was leading, with Cole, Cruz and Wacker close behind. It was clear the fight was going to be a hot one.

Tom was crowding me, moving up fast, but he was forced out on lap 8 with gear trouble. Five laps later Cruz also retired with a smoking engine. But Wacker was now in second and gaining as I strained to hold the lead in the juddering

Allard. It was a delicate problem: to push hard enough to stay ahead, yet gently enough for the Allard to survive the distance. Judging from a pre-race acceleration comparison we had made, I did not think I could repass Fred if he once got by me.

But the picture suddenly altered. Fred overdid things and spun on a sweeping U-turn, ending up straddling a hay bale, his front wheels in the air. When he got back on course he had lost vital seconds, and finished a full lap behind me. The old Allard had held together and I had won my first important international victory! (I had also set the fastest lap, breaking all previous records for this circuit.)

My own joy seemed matched by the crowd, for they treated me to a chaotic acclaim, the backslapping and hand-pumping going on for what seemed hours. The following day we were invited to the government building where I was formally introduced to Evita Peron. She talked rapidly in flowing Spanish, kissed me on both cheeks and presented me with a special lapel pin entitling me to an honorary membership in the Peronista Party, the highest honor, I was told, that could be offered in Argentina.

(Evita Peron was to die in a few months and though we heard no rumor of her illness at the time, she did have a peculiar yellowish pallor. After witnessing her sure conduct in State affairs that afternoon—accommodating several delegations—it is actually surprising that General Peron lasted as long as he did without his energetic and photogenic "Lady of Mercy." She was, no doubt, a strong political asset—though for a poor cause.)

That afternoon, before we were to embark for the States, Tom and I drove his old Allard into downtown Buenos Aires. It had survived the race but it did *not* survive this brief trip; the tired machine literally fell apart in the street. It had won for me and refused to do more.

I arrived back home sporting a new homburg and smoking slim brown cigars—and when Elizabeth saw me she winced. "You look like an undertaker," she remarked, deflating my

Argentine ego; and when I casually requested breakfast in bed the next morning she was dead certain that I had been corrupted beyond salvation by my plush stay in Buenos Aires. And, in a way, she was right; that kind of living takes some getting over.

2.

Shortly after my homecoming—and presumably as a result of my win in Argentina—I received a phone call from millionaire sportsman Briggs Cunningham. He needed a co-driver for one of his big blue-and-white C-2 Cunninghams at the forthcoming 24-hour Le Mans race in June, and he asked if I'd join his team for the great French classic. Of course I jumped at the chance to compete in Europe and agreed to share a car with his team manager, Phil Walters. I'd known Briggs as a hard-driving, fair competitor prior to this, but I had never thought seriously about driving for him. Road racing was still a rudimentary and infrequent sport in the United States and an event like Le Mans had seemed very remote to me. Now it was a sudden reality and my head was in the clouds.

Again, Elizabeth was not too happy about my taking off for France, since our first baby was due at any time, but she knew just how much driving in "the big league" meant to me and told me to go ahead, that she would be fine until I returned.

I competed in three other events before tackling Le Mans that season, taking a first in class at the Giant's Despair Hill Climb in May in a tiny 500-cc Effyh-Jap and going on to win the first 500-cc race in the United States with the same car early the following month at Bridgehampton. Also at Bridgehampton, I'd won a first in class (and fourth over-all) with the Fitch-Whitmore Jaguar Special, a car I had helped build for Coby Whitmore earlier that year. The chassis and engine were stock XK items, but we replaced the body with a special shell which shaved a full 800 pounds from the weight of the pro-

duction XK roadster. Other minor changes included reground camshafts and Alfin brake drums all around. This was the Special's first competitive outing and it did itself proud, winning its class easily over a swarm of XK-120S and a Ford-Allard. We were particularly pleased because the initial race with a Special is rarely successful.

The car handled beautifully and would have won many class cups, except for the fact that the new and considerably faster C-type Jaguar made its appearance at Le Mans later that month. And although the all-up weights were almost identical, the C-type engine developed 50 horsepower more, an advantage we could not hope to overcome.

My first son, John Huntley Fitch, was born on June 7, 1951—just four days before I was to leave for France. I hated to abandon Elizabeth so soon after his arrival, but she insisted, declaring it was an opportunity I might never have again. Which was the final urging I needed; I kissed her, gingerly made my apologies to the red-faced young man we had miraculously produced, and took off for Le Mans and the cockpit of a C-2 Cunningham.

3.

Three hundred thousand spectators are attracted to Le Mans each year, for his or her own good reasons, but most of them simply because the auto seems to be the most natural instrument of a modern competition of speed. The race has a proud history.

In 1923, a test was devised to prove the merits of the automobiles of the day in a public contest. This was the first 24-hour race of Le Mans, an extraordinary venture of the time, which has grown in importance and stature until it is recognized today as the World Series for sports cars.

Perhaps partly because one of the first vehicles "that could proceed without horses at a rapid walking pace" was built in this rather drab city two hours from Paris, the Le Mans race has been soberly bound by a volume of purposeful regulations

designed to insure that autos would be truly tested. Today, special racing sports cars or prototypes compete at Le Mans, meaning that the full imagination and engineering facilities of the world's proud manufacturers are released, no holds barred, to prove that they have made the car that can cover the most distance, weather and luck notwithstanding, in 24 hours.

Le Mans has always had its buffoons and serious sportsmen, social lions and certified playboys, and always its fire-eating car killers who win or bust, to the dismay of many a chairman of the board of heavily committed manufacturers. With such a cast, discipline is largely an excusable conceit of racing managers, and in spite of the record, almost no one drives at Le Mans with a respect and reserve fitting the severity of the test.

By and large, these drivers are rather unruly types who like to win in spite of resolutions or promises they may have made "to save the car during the first six hours." One of the personal factors that make them indispensable to the team that covets the laurel, their will to win, also makes them a bad risk in the waiting game which is Le Mans. Most are full of tricks and fun, enjoying the tremendous, wrenching effort of will and body this race demands. They race, in the final analysis, only because they like to. Thus the character of drivers and the nature of the race guarantee that Le Mans is and will remain an essentially sporting proposition.

A feature of the contest that escapes most contestants and spectators alike is the severity of a 24-hour race. Based on tire wear only, the approximately 2500 miles covered is equal to about 50,000 miles of normal driving. This is well above the trouble-free life expectancy of a car, and is it any wonder that generators fail, bearings burn out, gears and chassis themselves break, and that the number and variety of breakdowns is legend? Who would be surprised if, during the life span of his car, an axle should break or a bearing fail? But one such failure, and a car is out of contention at Le Mans.

Our Cunningham team was not backed by a manufacturing firm as were our opponents, but instead was supported entirely by an individual as a purely sporting venture. With his big white cars, the elaborately equipped truck and a crew of mechanics, Briggs Cunningham unfortunately gave the impression that he represented the mammoth industries of Detroit with divisions of engineers, enormous testing facilities and unlimited resources to lavish on the development of his cars.

Actually, this was not the case. His cars were big because the only efficient U. S. engines capable of being raced were big. He preferred smaller power plants and smaller cars but could not use anything except the production engines available. He had to have the truckload of spare parts and a crew of mechanics because there were no Cunningham "agents" anywhere this side of his plant in Florida, some 3000 miles and an ocean away. The personnel of his distant plant totaled less than 40 persons, most of whom were at Le Mans. His "division of engineers" were two men, one in semiretirement. His testing facilities were one rather fragile dynamometer, and the fact was, he was hard pressed to find a lonely stretch of back road on which to test his cars without being hauled off to jail. He found himself in the misunderstood role of a poor little rich boy at Le Mans. Comparatively speaking, he was an amateur garage proprietor who modified—hopped up, if you prefer—passenger car engines in an empirically evolved light chassis (all this done with a great deal of sound instinct and good luck) and presumed to toss his hat in the ring against the wealth and experience of the professionals. This is not to apologize beforehand. There was not a man in our *equipe* who did not do his job with confidence in the venture and a measure of proud joy in representing his country and his team in this demanding international contest.

The race started at four in the afternoon and as a prudent schedule required the cars in the pits by noon, there was time for a test lap, and I jumped at the opportunity after

having slowly driven our big Cunningham through the holiday crowds to the circuit.

From the start finish line flanked by the pits and grandstands, the circuit gets right down to serious business with a fast, climbing bend under the Dunlop bridge. It is a wide, long bend, complicated by a rolling surface that makes a car wallow awkwardly at high speed. One must slow to 120-130 mph for this bend, the problem being to determine just how much. It is impossible to watch a tachometer or speedometer as all attention is urgently needed, correcting and adjusting the path of the car on the approach. It is an unwelcome but not unlikely place to find a wreck in the middle of the road.

After a short climb, a zooming drop leads into the 70-plus-mph Esses, a left and a right through the narrow earth banks in a pine wood. Just as you come out of the right turn, there is an unfriendly little hump on the inside which tends to upset the balance of a car straining for traction, especially in the rain. You just get cracking nicely again under a spectator bridge when Tertre Rouge, the most deceitful corner at Le Mans, looms suddenly. It looks like a simple right onto the straight. But just as you're well set for what it appears to be, a final tightening hook appears, half of it on a reverse camber. If you slide wide onto the downsloping camber, you've done it, and might as well reach for the shovel to dig yourself out of the ditch. Many Le Mans hopes have abruptly ended at Tertre Rouge.

You are now ready to stretch out on the famous 31^-mile straight where you can go all-out (up to 180 mph) if your car can and you don't suffer from a certain lightness of the right foot. After a quarter-of-a-mile boost downhill on a sycamore-lined road, you find the straight really isn't straight when you hit a gentle right bend ... flat-out in anything that has ever run at Le Mans or is likely to for some years. When it is dry, you can hug the outside, passing one or even two cars without frightening yourself. And though you know you're on the long straight, it never looks it; there are humps and crests and woods crowding visibility all the way. It is a real

car killer; sustained high speed without a breather being the formula for blowing up engines. Near the end, the "straight" really becomes a misnomer. Through a tall wood the broad road angles definitely right in such a way that any car traveling over 150 must be well positioned to drift through using the whole road. It is a poor place to pass because all the cars tend to use all the road whether they need it or not.

If the straight is an engine destroyer, the slow corner at the end of it is the prime cause of brake failure at Le Mans. The grinding punishment of slowing from top velocity down to about 40 for the Mulsanne corner is simply too much for conventional brake design, and restraint must be used beginning with the first lap. The scarred bank testifies to countless cases of overoptimism.

Climbing back to speed again on the back stretch, the definitely second-rate narrow road tops two crests at full speed and plunges into a wood that hides an 80-plus right and a slower left called Indianapolis (named by incredulous Europeans because our most famous track turns left only). It is a turn that often becomes oily and treacherous.

Straight to the carnival site at Arnage, and the road turns sharply right. Still on the narrow road we sweep through the two flat-out lefts approaching a sharp, blind hilltop bisecting a fast right curve. A stop light here warns cars approaching in the region of 140 mph of wrecks which might obstruct the road over the hill.

The gently winding road drops into the valley that traps the worst of the dreaded fog, crosses a bridge and swings right to White House. This fast left around a farmhouse has been the scene of much racing history—where the contest has almost stopped itself by the wreckage blocking the road. (Here in another era of the race, a Bentley crashed through a multiple wreck including two of its own teammates and limped on to win.) Easy bends wind back to the pits—and we were home safe for one lap. It had taken less than five minutes, and now I was in for 24 hours of the same—this time "for real."

The story of the race itself is a brief one. We came tanta-

lizingly near the magnificent victory in this premier event, only to be rudely disappointed. Our car was running in second over-all at the 18th hour, behind the new Jaguar driven by Walker and Whitehead. Both of the other team Jags had blown their engines and we were gambling that the same would happen to the leader. Instead, *we* had the engine trouble—burning the bearings in the Cunningham—and had to nurse the car home, finishing far down in the over-all results. We were actually fortunate to make it under the final flag. The Walker-Whitehead Jag went on to win.

Briggs, however, seemed satisfied with my performance, and asked me to remain with the team. And I liked the big brutal Cunninghams, feeling that they had a future almost as solid as their construction ahead of them.

4-

My faith in the marque was soon to be justified. Briggs took his entire stable to Elkhart Lake for the races there in August, and I was assigned a 260-hp V-8 model that weighed in at just over 3000 pounds and had all the power I could desire for the tricky 6^-mile circuit winding through the lush hills of Wisconsin's Kettle Moraine country. This was another of the races set on public roads—and streets, too, for we ran past the railroad station to the grain elevator, around a corner to the bank, the post office and the drug store, then past rows of resort hotels along the lake front and off into the rolling countryside again. The fastest cars reached 140 and more on the longer straights and as this was a high-crowned, rough country road lined with trees and ditches, we took the greatest care to make no mistakes.

The two other team cars were being driven by Cunningham and Walters, and we had some very stiff competition in the large 38-car field, but I liked the rock-steady feel of the Cunningham and was out to win, in the hope of vindicating the marque for its recent mechanical failure at Le Mans. After flagfall, starting from the third row, I passed a pair of

Cad-Allards to take the lead. The C-2 was going well, and I felt more and more confident as the 202-mile event progressed. After four laps I recognized Phil Walter's white car growing in my rearview mirror, and he later passed with a hurried thumbs-up signal as we wound out of the quarry bend in third gear. As in any team worth the name, we had agreed not to jeopardize our chances by racing each other, and Phil's pass was perfectly okay with me—as long as we kept it in the family. I was going as fast as seemed prudent at this stage and would only push Phil if an "outsider" began to gain on us.

But Phil's machine dropped out on lap 8 with burned bearings and Briggs, who was keeping a good position, turned his C-2 over to Walters later in the race, allowing them to finish sixth over-all in the last of the three team cars. I won the race at an announced average of 80.82 mph, with Mike Graham in for second in his Allard; Phil Hill took third in an aluminum XK Special Jaguar.

The crowd, estimated at some 50,000, seemed delighted that an all-American team of car and driver had won. Here was a combination patriots could cheer for, relieving the dominance of imported makes—and cheer they did!

5-

The following month saw the full Cunningham team at Watkins Glen—and again our big cars dominated the field. Walters won the 15-lap main and I came home behind him. In an earlier event that same weekend—the Seneca Cup Race—I drove Cunningham's Ferrari coupe and managed second, although I had stopped in mid-race to aid Ken Hill, whose Jag spun directly in front of me into a tree. I was afraid Ken might need instant attention, as the XK was all but torn in two, but miraculously he was unhurt.

George Weaver took the event in his Grand Prix V-8 Maserati, and in finishing second I was awarded the Sportsmanship Trophy. I might say at this point that I have met very few poor sportsmen in road racing, perhaps because

"unkindness" (as the Marquis de Portago used to call deliberate sharp practice) can be so easily repaid with dangerous dividends. In any case, the common hazards of road racing seem to inspire a comradely consideration, and the driver who lacks this quality is the rare exception; and it is the same in all parts of the world.

6.

In November, I got my first crack at driving a U. S. production car in competition—with frustrating results. Carl Kiekhaefer asked me to take one of his 1951 Chryslers down to Mexico for the second running of the 2000-mile Pan American Road Race. The car was a full-race Saratoga model of some six liters, set up by Carl's mechanics, and it appeared to have plenty of steam.

We were 32nd off the line (with all cars starting at one-minute intervals) and, on this first leg of the long 5-day event, we had passed every car except Troy Ruttman's very potent Ford, painstakingly prepared for Troy by Clay Smith of Long Beach, California. From the air, Kiekhaefer had followed our progress, and he later confirmed that we were within two miles of Ruttman, meaning we had made up many minutes on his earlier starting position and were undoubtedly first on the road on the basis of elapsed time.

After more than 320 miles—just *one* short of Oaxaca—the engine suddenly died. Our radiator was leaking, and we were also losing oil. I jumped out, raised the hood, and twisted off the radiator cap. A small Mexican lad appeared from nowhere, watching the whole procedure with wide eyes. He carried a basket of warm soda water which I bought from him and hurriedly poured into the steaming radiator. Meanwhile, Williams, my navigator, was busy pouring the oil drippings back into the crankcase. We both leaped inside the Chrysler once more and attempted to restart the engine. No luck. We kept trying until the battery failed, then got out and began pushing. We knew we only had a mile to go, but the

machine was simply too massive. We had no choice but to abandon it there and hitch a ride into Oaxaca. For that year, at least, our bid in Mexico was finished; hard as it had been, we were sorry to leave. The Mexican race, as I was to discover in a much more rewarding attempt the following year, was like some colossal practical joke—or a scavenger hunt on the grand scale. Everything is extremely difficult: the vast country, the lack of supplies, the endless road—even gasoline and food are not easily found when and where you may need them. I have heard many a race referred to as "a real challenge." Well, this one was really ***it.***

With Mexico behind us, however, the season was to be capped by a very successful weekend at Palm Beach Shores in December.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Moving Toward Mercedes

THE winter races at Palm Beach Shores, Florida, proved to be exciting and closely contested. I was set to drive two cars that weekend: a production XK in the one-hour Hoffman Trophy race for unmodified Jaguars, and another from Bill Spear's stable, a potent 4.1 Ferrari roadster, in the two-hour main for the Riviera Cup. I won the all-Jag race after a spirited battle with Karl Brocken, and after the flag had fallen Karl pulled his Jag alongside mine and called across: "Good going, John! Fine drive!" His expression and words confirmed the sincerity with which he congratulated me for taking his victory from him at the last moment. This has happened often to me, and I have spontaneously done it many times to other drivers. I think it supports my observation that, having done as well as possible within their individual limitations, competitors in this sport are able to rise above their own ambition and pride to congratulate a winner who beat them fairly.

The Riviera Cup race followed, and I switched cars, hopping into the cockpit of the 4.1 Ferrari for this one. As Tom Cole got away for the lead in his Allard he was bumped by another machine into the first turn and his partially crushed gas tank caught fire. For a few long moments he was not aware of this condition, and I vividly recall the frustration of want-

ing to pull alongside to warn him of the swirling flame, but Tom was out to win and I could do no more than maintain my position a few feet behind as we flew down the back straight. By the time Cole finally realized his danger and pulled off course to quench the fire he was out of contention, and Phil Walters in a Cad-Healey had moved up decisively to take the lead. My 4.1 was delicate to handle in the slow turns due to its 220 hp and light rear end, but by lap 15 I'd closed on Phil whose 6-liter juggernaut was hot and beginning to falter from the blistering pace.

We were both enjoying the contest, exchanging those small gestures and expressions which can, in split seconds, speak volumes. Once I tried to edge the Ferrari inside as we entered a slow corner but Phil promptly "shut the gate." His shrug said: "What else could I do? You weren't up far enough to claim the groove." When I saw his eyes in the mirror I grinned and rocked my head, as if to say: "Well, you *might* have had a relapse and let me through. You're getting old, you know!" We were both certainly trying for the win, Phil making his heavy car drift to the absolute edge of the road with uncanny precision, and I wringing everything I could get out of the smaller-engined Ferrari.

After several intense laps of this, Phil pulled into the pits with a backward glance that was both envious and dejected—and I took the front position, with the smaller cars carefully swinging wide to wave me past. As I now had no other serious competitor, I was able to take the checker without further strain on the Ferrari.

In all, it had been a grand day for me, and a very encouraging end to the 1951 season. I had been lucky enough to win the SCCA National Championship that year, and owed much of my success to Briggs Cunningham.

2.

The Fitch-Whitmore Special behaved itself nicely at Bridgehampton in May and I took home a third over-all and

a first in class. In June it was back to Le Mans, this time with Elizabeth along to keep me company. Briggs had booked passage for us on the S.S. *Mauretania*—and our situation, in toto, must have answered some formula or other, considering the pleasure we found in this trip. We were pursuing victory in a foreign country against very strong opposition. Perhaps we savored it because we felt that victory *was* attainable, the country and circuit familiar, the opposition fallible like ourselves. And our entire crew seemed imbued with this spirit.

But my fortune was no better at Le Mans in '52 than it had been the previous year. I got away first at the start, only to have a coil lead jump out on the first lap. I crept into the pit, running on four cylinders—and returned to the race in dead-last position. I then set an official Le Mans record trying to regain lost ground, and our car (which I was sharing with George Rice) was holding down a solid third over-all at the fourth hour when the engine failed completely. Briggs and Bill Spear went on to finish their C-4 behind a pair of factory Mercedes and a Nash-Healey at the end of the 24 Hours, so the team effort was not entirely without success. But a Cunningham had still not finished within the top three at Le Mans. This had been our great chance; we had the fastest cars, they handled well and had sufficient race-hours on the engines to make them dependable. Yet we were beaten. The blow was a bitter one.

In the pits after the race I met the brilliant engineer-director from Mercedes, Uhlenhaut, and I asked if I might test-drive one of the silver 300 SL roadsters in Germany, as I was keenly interested in these fast new machines that won the event. He told me to come to the Nurburgring for the German Grand Prix in August and he'd see what he could do. We shook hands on it.

During the two-month interim I contacted Rootes Motor Company, and with Mike Hawthorn, Stirling Moss and Peter Collins, joined the Sunbeam-Talbot team in the July Alpine Rally. The 2000-mile run began at Marseilles, France, and ended five days later back on the Mediterranean Coast, at

Cannes. A 95-car field, representing several nations, began the exhausting and dangerous event through the Alps, but some 72 cars dropped out or crashed before the Rally had ended. Ours, unhappily, was one of them. (I was sharing the Sunbeam with Peter Collins that year.) We were running without marks against us at the time, when a wheel bearing failed in Austria. At any rate, Collins and I had found a lot to amuse us, and we were promised another chance in team cars the following year. My second Alpine, in '53, was to prove far more successful.

3-

In a high state of anticipation, I journeyed to the Nurburgring in Germany for my Mercedes test. I was set to drive a production Porsche coupe in the first race of the day, preceding the Grand Prix, and I was grateful for this chance to learn something of the very difficult 14-mile circuit before my 300 SL test on the afternoon following the races. Getting away in the midst of a 30-car field (and *how* some of those Porsche specialists could drive them!), I brought my small coupe in for fourth over-all, feeling that I had obtained valuable experience on "the Ring"—and knowing it would pay off during my test run with the hot new SL.

A few of my European friends seemed a bit concerned about my strong desire to drive for a German team, but I had long since put the war and its ramifications behind me. That grim chapter was over, and I was involved in a sport; I was part of a world fraternity that transcends language, nationality and background, and I was glad to be a part of this, to forget the war. I refused to look on these people as ex-Nazis or anything else; they were simply the sportsmen (and some of the businessmen) of automobile racing, as I myself was, and I was happy to accept them solely on these terms.

The 300 SL roadsters flashed to an incredible 1-2-3-4 victory in the larger sports car division that day, breaking all records, and as I watched the sleek silver rockets shooting down the

front straight and around the turns I endured that range of emotions (from exhilaration to despair) that had upset many a driver before me: eager and impatient but also apprehensive and nervous; confident of my basic skill, yet doubtful of my specific experience. Tomorrow, on this most challenging of road circuits, I would be handling an SL under the critical eyes of chief engineer Uhlenhaut and the legendary iron-willed team director for Mercedes-Benz, Alfred Neubauer.

Surely, this was to be the most important ride in my three years behind the wheel.

CHAPTER

SIX

A Test On the Ring

The day after the German Grand Prix was sunny and clear, with a slight breeze from the mountains cooling the circuit. Three of the winning SLs were being run in and out of the pit area by German test drivers in order to determine what had made them a shade less than perfect in the prior day's event. The portly Herr Neubauer, Uhlenhaut, and a dozen specialist mechanics were on hand to chase down the trouble; carburetion, plugs and fuel were all being carefully checked, minor adjustments made, and the cars sent out again to circulate at speed.

In contrast to the noise and color of the previous afternoon, the huge, empty grandstand along the straight seemed almost ghostlike. I was sitting with Elizabeth over a cup of strong German coffee in the block-long restaurant facing the pits, and though I tried to stay calm, my patience was fast disappearing.

"They seem awfully busy out there," I said.

"Relax, John," Elizabeth assured me. "You'll get your chance to drive, but *not* before Herr Director Neubauer has his lunch. Let's just be sure he's watching you on a full stomach!"

She was right. After he'd eaten a sizable plate of pork chops and boiled potatoes Herr Neubauer finally beckoned

to me (I had put myself, by careful coincidence, in his direct line of sight all day) and agreed to let me take over one of the silver cars back at the pits.

After signing a paper releasing the Mercedes organization from any responsibility in case I killed myself, or if the car had a mechanical failure with the same result, I looked over the superb new 300 SL I was to drive. Neubauer told me, in his broken English, that the SL was not running right, that I had absolutely no insurance and no legal recourse if I wrecked it, and that I must drive very carefully and slowly. This was an odd and depressing turn of events—a driving test for a racing team with orders to go slow. Herr Neubauer knew, and I knew, that this was all a complete waste of time unless I was fast—*very* fast—and it occurred to me that after spending hours attempting to tune a miss out of the engine without success, they were now sorry they had agreed to try out a new driver under these circumstances. It would delay, if not completely disrupt their systematic pursuit of the fault. Perhaps they wanted to get it over with as quickly and uneventfully as possible.

I had an entirely different idea, of course. Before the war, Mercedes had dominated the road racing scene. Since the war, their bombed-out factories had been rebuilt, markets regained, and with this new sports machine, made from production car components, they had become the most successful team on the European circuits. In this one short season they had taken second in the Mille Miglia and had won outright at Berne, Le Mans and here at the Nurburgring.

It followed that if they could do this well when they were just getting started, using their production car engine, transmission and suspension, they would do very well indeed when they got going seriously with special designs and modifications. Also, Briggs had been dropping a number of melancholy comments to our team about giving it all up, and he didn't mind my trying out for the Mercedes team, so I felt no disloyalty there.

It was now late in the afternoon and I knew practice was

out of the question. It was obvious that I would have to go very fast immediately in a strange car on this extremely difficult course—and that I must make no mistakes.

During my discussions with Neubauer and Uhlenhaut an unpleasant and insistent fact kept hounding me. The Nurburgring is the wildest, toughest circuit in Europe. It is the most feared and the most respected, and I had not begun to really learn it. I had no clear mental picture of its tortuous plan, looping and plunging unpredictably through the Eifel Mountains for 14 harrowing miles. The Ring had been built as a kind of WPA project during the middle twenties. It was designed from the beginning to relieve the economically depressed country around it, as a pure racing circuit never intended for normal use. Because of this, none of the usual patterns of road building were followed. Intentional hazards were cunningly placed. The road doubles back on itself unexpectedly, and climbs straight over hills a "civilian" road would logically ease around. Cuts are few and shallow, leaving sharp humps on the hilltops that toss a speeding car for the broad-jump record. With no need to make allowances for the underpowered or poorly braked vehicles of the public roads, the gradients resemble a roller-coaster track, running as high as 27 degrees up or down.

On some of the extreme down grades, good brakes are almost useless; at a touch on the pedal the road wheels slide and the situation is worse instead of better. Topography offers no clue to the next direction this undisciplined road will take. At racing speed you have to know. There are 187 turns and curves to each lap, most of them hidden by hedges and banks, which have to be actually memorized to take at the highest speed.

The most frightening feature of the circuit, and among circuits it is a house of horrors, is the blue sky over the blind crests one frequently approaches at 100 mph plus. If you don't *know* which way the road goes on the other side, you are not only scared green, you are in serious trouble. I had concentrated on these, trying to force them into memory, and I

thought I knew them. It was the creeping doubt that bothered me.

Mercedes engineer Uhlenhaut knew the circuit and spoke English. I caught his attention and begged a scrap of information out of the volume I needed. Could the Mercedes be taken through the last S curve before the pits at full speed? (This was the fastest section of the course, and the difference between braking and not braking here would mean seconds won or lost.)

He looked uncertain. "Well, if you start the curve before you see it, just under the bridge, you can make it by releasing the throttle for just a moment... back off just a bit," he answered in his perfect Oxford accent. He wanted to be helpful, I am sure, but his face betrayed a reservation, perhaps it was concern for their car which was about to be entrusted to someone who hadn't driven it before and was trying to learn the circuit secondhand. "Shouldn't try it, you know," he added seriously. I couldn't think of another question in all the 14 miles that were crammed with problems and suddenly realized what a fool I was even to try. I would make a poor showing for no credit, or wreck the car to my eternal disgrace.

But it was too late now. Borrowed helmet in hand, I walked toward the waiting car. The small, smooth, silver roadster, by its design and construction, showed unmistakably that it was a new approach from another, and alien, school. The wheels were not wire but steel discs, radically dished over small but extremely wide brake drums. The shallow door hinged forward and swung straight up from a web of surprisingly small tubes making up the frame. There was a telltale second hand on the tachometer which would betray any excess of engine rpm. Pressure on a trick lever released the steering wheel to permit entry. I didn't like the idea of this facile and unnatural disabling of a car, and I felt uncomfortable holding the wheel awkwardly in one hand like a dismembered head as I slipped into the seat.

The unmistakable odor of a special hard brake lining mixed with a taint of hot oil drifted into the cockpit. I slipped

the seat back and found plenty of leg and elbow room, a pleasing novelty. The gas and brake pedals were in an ideal relationship to swing a heel over to hit the accelerator while braking. The gear lever was not of the remote extension design but it was accessible and positive. There was no safety belt, contrary to all my experience, but the seat was so deep and enveloping I didn't miss it. Starting was indefinite as it is with most highly tuned engines set up to produce their best power in the higher rpm ranges. The engine was well insulated from the chassis lor a racing car and its muffled tone gave the impression that, though sharp and clean, it was remote. Its balance was remarkable—more like an electric motor than a reciprocating engine with flailing innards.

A curt nod from Neubauer and I realized I was as ready as I was going to be in this "make-or-break" proposition. With an effort to push the crowding second thoughts and misgivings from my mind, I slipped into the synchromesh first gear and scrambled off. Winding her up to the 5800-rpm limit through the gears, I felt a pronounced squat under load, and noticed the miss they were looking for. Then immediately back down through the gears to second for the sweeping banked turn past the pits.

The transmission was a delight—the lever seemed to jump into place when brought near the desired position. It was light and engagement immediate, with a high first and the other ratios ideal to wring the ultimate power from the willing engine. The Sud Curve was forgivingly wide, just the place to safely learn if I was out with a bimbo or a lady, or something in between. Entering it a little slower than I thought, on this short acquaintance, that we could make it, I jumped back on the accelerator as soon as we were solidly set, purposely forcing her beyond the breaking point. In spite of the unconventional swing axle design, she responded to correction with a wholesomeness that was almost friendly. The car was a sweetheart! The brake pedal was hard but a short, heavy application for the Sud Curve slowed us positively, without loss of pedal travel. The real test for brakes

would come going down through Hatzenbach. Braking on the rough surface behind the pits before the downhill section, I was delighted with the solidity of the light but stiff chassis. I had a nice all-of-a-piece feeling about it even on the cracked and patched concrete that made most cars hop in a clumsy dance under heavy brakes.

Approaching the turn near the bottom of the Hatzenbach hill, I stood really hard on the brakes, sliding the wheels briefly at the end for good measure to see if they still had the power. They did have—surprisingly enough—and although the pungent smell of burned lining was strong, and the pedal grew harder, it held its position and braking power was unchanged. They would stand the worst I could give them. The steering was light and positive; if any one feature could, it typified the whole car which felt and handled light but solid.

The three blind lefts, climbing out of the valley could, I was quite sure, be taken at full speed by staying near the center of the road until the true apex came into view. They could.

The long sweep along a ridge near an abandoned airstrip at Flugplatz was broken by a vicious hump in the middle of a fast left which, I was positive, could *not* be taken at full speed. Too fast and the hump would toss the car into the air while it was scrambling for traction to hold it into the curve. The question of how much to brake was not made easier by the fact that the curve beyond was hidden by the hump.

It was only a guess when I stabbed the brakes hard twice and turned, trying to straighten a little over the hump itself. It had been a fair guess. We made it, but I wouldn't want to try it any faster. The bump and rebound against the rubber stops produced an alarming amount of steering through the back wheels. (The sensation must be something like that in a hook-and-ladder wagon when the driver of the steerable rear wheels is half potted.)

I didn't like Wehrseifen; on a steep downgrade rounding a mountainside there is a series of blind right curves, baffling

because they all look alike, but are not. They end with a very sharp left over a bridge, and this is where I thought I'd really had it. The left over the bridge is one of a dozen hazards of the Nurburgring one *must* remember. It is completely blind and gives not the slightest indication, either by the visible road or the formation of the mountainside, that a turn of such severity is being approached. The deception is compounded by the fact that the apparent inside edge of the road which one aims to skim with the left wheels changes to the corner of the bridge 20 feet farther, when it becomes visible.

Since there is not time to return to the correct position for a new start, the entry is not only ragged and awkward, it is hair-raising, and the tightening exit from the corner is worse. I had allowed my conscious attention to drift into that state of almost-mesmerized blankness that drivers are prone to. The mind lolls in a dull state of passive fascination with the rapidly unwinding ribbon of road, and one tends to drive by what is seen, rather than by what is known. This is bad policy, since the visible road looks slow in many places where it is fast, and vice versa.

Just as I committed myself to the steep downhill left, I remembered that this was Wehrseifen. In another instant I saw the cement bridge wall marking the true apex of the corner. It bore an ugly patch where some unfortunate had gone through it—and not very long ago—and several deep gouges made by protruding wheel hubs. I thought I was about to make my mark. I braked as hard as I dared and frantically tried to hold the resulting slide all the way through the corner, to slow by sliding sideways where brakes were no longer effective. With rough and drastic corrections, the SL held, sliding to wallop the earth curb on the extreme outside of the corner. My scalp tingled with the cold realization of what had almost occurred due to my brief lapse in concentration. I resolved to stay alert.

We swooped through the steep gully at Brunchen, past the very fast Flanzgarten and the double back at Schwalbenschwanz, past scenes of major victories and disasters in racing

history, out into the comparative open of the last kilometers to the finish, and over the ski-jump bridges that in races past catapulted Seaman, Von Delius and Chiron through the hedges and into the trees. This was the fastest section. The tachometer needle climbed, slowly now in fourth gear, to 5200, 5500, 5700 rpm, equaling 138, 142, 145 mph. The macadam surface grew rough with speed, and corrections for the distinctive rear end steering effect grew more demanding, exacting.

Here was the bridge, and the last S curve. Remembering good advice, I backed off "a bit" and started turning under the bridge before the curve was in sight over the crest. The hump set us right across to the edge of the road where the car wallowed unsteadily for a breathless moment. Then it was over! One more gentle bend, no trouble at full speed, and past the timing tower to the pits.

I thought I liked to drive, but I was glad to be finished. Feeling much relieved, I released the steering wheel. As I climbed out, a shout from the tower gave a time faster than some of the lap times for the team in the previous day's race. Herr Neubauer and the mechanics soberly inspected the car for marks of violence that weren't there when we started. They silently filed by the cockpit to check the tachometer maximum hand which rested a shade under 5800. Sharp-smelling white smoke rose from the front and the rear brakes and hot metals snapped and rang as they cooled. A semblance of manners returned with my hearing and it was honest praise that I offered in every phrase of approval I could remember: *"Sehr Gut!" "Prima!"* Smiles broke out freely, for they were proud as parents of their new *Rennsportwagen.*

I had liked the car. It was nothing short of brilliant from a driver's point of view. But under this pressure, driving on the absolute ragged edge on a half-known circuit, with a demand for absolute security, was no pleasure.

I had driven only 14 miles and it felt more like 24 hours at Le Mans.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Success Back Home

BEFORE I left the sleek SL behind me that afternoon at the Ring I turned another fast lap at Herr Neubauer's request (now he seemed more interested!) and managed to cut my initial time by a few more seconds. I was told I would be notified when and if I'd be needed and we shook hands all around.

Elizabeth seemed optimistic, but I was anything but certain I'd earned a position on the team. Still, I had no intention of letting them forget me. I had, in fact, discussed with Neubauer the possibility of Mercedes entering the Mexican Road Race in November, telling him that I felt it would be a perfect chance for the 300 SL. The car possessed the prime virtues necessary in this singularly severe race: It was small and light for the mountains, fast enough for the long straights and, above all, dependable. Neubauer admitted he was interested in what I had to say, but stated that Mercedes did not plan to enter this race. (However, upon my return home, I received a letter from him asking for more details. Thus we began a rather involved correspondence in which I supplied him with reams of information regarding the 5-day contest: average speeds over certain sections, rainfall charts, temperatures, altitudes, etc.—hinting strongly that I would be available to drive one of the cars. Meanwhile, I knew I must await his decision.)

2.

That same month we returned to the States, and I entered the main event at Thompson, Connecticut, gaining a second over-all in the Cunningham behind Phil Walters. Although Phil and I insisted we never drove all-out against one another when our team was not pressed by the competition, we would have had a difficult time convincing those who saw this race at Thompson that we were actually holding to such a dispassionate policy.

The two of us were well out in front, but our cars were never more than a length apart, badgering, harassing, almost chewing at one another on the narrow road that barely contained our two big machines side by side, and once (while in the process of passing me on the notorious uphill turn) Phil sent a geyser of sand towering over the pine trees. He practically banked around the curve, using a sandy shoulder on the outside to maintain his angle and, incidentally, to keep him within the circuit grounds.

I don't believe I ever really minded losing to Phil in those days, knowing that when I did I had lost to a superb racing driver. And I was in a perfect position to appreciate just how accomplished he was. Before he joined Cunningham, Phil had raced midgets for years around numerous dirt ovals under the name of "Ted Tappet," and he had a large following—all of whom expected him to win (as he did so often during his many successful seasons on the tracks from Maine to California). Naturally, he didn't like to disappoint his supporters.

Before this particular race we had been a bit worried by the competition, so we did something we both hated to do; we rode with each other in practice, in an effort to gain a fraction of a second here and there through comparison of our respective techniques. It always thoroughly frightened each of us when his time came to ride as passenger. On this afternoon at Thompson I distinctly recall deciding at one point that the accident we were about to have could not be

terribly serious as Phil was only doing about 80 at the moment. And later, with our positions reversed, as I roared into a tight curve, Phil announced distinctly: "We will never make it." But, of course, I knew we would.

All this *did* help. Phil discovered he could hold power on later, braking into some of the turns; I, for my part, found that more liberty could be taken in certain other curves. (Phil once forcibly demonstrated this as he recovered an "impossible" crossed-up slide with one masterful stroke of the wheel—cool as ice.) But the final result was that we both improved our lap times.

After these tense passenger sessions were over we chuckled about them endlessly, both of us feeling we had really been through something "hairy." They always left us with more respect for each other, and enlivened the friendly competitive relationship we shared. Phil never failed to bolster my ego when he would ponder just "where I got my experience"—indicating that I already *had* the skill. We made a good team, and we won a lot of races between us.

3-

The Elkhart Lake races, run in early September, proved a runaway victory for our big blue-and-white cars. In Sunday's 31-lap main, for the Elkhart Cup, the contest was completely dominated by our Chrysler-engined C-4 Cunninghams. I led most of the way, although Phil took first away from me briefly with his C-4 coupe. The only other challenge was Phil Hill, in a new C-type Jaguar, who gave me a good chase until exhaust fumes (from a hole in the muffler) forced the hard-driving Californian to fall back. Walters took second, Briggs third, with Hill in for fourth. I was happy in that this marked my second consecutive main-event victory at Elkhart with a Cunningham. (In '51 it had been a C-2 model.)

During practice an amusing thing happened to Dave Garroway, the TV star and part-time competitor (in his SS-100 Jaguar). Dave then had his show in Chicago and came out to

Elkhart for the races. Loaded down with valuable camera equipment, he positioned himself close to the road on a narrow ridge between two sharp crests. He reasoned that this was the ideal spot to get close-up movies of the speeding cars with complete safety. (He could simply scramble down the ravine directly behind him if a car should come charging in his direction.)

During the first session of practice Phil and I—running close together—were exploring the maximum team potential, going as fast and hard as possible. Phil's car popped over the first crest, immediately breaking into a high-speed slide that appeared destined to end in Dave's lap—while I took to the dirt shoulder in a plume of dust, to avoid Phil should he spin my way. Dave's first glimpse of the two big Cunninghams thundering at him was more than enough. He didn't attempt to climb down the side of the ravine; he *jumped*, landing at the bottom in a tangle of briers, cameras, view finders, light meters and film cans. When he arrived back at the pits, some ten minutes later, he closely resembled Jeeter Lester in a remake of *Tobacco Road*.

4-

Then it was back to Watkins Glen for a try at bettering my pair of seconds taken the previous September. This 1952 event was estimated to have as many as a quarter of a million spectators—and their cars had been streaming into the Glen all that week. On Friday night the entire circuit was ringed by flickering campfires and makeshift tents, and space along the snow fencing was at a premium. By 3 **A.M.** Saturday the incoming cars had created a colossal six-mile traffic jam, blocking all roads leading into the town itself.

Practice was out of the question. The circuit could not be closed before the races, and a maximum of three slow laps just prior to the events had to suffice. Most of us toured around in family sedans, and any kind of real speed was impossible.

First on the program was the 53-mile Seneca Cup race, in

which I was to handle a new, white C-Jaguar for the factory. (And they must have expected something momentous, because the Jaguar chief himself, Sir William Lyons, was on hand all the way from England.) With its light aluminum body, tube chassis and factory-modified XK-120 engine, the car was capable of 150 mph when properly geared. And although I would probably not reach that maximum at the Glen I *would* be moving. George Weaver, in his blown 3-liter V-8 Maserati, looked like very strong competition—and I was still cautiously "feeling out" the C on the rough back roads away from the crowded circuit.

Weaver's thundering Maserati took an early lead as the pack was flagged off, and I found myself held up maddeningly by an incredible rule (in effect at that time): *No passing on the right.* I was forced to wait until someone who seemed to prefer the left verge finally wandered over, allowing me to get by. In the second lap the red Maserati was in sight and by the third I could begin to plan the tactics of passing. But following this close was distinctly upleasant, as choking blue clouds of Castrol from his exhaust enveloped me each time George mashed the throttle. It was not unlike driving through fog.

But I got by, coming off the stone bridge—thankful for the fresh air—and began to stretch out the Jag, letting her sing. This new C was a real beauty, and once I had become accustomed to the darting response of the wheel I was able to outdistance the remainder of the field, finishing with a winning average of 76.6 mph. (Weaver eventually retired his smoking Maserati.)

After the Queen Catherine Cup affair was over I again lined up on the grid, this time in the familiar C-4 Cunningham roadster. Our team had some solid competition in the ranks: Phil Hill in a new C-Jaguar, Brooks Stevens' fast Excalibur J, a novel V-8 Fiat-powered Siata, and no less than *eight* Allards. The start had been delayed by spectators crowding the turns, and it was 4:30 **P.M.** before the flag fell. Tragically, the contest was never completed. At the end of the second lap an

Allard went out of control and sideswiped a crowd of spectators in front of a street barrier. Several were injured, one fatally—a grim finale for the contest, which was promptly stopped. Watching a road race entails a certain amount of risk, but that risk is greatly compounded when circuit barriers are ignored and safety precautions disregarded. It is worse when the safety precautions are badly conceived, as they were there at the Glen in 1952.

The real causes, however, were impersonal. They were ignorance and inexperience. The sponsoring club, the town committee, the drivers and the police (who were arbitrarily placed in charge) permitted the spectators to crowd in too close to the road. In fact, incredibly, the injured spectators at the accident point were actually sitting on the curb! The club had asked that sidewalks and danger spots be completely cleared, as at Monte Carlo and other European street races. But others in charge did not see the necessity; after all, didn't traffic normally pass through these streets every day in perfect safety? And certainly the shopkeepers wanted the walks open for business during the afternoon of the race.

However, the sponsoring club was not entirely blameless. They increased the risk by enforcing impossible new regulations, designed to "improve" the existing rules. We were thus saddled with "No Passing" zones (even worse than "no passing on the right")—the idea being that the car arriving first at the sign marking the zone had the use of the whole road. It would have required a judge with a photofinish camera to determine who actually reached such signs first. In my opinion, it was this rule as well as the lack of spectator control that caused the accident.

Though this tragedy cannot be diminished, it remains the only spectator fatality in American road racing in recent decades—compared to hundreds who are drowned, shot, dropped off mountains, etc., each year. Spectating now appears to be an eminently safe diversion. In nearly all present-day events crowd control is well handled by the race organizers.

5.

In October, at Albany, Georgia, I entered the Sowega races at Turner Air Force Base, again driving for Briggs Cunningham. A total of 60,000 fans attended, and in contrast to the Glen, this airport course was exceptionally safe for all concerned, with wonderful crowd control throughout. The whole race weekend was gratifying to those of us who had been emotionally shaken by the spectator fatality at Watkins Glen. Here was an example of just how a firm authority—in this instance the Strategic Air Command—could intelligently conduct a race. (Oddly enough, I had been stationed at this air base some dozen years before when I had taken advanced training there as an Air Cadet. I found a few old acquaintances on the field and in the town—but now it seemed an entirely new world.)

We had a special team plan for this one at Sowega: I was to set a hot pace, driving all-out in an effort not only to wear down the competition but to find out just how much punishment this new Cunningham model could take prior to its forthcoming Le Mans appearance. Engine, brakes, transmission—all were to be severely tested and even abused at speed. If possible, I was to secure a full lap's lead, so that I could come in during the race for a tire change. Phil and Briggs would stay behind me, ready to make their move if my Cunningham faltered.

Marshall Lewis, in a Ferrari, roared out of the first turn clearly in the lead, and held this position for two laps. I caught and passed him in a series of fast lefts, but could only gain a 20-second maximum lead. At the end of one hour I stopped at the pits for a tire check, and was told to go right out again, that they were good for another 60 minutes. Meanwhile, Fred Wacker had taken the lead, with Lewis trailing. I passed the second-place Ferrari once more, but could only stay a few seconds ahead of him. Fred held the lead for several laps, but I was creeping up, gradually narrowing the distance

separating us. I was unintentionally balked on several occasions by slower cars, but finally inched past Wacker's Allard. Almost immediately he repassed, forcing me to rev to 5500 rpm (well over the usual limit) and abuse the brakes to get by him for the second time. Now the clutch was slipping badly between 4000 and 4500 rpm, and when I pulled into the pits for my next tire check I found Phil was there ahead of me, with plug trouble. Briggs was having his own worries with a locked transmission, so there were all three of our Cunninghams!

At speed again, I had to overtake Bill Spear's Ferrari, now the leader in this motorized game of musical chairs. Spear was not making it easy for me, completely ignoring my attempts to get by him—but I did nail him at last. Meanwhile, Lewis was back in the fight, pulling up rapidly to a point where he eventually repassed me. Freshly stimulated by the rarely used speed-up signal from our pit (which was a chalk-lettered MO, for "More!") I overrevved on the straights and punished the brakes in the corners, getting past Lewis again inside a slow left-hander. After all, my role was to win or blow up the car—and it began to look as if the latter would be the case. But with less than an hour of the race remaining I was able to increase my lead to 30 seconds by flagfall, ending one of the hardest sustained-effort racing battles I had ever fought and one which left me physically exhausted. Winning was indeed an unexpected pleasure, and the new C-4 had surely received its proper "shakedown."

However, the Cunningham supremacy in the United States was in serious jeopardy, as this event had demonstrated. We needed a new four-speed transmission, a stronger clutch and more power. Also the weight *must* be cut further if we were to challenge the lighter competition Ferraris and Jaguars. (The new Jaguars had passed me several times on the longer straights.) The tire wear had not been severe; I'd gone the distance on one set, but the car plowed heavily in the turns, another fault to correct. In all, much work remained to be done if Briggs wished to keep winning.

Le Mans, in June of '53, would tell the story.

I found a telegram waiting for me in the pits when I rolled in: Could I, it asked, leave immediately for Mexico City in order to compete with Mercedes-Benz in the Pan American Road Race?—Signed, Neubauer, Daimler-Benz, Stuttgart. Wonderful! This was the break I had been waiting for; and I dispatched a return wire to the effect that I would most assuredly be there.

The dream was a reality; I was to compete as an official member of the great Mercedes team. Now, my boy, I thought, you've got to go. Here is the real chance for anyone who imagines himself to be a race driver. Now you've really got to go! And I immediately began preparations for the trip to Mexico.

CHAPTER EIGHT

With the Three-Pointed Star in Mexico

I ARRIVED in Mexico City on October 20, 1952, to begin training with Mercedes for the third annual *Carrera Panamericana,* five days and nearly 2000 miles of speed over the jagged spine of Mexico.

Three weeks of practice didn't constitute an unusual pre-race program for the meticulous Germans, who undertook no endeavor without the intention—even the *obligation*—to win. Because of this Teutonic single-mindedness I found none of the mild horseplay that is associated with the American team, none of the beguiling indifference of the French, or the high enthusiasm of the Italians. Admittedly, this approach was most satisfying to me, as I have always regarded the essence of successful racing (aside from the showdown of the contest itself) as the deliberate reduction of chance.

Mercedes certainly adhered to this policy. They were always careful to profit by experience, with the result that *everything* was noted and filed for future reference. Thus, the road temperature gauges, the rainfall charts, the presence of the Bosch ignition expert, the specialized mechanics, the extra cases of tools; all were due to the simple fact that Mercedes remembered. They knew they had needed such items

and men in the past; they might well need them here. (In fact, before this race ended, Herr Neubauer decided that if Mercedes ran again in Mexico he would have his already large party *doubled* in order to insure the best possible future results.)

As for my being along, driving for the marque, the Mercedes directors obviously decided that my performance on the Ring in their new SL—plus my open enthusiasm for and knowledge of this event—merited my inclusion on the team. It was all a workmanlike, unemotional arrangement. I was there because Mercedes expected me to do well by them, and that was certainly my firm intention.

I recalled my frustrating experience in last year's Carrera, when a quick taste of spectacular success had abruptly ended as our Chrysler ground to a dead halt, so close and yet so far from the finish of the first day's run. Now I had what by reputation was the most dependable, the fastest machine in production, and if I failed with this instrument of victory it would be a personal failure.

From Neubauer through the regular team drivers, Karl Kling and Hermann Lang, and on down the line to the crewmen and mechanics, the attitude was one of almost dogged determination. And though we all worked closely together, very little social contact was involved—except for frequent command-performance dinners *en famille*. For Mercedes-Benz, racing was a stern, demanding business, and I could not help but admire their efficiency and coolness under pressure.

This year, in 1952, the total prize money amounted to the staggering sum of $85,579. For the sports car category, first place won $17,442; second $11,628; third $6977; fourth $4651; fifth $2907, and sixth to tenth a refund on the entry fee of $581.40. The standard category won slightly less. Added to this total were nominal prizes for the winners of each leg and special prizes for the highest-placed Mexican in each category. Nobody had much chance to make money, however, because the expenses of racing are tremendous. The Mercedes-Benz team could have done little more than cover transporta-

tion costs alone if it had won *all* the prize money in its category, which couldn't possibly happen. They transported from their factory in Germany three racing cars, one practice car, two passenger cars, two 31/^-ton trucks, several crates of spare parts and a personnel of about 35 people. However, they had more to win than the prizes. The honor and prestige brought to their name by a victorious team would boost the sales of Mercedes cars throughout the world. On the other hand, a fiasco would hurt them. (A private individual out to win this race would lay out a sum so close to the amount of the first prize that he might as well stay home—if it were not for the sport of a try.)

Two thousand miles in one direction on any continent covers a variety in climate and conditions, but in Mexico in November the changes from south to north are remarkable. From the steaming tropics of Tuxtla Gutierrez, where the race started, to the cool plateau of Ciudad Juarez, where it snowed the day of our arrival, the route climbs major mountain ranges to a height of almost ten thousand feet. The road was as varied as the locals who used it, from the full-skirted Indian matriarchs of Tehuantepec with their steady, level look to the Parisienne-like sophisticates of Mexico City. There were differences in engineering, surface materials and dates of construction. Sometimes an evenly paved section proved to have the texture of giant sandpaper and consumed tires at a fantastic rate. The road switched back and forth like the tightest Alpine pass and then ran arrow-straight for 40 miles, sometimes on the same day's run.

The event began on November 19, in Tuxtla Gutierrez in the extreme south of Mexico. The finest racing machines in the world—Ferrari and Lancia from Italy, the Mercedes-Benz of reviving Germany, Gordini, the pride of France, the English Jaguar—struck an exotic and incongruous note as they picked their way through the dusty streets among the indifferent burros, noisy mongrels and silent peasants. It was 6:30 in the morning and cool in the slanting rays of the sun, which

in an hour would bake the black road to Oaxaca, 330 miles to the north.

The cars lined up on the road at the end of town, rumbling, snarling or barking according to their design character and degree of tune. Drivers and crewmen were nervous from long preparation and eager to get under way. The starting positions were determined by the order in which the entries had been received, and the 87 starters stretched in a single file well back into the noisy, cluttered town. The crowds were solid on both sides and spilled out into the road, a mixture of Mexicans, *aficionados,* officials, friends, police, army, and dark Indians in their Sunday best. Helmeted crews moved in and out among the cars, trying to look unconcerned while they appraised their competition.

The word flashed down the line that the road was cleared, as it would be for the entire race. The special Cadillac, entered by the son of outgoing President Aleman, was flagged away with a wild cheer, and the race was on. Now, a minute apart, the others followed: a modified Jaguar coup£ with a U. S. crew, my teammates Hermann Lang in a silver Mercedes-Benz coup£, Karl Kling in a similar car, the Mexican 2.6 Ferrari of Echevarria, myself in the open Mercedes, another Jaguar driven by the Mexican engineer Letona, the Italian Bracco in the ex-Ascari 3-liter Ferrari which had won the Mille Miglia race in Italy. Farther back, world champion Ascari, his countrymen Villoresi and Luigi Chinetti, all in bright red Ferrari model "Mexicos" built especially for this race, waited their turn. Americans Jack McAfee and Phil Hill, both from California, sat in their comfortable Ferrari coupes, 4.1 and 2.5 respectively. Manzon and Behra in 2.3 Gordinis, Bonetto, Cabianca and Maglioli in supercharged Lancias, Ehlinger in a Jaguar, Ibarra in a Ferrari and Prince Metternich and Graf von Berckheim in their little German Porsches, awaited their turn.

When the flag dropped for me I eased away gently, remembering many historic and classic embarrassments, stripped gears and broken axles at the starting line. At the cost of a

second, I wanted to save the car for the many hard days and the punishing miles ahead. The road was almost impossible to see in the crowd swarming our path, but in a few minutes we were clear of the town, alone with the elements of the struggle set for us: the willing and responsive car, the road, the big sky and the beautiful, barren Mexican landscape.

In a few miles we overtook the 2.6 Ferrari that had started just ahead of us and in another five miles passed the special Cadillac, climbing the first of many mountain ranges. We then passed the Jaguar coupe, No. 2. These, and all the other drivers we passed, held to the extreme right and waved us by with a sporting gesture. Competitors in a race for high stakes, they all observed with the greatest care the letter and spirit of the rules.

At a prearranged signal from my mechanic, Eugen Geiger (he spoke no English and I no German), I slowed for the one-way frame bridges with their pairs of narrow wooden tracks. Below them were rough crossties we took care to avoid. We dropped into a valley between two mountain ranges; the outside turns overlooked dense white cloud instead of the green valley, and a moment later we were groping through the cloud at touring speed. We could see only a short stretch of road ahead, and it seemed to rush at us faster: curves, bridges and crowds from the isolated villages loomed out of the mist suddenly, alarmingly. Twenty miles later we broke out into clear sunlight again and a silver Mercedes-Benz coup£ slipped over the horizon a mile ahead. It was Lang, and a few moments later he signaled us to pass. Some miles farther on, Kling, my other teammate, and I were yards apart on a fast section. Both engines were straining at their limit and I was unable to pass until he deliberately slowed and waved me on.

The "unoccupied" part of my mind told me that we must now be leading the race, unless someone starting after us was gaining time on our position. A series of fast straights and an unpredictably undulating surface sent us sailing through the air every mile or so. On one of these, we felt a sudden, stun-

ning shock; the steering seemed to go soft and the whole car shook itself as though the crankshaft had broken. And this at 140 mph on a high-crowned, rough road! Fighting to maintain control, I eased in the clutch and tentatively touched the brakes. In a moment the violent shaking eased, and in another the wild swerving from shoulder to shoulder was under control. We jumped out to find the right rear tire completely naked of rubber, the body for two feet front and rear of the wheel bent and torn by the lashing tread. We changed the wheel with more energy than speed as Kling repassed, and I pointed to the discarded tire to warn him. A moment before we restarted, Bracco whistled by with a cheery wave.

The car was not right. Its rear shifted and hopped in the curves and wandered on the straights. We stopped again and found that the torn body behind the wheel had cut through the cord of the new tire. We changed again at the roadside, going on with no spare. The car handled so badly that, late as we were, we stopped to have another look. No cause of the fault could be seen. Deciding it was structural—or at least impossible to repair on the road—we went on, hoping to make speed enough to remain in the race at the end of the leg, leaving extensive repair to the overnight stop.

One hundred and seventy miles from Tuxtla was our planned tire stop, and we pulled over, followed a moment later by Lang. Behra, in the tiny blue Gordini, sailed by with a wave and his usual expression of enjoying some great lark. Phil Hill passed, running steadily. We changed the rear tires, replaced our two spares and resumed the road just after Lang. We could not run fast on the straights for fear of throwing another tire tread, nor could we gain time in the curves, the damaged suspension shifting the rear of the car unpredictably to one side then the other. (That night we found that this trouble was caused by a broken shock absorber.) Next the clutch began to slip and the brakes snatched.

About 30 miles from Oaxaca, looping tire marks ran to the very edge of a sharp left turn in what could only have

been an uncontrolled slide. Someone had survived a close one. We repassed Hill in the 2.5 Ferrari as he changed tires. Lang came into sight ahead as we approached Oaxaca.

We coursed through the last miles hedged solid with crowds, passed the checkered flag and stopped at the large Diesel truck with the Mercedes-Benz sign, amid wild cheers for what we felt was an indifferent performance. The mixed crowd with its peculiar form of racing madness closed around us, 50 pairs of hands patting and pressing against the Mercedes and plucking at our clothes. We had been racing for four hours; it was now almost noon and very hot.

Herr Neubauer greeted his team in high spirits, pleased, I guess, that his three cars had finished this difficult leg, although the highest placed was only third. Now the wise old tactician could appraise our position with the experience of the first leg, evaluate our weaknesses as well as our strengths, and perhaps create yet another victory for the marque of the three-pointed star. He still had three cars, hence three chances. He herded us together with his booming voice and sent us off to our prearranged garage. There, notebook in hand, he interviewed each crew, taking details of engine, chassis, tires, etc. What did we want changed? I wanted a new clutch, new right rear shock absorber, a new jack (ours stuck coming down), a wider windshield (to reduce severe wind buffeting) and the brakes cleaned. He assured me that most of these things would be done and explained the reasons why some would have to wait until we reached Mexico City. He did, however, allow me to use my limited metalworking skill in order to improvise some air scoops for cooling the rear tires. This employment of amateur talent on a Mercedes would have been unthinkable, except that all the team mechanics were already overloaded with the night's work. And, contrary to general conception, the supposedly "typical Prussian autocrat" was always very considerate of his drivers and their wishes. He felt that it was an important part of his job to keep them happy. In this case, I imagine he decided that I couldn't do much harm. (As it evolved, I didn't do much

good either!) Despite his sixty years he moved his great 300-pound bulk from car to car like a man of twenty, peering into engines and under chassis, summoning engineer Lamm and other specialists in a voice that drowned the clatter and talk of the noisy garage.

To the delight of Mexico's French colony, Frenchman Behra had won the first leg on the fast and maneuverable Gordini at 87-mph average. He alone among the highly placed had changed no tires. On this leg, Ascari turned over, Bonetto hit a mountain, Cabianca went out with engine trouble (bad luck after the long journey from Italy), Lang struck a dog yards from the start and threw a tire tread, Kling also threw a tread and took an enormous buzzard through the windshield, his co-pilot Klenk receiving a heavy blow, but minor injuries. Bracco changed two rear tires on his schedule and without further incident took second. Villoresi, Ferrari Mexico, was delayed by transmission troubles. Manzon, in the other Gordini, had broken down a few kilometers from the start. Chinetti and Metternich completed the leg without tire change. After Behra came Bracco (Ferrari), Kling (Mercedes), Maglioli (Lancia), McAfee (Ferrari), Chinetti (Ferrari), myself (in the Mercedes), Lang (Mercedes) and Hill (Ferrari).

At 6:30 **A.M.** the next morning we lined up for the two legs from Oaxaca to Mexico City; first to Puebla, 250 miles of breath-taking mountain road; then 81 miles, including the most dangerous and highest pass, at 9800 feet above sea level, from Puebla to Mexico City.

These mountain roads are among the most treacherous in the world. They climb and descend at an acute pitch, sometimes wheeling and reversing like nothing so much as a monstrous roller coaster, flanked by gaping crevices and sheer cliffs overhanging rock-strewn river beds often a thousand feet below.

It was in these mountains that three of the competitors had been killed in the previous year's race.

In contrast to the day before, there seemed to be very little tension this morning among the drivers awaiting the start.

Behra was at the head of the line, smiling acknowledgment to good wishes. Bracco was patting cheeks and grinning continuously in his characteristic way. Nice guy Villoresi, quiet Chinetti, serious Kling, affable Lang, big Jack McAfee, the picture of composure, Phil Hill a little anxious with an upset stomach—all were talking earnestly in scraps of Italian, French, English, German and pantomime.

It is at a time like this—just before a start—that one experiences a genuine, warm sense of camaraderie. Such moments are deeply moving and highly cherished among one's racing memories.

And so the start. Up a hill and out of town. We caught Chinetti within 30 miles, Maglioli in 50 and McAfee in the winding approaches to the mountains. He gave us plenty of room and an energetic signal to pass. This was a section of many fast, blind turns taken at 80 to 130 miles per hour. We hit 15 minutes of light cloud, which didn't slow us much, and then out into the clear sun again. We had a few frightening moments from crowds too close to the road and bullfight fans, matadorlike, dashing across the road just ahead of our deceptively fast car, but I felt we were going well and fast. And I was reassured by frequent tire checks through holes in the body made the night before. My mechanic could see the rear tire on his side with ease, but I was afraid I would lose him altogether when he climbed on the deck behind me to check my side. (Although he could not see the condition of the tread at this speed, he looked for the white line which would mean the tire was wearing through.)

Then we topped a hill in a fast, undulating valley run mostly at 120 to 130 miles per hour, and found disaster before us. A steep decline in a hidden gorge, then a quick switchback to the right over a bridge, and running straight off the road before the right turn were the black tire marks of locked wheels. Only Behra, Bracco and Kling were ahead, so it was one of the three. I could see nothing of the wreck; the same emergency that had caused it was occupying my own frantic attention. We slid straight under heavy brakes, then without

brakes slid the right turn, using the shoulder, and in a cloud of dust and flying rock regained the road.

We heard later that several cars left the highway on this turn. The crowds were dangerously close to the road into Puebla, where we stopped for our 30-minute layover for gas, tires, Coke and a cigarette. We learned that it was Behra who had crashed, with unknown injuries. (Santos Letona, a Mexican in a Jaguar XK-120, had hit a bridge and been killed.. His co-driver was in serious condition.) I had made the second-best time on this run; only Villoresi had beaten me, and the over-all order was now Bracco, Kling, myself, Lang, Maglioli, McAfee, Chinetti, Hill and Villoresi, still poorly placed from his delay of the first day.

The fast road out of Puebla was neatly lined with huge old eucalyptus trees making tunnels of shadow across the bright countryside. We soon approached the steepest, highest range of the race and began climbing hard toward Rio Frio. When we were halfway up, the red Ferrari of Villoresi appeared across a deep gorge on the rising shelf below us and flashed momentarily in the sun. Despite my best efforts he crept steadily closer, gaining a few yards on each short straight. Just as he came within passing range we hit a longer straight and he pulled smartly past, throwing back a shower of rocks as he cut the curve ahead. Tighter curves reduced the advantage of his more powerful, though heavier, car; and for several miles we ran nose to tail, the big Ferrari's brake lights warning me of the tighter curves ahead before I could actually see them. At this close range it was fascinating to watch Villoresi's precise control and polished style. Yards before a curve he would throw the big car into a near slide, maintaining the same drift throughout the curve with no major correction. He made no mistake and as the curves widened he pulled irresistibly away, soon disappearing in the shadows of the pine forest.

After this wild mountain ride we leveled off onto the plateau on which Mexico City stands. Great crowds along the road caused it to lose definition. Neither the shoulders nor

the ordinary road signs were visible, and approaching a curve all that could be seen was a wall of humanity with no apparent passage.

The makings of a disaster, Italian style, were all here waiting to be set off by a false move on anyone's part. The danger was real and I slowed down. Then the road opened up again, and about a hundred yards from the finish line on a very fast, wide straight, walled with people, a large brown dog ambled stubbornly toward us, snarling to the side where a policeman was pleading and threatening. With a chill, I swerved around him and passed the checkered flag for another finish—661 miles done, 1273 to go. The great race was a third done.

A motorcycle escort whisked us through the city thick with holiday crowds celebrating Mexico's revolution. This was Mexico's Fourth of July, and several hundred thousand people jammed the plaza and pressed around our cars, drumming on the sides as we passed slowly by.

At our garage, Herr Neubauer improvised his usual "office" —a table surrounded by camp chairs and boxes piled high with papers, maps and other data on the planning of the race. He conducted a general meeting at which drivers and mechanics pooled their ideas and experiences and a plan was worked out. Good Mexican beer was always a part of these sessions and very welcome after the dehydrating work of racing in this climate. Kling was, as always, serious and reserved, but positive in his ideas. In a group, Lang speaks softly, almost in a whisper, which quiets the assembly because everyone wants to hear what he has to say. Herr Neubauer quickly appraised the ideas (after so many years there is seldom anything new) and with loud good humor got everyone busy on his job of the moment. The final gearing was changed on Lang's and Kling's cars in preparation for the higher speed north of Mexico City. (My car had this gear from the start.) During our discussions Herr Neubauer was not concerned with the speed or capabilities of the other cars, and hardly ever mentioned them. The team's whole energy was directed to preparing our own machines, anticipating the need for tires,

parts, or special skills and otherwise arranging that our Mercedes would run as fast and dependably as they could regardless of the competition. I thought at the time that Mercedes would rather bring the three cars to the finish than win the race, if it came to a choice.

I roared away from Mexico City on the 267-mile leg to Leon in third place behind Bracco and Kling. Fifty miles out our good luck broke with the frightening crash and rattle of a thrown tread, and the alarming swerving and diving at the road's edge as speed was cautiously reduced. This incident had become as familiar as it was unpleasant. Lang passed as we labored and we signaled tire trouble to advise him to slow down. Somewhat resigned to our bad luck, we set out again, staying under 130, a snail's pace in this race with 10 minutes to overtake the leader, still the flying Bracco. We pulled up behind Lang just before the finish line in Leon, where we had a half hour to refuel, change tires and make any necessary repairs before starting the next leg to Durango, 330 miles north. This was a hectic session, because we had a serious tire problem that could ruin our chances. Kling had also thrown a tread with the "Monza"-type tire. In Leon we had nothing but the same thickness tires to replace the worn ones, and hence replace the problem, so I chose to run on the tires used from Mexico City. They were evenly worn and had lost some of the heavy tread. We were almost late—penalty: disqualification—and we took off, fastening helmets and adjusting goggles.

We went well, passed Lang, caught Kling and passed. Oddly enough, we could not stay in front of Kling. As soon as we were ahead our car seemed to slow in spite of the open throttle, and Kling repassed. This happened three times, so we fell back and followed at 200 yards, in spite of flying rock and sand. (I was glad of the leather mask I had made to fit under my goggles when a rock hit me a stunning blow square on the forehead!) We followed Kling into one of the fast curves, but had trouble getting through it, the car hopping sideways and steering erratically. On the straight again, it

shimmied as though the front wheels were out of alignment. We held 125: any faster and we would surely have gone off the road. The shaking became worse and we stopped to inspect, finding the left front tire badly worn. We went on another half hour at reduced speed and then changed tires while Villoresi passed. The shaking slowed us to 100 mph which seemed maddeningly like no speed at all. With two hours to go to Durango it meant we would lose 20 minutes or more. I was not sure we would make it at all. The slack in the steering became really alarming and I held my breath as we crossed a steep-sided earthen ramp. On the approach to the bridges I strained to aim the car accurately between the abutments; the rest was luck.

Chinetti passed (into third place) as we changed the left front tire again. It was worn through three plies on one side while on the other it was perfect, with half an inch of good tread remaining.

We passed Villoresi who was stopped beside the road looking worried. During a short burst of speed on a very smooth stretch, where the shimmy subsided, we repassed Chinetti. The smooth road soon ended; we slowed and Chinetti passed again. After what seemed an endless time we weaved down the final straight into Durango. Kling had also thrown a tread and after many strong expressions of our opinion of the tires (except Lang, who'd had no trouble), we learned that Kling had gained a minute on Bracco's time in spite of the tire delay and a slipping clutch. The diagnosis of my car's troubles was a loose spring hanger which threw the front end out of line. This did not seem logical because the A-frames and steering gear were independent of the spring hanger, as far as alignment was concerned. I expressed this opinion in limited German and the generous use of motions and put it out of my mind, assuming that the mechanics would deal with the matter in the manner for which Mercedes-Benz is famous. That night, after yet larger air scoops to cool the tires had been designed and executed, I found we would not have balanced

wheels for the next day's leg, the balance machinery being *kaput* in Mexico City.

Thirty miles out of Durango en route to Parral, 251 miles north, the vibration hit us again, shaking the car to the extent that it was unmanageable at top speed. With my high hopes of doing well completely shattered in this, my most important race to date, I dejectedly slowed again to about 120, my confidence gone in this particular machine. In a sudden angry impulse, I swore at Geiger and the Mercedes in English and what German and Spanish I knew, at the road and at all of Mexico! But soon, to my astonishment, we passed both Bracco and Kling at the roadside feverishly working, the first time in the race I had seen either of them detained by the delays that had plagued us. For a moment I thought luck was riding with us .. . but no, luck had only hitchhiked a few miles. Bracco, then Kling, repassed. Every few miles I shouted to Geiger that when we reached Parral he was to align the front end so it would stay put. Every time we took a fast bend that looked out onto blue sky—with no guardrail—I motioned that we might sail off any one of the curves and into the blue, in a kind of cruel reminder that he *must* get it right.

The long, exasperating run ended and we pulled into a large station behind Kling and Lang who occupied both stalls. I told Geiger to forget the tires—the other two mechanics would see to that—and to concentrate on the steering. He looked under the hood and under the jacked car, talking to the other mechanics. In a few minutes Lang and Kling were out and we pulled our car inside. I asked Geiger what he would use to measure the toe-in. He made an empty-handed gesture and said "Mexico," meaning that the measure was in Mexico City. I found a graduated stick used at the station to measure their underground tanks. I held the stick while he measured and when the steering rod was locked we started to the line 400 yards away. In this short distance it was apparent that the steering was worse. We had 12 minutes, so we returned to the station where the elder of the two mechanics on duty took the measure ... 20-mm toe-cut. He and the other

mechanic helped while Geiger reset and relocked the tie rod. With only seconds to spare we left again for the starting line. The wheel alignment was ridiculously off this time, the tires howling in protest at 30 mph! We could not complete 50 miles in this condition. Gunther Molter, the German journalist, who spoke fluent Spanish, was photographing the start and with him as interpreter I asked the official starters if we could take the flag for the next leg, beginning our lapsed time for the leg, and return to the gas station to complete repairs. They agreed to this and after being "flagged off" we returned to the station a second time, the steering gear feeling like rubber. The wheel alignment was 40 mm out—almost two inches.

After 15 minutes Geiger said it was near right (zero degrees), and we departed for the third time. We passed the starting line without stopping—they were now flagging off standard cars. The steering was not exactly right, but so much better that the slight wander seemed trivial. We hit the first right bend at a good speed and the car slid wide onto the shoulder. The left rear tire was low! Angry and discouraged at the oversights which had set us back from a sure second to our present fourth, I settled down to wait for the low tire to blow. And in about two dozen miles, at 145, the terrifying crash, rattle and wild swerving of the car announced the event. In about two minutes the familiar routine was finished. At speed again, Geiger looked through the tools at his feet with alarm. Whatever the trouble was, it was unlikely that I could do anything about it. I was almost contented with the pleasure of handling the now comparatively sound car through the bends and down the straights at a steady 135, the maximum I was willing to risk, everything considered. I had lost all confidence that the steering or the tire pressure was right. After so many miles and hours driving a misaligned car that day and the day before, I no longer had any faith in it. (I later found that the object of Geiger's search was the jack, left behind when we changed the tire. We would surely have been eliminated by another tire failure.)

A Ferrari coupe was pulled to the side of the road. As we

flashed by I recognized Bracco, one elbow on the top, chin in hand. With a wry smile, he waved us good-by. He was obviously finished. It was a heartbreaking end to a game effort, an independent entry representing his country and their best hope, Ferrari ... and under the strain of three Mercedes-Benz breathing down his neck for days running.

But Bracco was a man with a graceful flair for everything, including defeat, and his very stance told all with clarity: that he was finished, he was desole, but that he took pleasure in having done as well as he could—and that he would try again. He somehow conveyed all this as we swept by him at speed. My spirits rose to think I knew such a man.

We crossed the line into Chihuahua with a loss of 15 minutes for the leg. That evening I heard that the racing crowd was buzzing with talk that I would be disqualified for turning back from the start at Parral. Herr Neubauer had not arrived from Durango, but Kling and Lang felt that so long as I had obtained permission from the race officials at Parral it would be all right. About midnight I got a message to come to Race Headquarters, where the committee asked me what had happened. I told them and they said it was exactly what they had heard from Parral. The rules provide that repairs be made at the "side of the road" and I had violated them by leaving the course proper. The race committee could overrule the decision and void the permission of the officials at the start at Parral. They agreed to reserve decision until Herr Neubauer, as the representative of the Mercedes-Benz factory, could be present for the discussion.

We started the final day's run in fourth over-all, and as I had tested the car early that morning (and found it to be right at last) for perhaps six miles on the new leg, I thought I knew this stretch.

As often happens in this situation, I was too fast entering the curves and almost left the road. There were perhaps 40 miles of foothills with sweeping, wide hairpins. Just before coming out of these we caught Chinetti, co-driver Lucas waving us on by as Luigi concentrated on keeping to his side of

the rough road. Immediately after we passed him the road changed to the character it was to have most of the way to Juarez—straights of from one to four miles broken by fast curves, some of which could be taken at full speed. The problem here was that the high brush on the flat plain obscured the radius of the curves, and most of them could actually *not* be taken at full speed. For the next solid hour, Chinetti's powerful Ferrari would creep up to within passing range on the straights only to drop back again when we reached the spaced curves. Obviously, old-hand Chinetti was determined to finish this last surviving Ferrari Mexico, as he had finished many important races before. This was the best policy for him and he wisely stuck to it. The heaving of the road, which was negligible at touring speed, was sufficient at our speed to toss the car as though it were leaping off a shallow ski jump.

The weather report was snow at Juarez, and 50 miles out we ran into a cold and blustery cross wind which shifted the car across the road. Many small planes were pacing us into the finish, flying very low alongside our bouncing Mercedes. They came abreast by diving, but after a moment, engines straining, they dropped back, unable to keep the pace. We passed Lang, looking very uncomfortable in the turbulence caused by the loss of half the door on his side (it had blown away.) Thirty miles from Juarez we ran through dunes where the straights became shorter between curves, and the curves tighter. Stinging sand streamed across the road in the blast of cold wind, and sometimes the sand completely covered the surface.

From a few knots of cold-looking enthusiasts the spectators grew to crowd proportions, thicker and closer to the road until they completely closed it, opening a narrow passage at the last possible moment. I realized we would finish the leg without the troubles that had plagued us before. I wanted to make good time to exonerate our Mercedes, to demonstrate that despite our troubles it was a sound car. Almost unexpectedly, the finish banner loomed out of the blowing sand,

the checkered flag flashed—and the toughest race in the world was over!

Karl Kling had won, with a total elapsed time of 18 hours, 51 minutes and 19 seconds. Lang was second in the team Mercedes, some 35 minutes behind in over-all time, with Luigi Chinetti in for third with his Ferrari Mexico. Although I had crossed the finish line in second place behind Kling, my frequent tire changes and enforced slow running had accumulated a deficit of over-all time that dropped me down the lists to fourth over-all. Then came Maglioli (Lancia), McAfee (Ferrari), and Hill (Ferrari). Lincoln-driver Chuck Stevenson, who finished 41 minutes behind Hill, won his stock production class, and Johnny Mantz and Walt Faulkner made it a Lincoln threesome. These were the first 10 cars under the checker.

Suddenly, I was sorry it was finished. I was sunburned and windbeaten, tired and sore after five days of goading this Mercedes up the length of Mexico ... cold in mornings, hot at noon, hungry, thirsty and filthy from changing tires and tending the car with too little time. I pulled up beside Kling and in a moment Lang, who had repassed Chinetti, completed our trio. We were stampeded in the gray cold by handshakers, back slappers, interviewers, and photographers. A bottle of Mexican whiskey warmed us. For some reason, we had photographs taken with a lady bullfighter and a shivering singer from Detroit.

Herr Neubauer was elated. He smothered us with bear hugs and thundering congratulations. This was *the first German victory in the western hemisphere since Rosemeyer's in the Auto-Union at the Roosevelt Raceway in 1937.*

The cars themselves looked disreputable—the paint literally sandblasted away to the base metal, the bodies pocked by stones, dented by birds, and torn and bent by the flying treads which had become giant whips at speed.

The race had been many things to many people. Drivers of reputation tackled it with personal pride and determina-

tion; nationals from three continents for pride of country; soberly willful factory teams for prestige and profit. Businessmen from the States had found a fascinating hobby, and their faces shone with genuine satisfaction. Some of them took their racing vicariously, buying cars and sponsoring drivers, and captained their teams from the armchair of a chartered plane. One such gentleman had gambled big by buying the special Ferrari Mexicos of Ascari and Villoresi hours before the start at the Guatemala border. He wore a long face, but he would be back next year. (Only 39 cars had completed the race.)

I was pleased to hear that I had made the best time on this last leg and the highest average of the race for any leg, on the 230 miles into Juarez.

Ours was the winning team. And the three immaculate Mercedes that had bolted from the southern border five days before had, a moment ago—dirty and battered—crossed the finish line first, second and fourth—a real accomplishment, we felt, against 84 other competitors and everything this rugged country could throw against us. We had battled desert, wind, mountains, sun, fog, our cars and even ourselves to achieve the victory.

But bad news is quick in coming; I learned that my finishing position would not be recognized, nor would I receive any prize money. The official starters at Parral had been overruled, and I was disqualified. It was a bitter blow, but I felt that I had done my best with what I had been given to work with, and this bleak news could not wholly dim my pride or my sense of sharing in the Mercedes victory.

After the prize-giving and general ceremonies were concluded, I said good-by to Herr Neubauer, Kling, Lang, Geiger and to the other members of our team, and took a plane for New York. Of course Elizabeth had been following the race in the papers and she was pleased in the way of wives. But she was *more* pleased with the promise that I didn't plan to enter any more races for the next two months. With a new baby in the house she wanted to pretend, at least for a while, that we were a normal, settled family doing normal, settled things.

And that was fine with me; I'd had a good season and was quite willing to wait for the upcoming Monte Carlo Rally in January.

But, as we both realized, the intervening weeks would pass very quickly.

CHAPTER

NINE

Luck, Bad and Good

THE 23rd running of the world-famed Monte Carlo Rally started January 20, 1953, with the departure of some 440 cars (representing 20 countries) on a wild 2000-mile run from seven starting points spread across the Continent: Glasgow, Lisbon, Munich, Oslo, Palermo, Stockholm and the sunny dreamworld of Monte Carlo itself.

They would crisscross routes from Norway to Italy to Spain and Greece, comprising more than a thousand adventurous citizens in their Ford Zephyrs, Jaguars, Panhards, Citroens, Renaults and Sunbeam-Talbots, battling ice, cold, snow—and the clock. The arrival times were governed by an official *average* speed (which included all stops) of 31.5 mph. Not very fast, you say? It was an easy pace on the main roads and across level valleys, but 31.5 mph over snowbound goat trails snaking through high mountain passes was frequently more than even the first-rate Grand Prix drivers could achieve, and the regulations were so enforced to insure that there could be no racing ahead in order to "take it easy" in the mountainous sections. The scattered check points along the route took care of that.

This annual rally has different meanings for different people. The rationalized acceptance of a 2000-mile dash around Europe in the dead of winter has its basis in a

mental attitude that might take some explaining to the great majority of Americans to whom a car is primarily a luxurious means of transportation—a method by which one can reach point B from point A in utter creature comfort. Not so with the Europeans. Almost all regard a car—any ear-as an instrument in the grand sport of motoring. Successful marques are as famous as champion race horses and, of course, their drivers are given the kind of attention usually reserved for movie stars in the States. The auto in Europe is far less common and more difficult for the average citizen to own than here in the U. S. Hence it has retained its "uniqueness." Even those who use automobiles daily in Europe appreciate the privilege of driving, and a facet of their pride leads them to try to understand it, to develop their own skill at the wheel. Therefore, among the hundreds of participants in a rally like the Monte, you will always find a scattering of businessmen and housewives who are anything but professional racing drivers. Once or twice a year they simply decide to put their automotive skill to the test, much as certain Americans enter a horse show. To Europeans "the Monte" makes perfect sense and thus it has become an institution.

I was handling another Sunbeam-Talbot for Rootes in this rally, sharing a car with Peter Collins and John Cutts. Since the contest would be run nonstop we needed three men: one to drive, one to navigate, while the third slept. In character, the Monte closely resembles the Alpine—which I am covering in detail in another chapter, so I shall not go into the day-by-night description at this stage, other than to say that only 253 of the 440 cars arrived in Monte Carlo without loss of marks, and ours was one of these. (We were subsequently awarded badges for having completed the 2000-mile course without penalty.)

But back in Monte Carlo after three days and nights on the road, we ran out of luck. In the braking and acceleration tests, a spectator affair on the harbor quay, we were eliminated. In one of these tests a competing car must accelerate 225 yards, stop abruptly at the end over an electric timing

strip, back up over the strip, then proceed forward again for an additional 55 yards, all with a cold engine and gearbox. (The cars have been in a sealed area all night and are not allowed to be properly warmed; that is part of the trial.) Nerves, cold power plants, improperly adjusted brakes—in some cases, none at all—were items to be overcome if the competitors were to qualify among the "best 100" in order to enter the regularity run, the final leg of the rally. This 50-mile test was like a miniature rally in itself, with special check points over the mountains ringing Monte Carlo.

Well, we didn't make that final run, due to the fact that our overworked gearbox balked at the reverse gate (for one-half secondl) and we were forced to retire. "Monte Specialist" Maurice Gatsonides from Holland was the over-all winner in a Ford Zephyr. It had been a fine experience nonetheless, and I looked forward to the Alpine in July with keen expectation.

Before leaving the subject of the Monte, however, I might mention one rather amusing incident that took place en route. The most fun of the entire rally, to many drivers, is the run into and out of Paris, led by police motorcycle escort. Here the competing cars weave at a breakneck pace through the crowded French traffic with every gendarme in town happily waving them on. Traffic lights are ignored and one side of the road is just as good as the other—so long as a space exists for a hurtling sedan with a number on it to squeeze through. For the driver, this stretch is great sport; for the navigator and co-pilot it is a nerve-shattering encounter with near disaster. Peter was at the wheel into Paris, with John and me hanging on grimly, our jaws set. I recall muttering: "Well, it seems *we're* going to end our rally right here in Paris, wrapped around a lamp pole." It was obvious that Cutts agreed with me.

On the way *out* of town, it was my turn to drive. I determined that I would not follow Peter's example, yet proceeded to enjoy myself, while being, in my estimation, very careful and sensible about the whole thing. Now, I thought, this is more like it. Just about then a green-faced John Cutts

tapped me on the arm. "Look, old man," he said levelly, "I really don't see any point in *deliberately* wrecking usl" And Pete nodded his stern agreement.

Which goes to prove that it all depends on where you're sitting. Drivers are always bland optimists while passengers are chronic pessimists, and thus will it ever be!

2.

Although I won the main event at Tampa, Florida, in February, Phil Hill, in his Ferrari, put up a determined fight, almost defeating our Cunningham team. The big cars had been consistent winners over the past two seasons in the States, and the crowds were clamoring to see a new marque in the victory circle. Actually, the Cunningham had almost reached the limit of its development, and recent victories had been a combination of tactics and luck, rather than inherent superiority. The crowd was soon to be satisfied.

Briggs himself had driven a small Italian Osca in this race to good effect. Unobtrusively, and steadily, he paced behind the "big iron" to win the handicap and the handsome Collier trophy (at a 77-mph average).

3-

Just two weeks after Tampa most of the same competitors journeyed to the geographical center of Florida's semitropical peninsula, Sebring, for the annual 12-hour international contest, counting for the first time toward the World's Championship for Sports Cars. The most interesting new entry was the DB3 Aston Martin team from England, with top drivers Peter Collins, Reg Parnell and George Abecassis.

In contrast to our shoestring *equipe* in 1950 (when I had shared a class victory with Coby Whitmore in his XK-120 Jag) the big Cunningham was immaculately prepared by a sizable, highly competent crew. Our chances looked good, though only one of our team cars could be spared from the major

effort we intented to make at Le Mans that June. Both Phil Walters and I were to alternate on the C-4, with Phil first aboard at the beginning of the race.

The 5.2-mile course was about half airport runways, with some fast bends and two straightaways (each just under a mile), and half roadway, with two sets of very sharp alternate left and right corners, plus a slow hairpin. It was marked with steel oil drums, luminous arrows (about half the race was run in darkness), and padded with hay bales.

When the starting thunder of 48 racing machines had rolled away across the plain, Phil had dodged through a large part of the pack to take first place, hard pressed by Peter Collins in the Aston Martin DB3. With another car in reserve, Collins tried to entice Walters to overextend our single team entry. Walters was aware of the game, but his racing blood enticed him into a faster pace. Part of Collins' battle of wits was to make it appear easy. Thus Peter would drift to within inches of the steel barrels with a forced smile on his face or hastily recover a near broadslide in the slower turns while chewing his gum with careful regularity.

When his stint was up, Phil came in for tire changing and refueling and I took over the C-4. We were running second now—and what could be better! A hot sun in a clear sky, a fast machine behind, another one ahead, a happy car under me, and nine hours of racing to find the winner.

But luck had already deserted some of the competitors: The Ramos-Cumming Allard J2X was burning in a field beside the road, and the Excalibur was in the pits with the entire right side of the car washed out. Those steel oil drums were obviously substantial!

The Hill-Spear Ferrari got into trouble when a brake lining parted from the shoe and locked up a wheel. The runaway car struck out across country with Hill at the wheel. In a field of high weeds, an old stone house foundation disembowled the 2.7—but Phil escaped.

Now the road section was getting slicker in the groove of the turns, as hay bales and barrels close to the desired line

were displaced by incidents that left their mark, the sweeping black lines of rubber under duress.

The pits signaled me "Position First"—and I learned later that the leading Aston had gone out with a damaged axle with world motorcycle champion Jeoffrey Duke at the wheel. For three hours I looked for Abecassis in the remaining Aston in each batch of cars I passed, across the waste of airport in traffic traveling in another direction and, very carefully, in the rearview mirror. But I never saw him and as our pit was happy with laps of about 4:04, I deferred to their superior perspective and held that pace.

At half distance, Walters took over in the Cunningham and later brought the big car in at something after 9 **P.M.**, a flat tire flapping in the breeze, but still in first place, followed by the second Aston shared by Parnell and Abecassis. Walters and Parnell had been going as steady as trains, each understanding that the race could be won or lost by a whim of fortune. Never more than four minutes separated them. Meanwhile, young Dick Irish, driving the battered Excalibur, burned out the differential. (He won the sportsman's award for pushing that sizable machine two miles to the pits, arriving in a state of complete exhaustion.)

The lights had come on as the fierce sun settled, bringing a degree of coolness to the torrid air. It was still warm enough to leave the pit crews limp after their frantic work during pit stops, and everyone welcomed the night.

I was out again as soon as the flat tire had been changed. Frankly, I was lost during the first laps in the moonless evening, twice mistaking a fast bend for a slow one (luckily not the reverse) on the airport stretch. Probably for the same reason, a tiny Siata dived out of a turn between the barrels, perhaps anticipating that the formidable Cunningham, bearing down with 51^-liter thunder, was overtaking too fast to avoid him.

Our pit signaled that the Aston Martin, with Abecassis at the wheel, was 2 minutes 38 seconds behind, and gaining two seconds per lap. I delayed braking and ran faster through

the turns. There was no signal for a few laps, so I decided that was the pace they wanted, and concentrated on more of the same—trying to keep in mind that the tires had to last until midnight. Even at this late hour, one pit stop could decide the race. Going through a fast bend on the road section, I saw Carroll and Pearsall's Jaguar resting upside down where it had rolled when a brake locked. Pearsall literally tunneled himself out through the soft sand, escaping without injury.

The pit now signaled me 4:04 for the lap, then 4:02, 4:01, 3:59, 4:00, until 3:58 came up with the postscript, EZ. Just then a fast car appeared ahead with what was obviously a bent driving light shining directly to the side, brilliantly sweeping the road's edge and the wide airport. The extreme travel of its soft suspension as the bright taillights floated over the bumps suggested a de Dion rear axle and that suggested Aston Martin and Abecassis. It was the first time I had seen the car although we had been running first and second for many hours. It accelerated well, the braking was late but positive; it had an excellent turn of speed on the straights, and it held the road superbly. The car was fascinating to watch-but the pit had spoken (EZ). I began to favor the brakes again and lost sight of the shifting red lights ahead.

After so many hours on a closed course, every variation of the surface becomes second nature. I found myself speculating on Abecassis' plans for the Aston Martin. Suddenly, I was stunned into attention. I had been rounding a familiar turn in the usual way only to find a hay bale obstructing the line of travel, just nudged there by the preceding car. I slipped by it, but on another sharp left there was a case in point; a huge mound of broken hay bales spilled out on the road. In the ditch, the hood and racing screen of a Morgan were just visible in a sea of hay. (It looked hopelessly stuck, but a few laps later it was gone.)

Time dragged during the last hour and it seemed that all clocks had gone wrong at the same time, but of course they hadn't. At exactly midnight, a bright rocket with a showering

burst signaled the end of the race, and our car had won. We were roundly congratulated by the losing Aston Martin team, and told them we were sorry that it couldn't have been a tie to reward their fine performance, but the Astons could hardly have had a better result than first in class with second on distance and on formula both. They were fine cars, and their drivers had all the skill and will to win, but the Cunningham was just that little bit faster. Two Jaguars were third and fourth, with Briggs finishing in fifth spot in his Italian Osca. This was the same car in which he had won the Collier Memorial Trophy in the handicap race two weeks earlier. After his scheduled pit stop at **8 P.M.**, there had been some doubt as to whether a hub had been tightened and there was much nail biting until he could be brought in again to check it. But it *had* been tightened and Briggs did extremely well, outdistancing another Jag and a pair of Ferraris.

4-

Shortly after Sebring, Donald Healey and I visited George Mason, president of the Nash Corporation at the big Nash plant in Detroit. We had discussed entering a prototype Nash-Healey in Italy's thousand-mile road race, the Mille Miglia, and wanted to confirm the details at the factory. (Actually the production model of this car was Nash-powered with Italian coachwork and a chassis built in England. A truly international combination!) Mason agreed to our plans and I flew on to Torino, Italy, where I discovered that our car had not yet arrived from England. In the meantime, I was provided with a big Nash Ambassador sedan in which to practice the route. I'd met ex-world champion Nino Farina earlier; he was touring the course in a C-Jag when he broke an axle. He now asked if he might accompany me in the Nash, to which I hastily agreed. Always an unhappy passenger, particularly with another driver practicing for a race, my decision proved a bit *too* hasty. As it happened, Nino drove two-thirds of the way while I took notes on certain deadly hazards (blind turns,

narrow bridges, etc.). Lacking the time to make any kind of comprehensive log of the dangerous spots I was forced to mark down only those I considered *extremely* perilous, of which there were a sobering number.

The ride back from Florence to Torino with Farina at the wheel was an unsettling experience. It seemed to me that we had a hundred close calls in the American sedan, which was very large for Italian roads, and we were continually dodging bicycles, motorcycles, trucks and pedestrians. Though I had picked up many good points from Nino, who knew the Mille Miglia well, I was very relieved and a little surprised to arrive safely in Torino.

I made a second tour of the circuit in the Nash before the prototype machine arrived in Brescia (just three days prior to the start of the event).

I was staying with Mille Miglia founder Count Aymo Maggi, in his lavish old villa just outside town, and I enjoyed some fantastic parties with Collins, Moss, John Wyer (of Aston Martin), Reg Parnell, Abecassis and John Heath—along with assorted cosmopolite camp followers (not to forget "Wacky" Arnold in his shiny Texas boots!).

When I finally tested the Nash-Healey, I found that the rear brakes were not functioning properly. With these adjusted I next "promoted" a set of Pirelli tires all around, for a better road grip. Although the car was capable of about 140 mph, I realized that it would never be among the winners that year. (It was far too heavy and big to succeed in the Mille Miglia.) But it *did* give me my first chance to drive in the fabulous contest.

The Mille Miglia has always been the one occasion when the not-so-latent racing madness of Italy is given full reign. Especially at this time, everything that moves on Italy's roads is an instrument of the sport of racing. Every vehicle (including tiny Topolinos and trucks) that can resist being overtaken does, in fact, resist; speed is increased gradually as the battle warms, until a full-blown race is under way, dust and gravel flying from shoulders cut across both sides of the

road; top speed is freely used through hapless villages, with car horns blasting and lights flashing. In such an atmosphere it is not surprising that the Mille Miglia, or Thousand Miles, is an Italian institution, as appropriate in its setting as the Fourth of July.

Some 600 cars of every description, ranging from hammering Diesel saloons to pure racing machines devoid of any amenity save the bare apparatus of speed, would depart, at one-minute intervals, the swarming streets of Brescia in the north, past Lake Garda to Verona, that living museum of stone, across the Po valley past Dante's grave in Ravenna, down through the Adriatic's coastal playgrounds (the fastest cars approaching 185 mph) to the white amphitheatre of Ancona, and Pescara where the leader's speed would *average* 118. (This over ordinary Italian roads, probably the most treacherous in the world, jogging through cities and innumerable villages in which speed is often reduced to 30 mph for sharp corners in streets like canyons. The road is closed but so much traffic is difficult to control; bicycles and farm carts edge along the shoulders, people, like chickens, prefer the other side, and worst of all, the black mass of solid humanity near the cities leaves an uncertain weaving gap for harassed drivers to rocket through.)

The route swings west over the sun-baked Apennines, across an eerie, desolate plateau where engines shriek at top revs, then twists down to the outskirts of majestic Rome, swarming in a haze of heat. Here the road swings north for the chassis-killing thrust to Siena, over the Futa and Raticosa passes to medieval Bologna, bristling with angular towers. Back on the level Po Valley the final test at top speed is a strain for tiring machines, minds and muscles. Then, finally, back into Brescia again for the end of the race: surely one of the most severe tests ever devised for men and cars (and a few enterprising women).

(Recently the race has been modified considerably, allowing only the smaller, slower cars to compete—and though I hate to see any classic die, I do feel that modern racing ma-

chines have outgrown these narrow roads. I agree with driver Piero Taruffi, who won the great Italian race in 1957, that such dangerous, outdated road contests must be abandoned for the over-all good of the sport.)

We put on something of an unrehearsed show for the massed spectators at the beginning of the race that year. It seems that John Gibson, the British racing official, had kindly consented to guide us through the confusion of our first Mille Miglia start. Just before dawn, moving between rows of gesturing Italians, we pushed our car slowly toward the starting ramp. Gibson had removed the ignition key-in order to prevent some playful urchin from snatching it, as has often happened at this stage to other unfortunate competitors. The trouble was, as I climbed into the cockpit preparatory to driving up the ramp, no one could find the missing key. John coolly attempted to calm us, saying quietly as he fished through his many pockets, "Now, we know we have it here somewhere, don't we? It's no good getting in a flap about it."

At last the key was found, and I hurriedly put it in the ignition. As the starter ground away, there was an ominous *bloomp* up front. Smoke curled from the air scoop and paint began to peel from the aluminum hood. The engine was on fire! Combined with the accumulated nervous tension of the race, this new crisis completely unstrung me. Since the hood was latched and strapped down, our only hope was that the engine might catch, sucking the flames harmlessly into the carburetor. After several agonizing moments, with the starter grinding, the engine coughed into life, and we were all right again. Seconds later we were at the top of the ramp, immensely grateful that the "Chinese fire drill" which we had just unwillingly performed was actually over—and no damage done.

The cars were being flagged away individually at one-minute intervals and my British mechanic and I were among the last to go. We plunged off the starting ramp just as dawn was breaking over the rooftops of Brescia, and almost imme-

diately a whining sound told me that we were in for some back-axle trouble. We reached 120 mph just beyond town and the whining subsided somewhat, but this was a depressing state of affairs. Barely out of Brescia and in trouble already!

Some 150 miles farther on, just past the first high-speed straight on a winding road through lush farm country, we approached an 80-mph turn. When I attempted to brake for it, the pedal went completely to the floor. Since we were moving too fast to downshift, I frantically swung the wheel, sliding the car from one side of the road to the other, barely getting through the turn with a wild screech of tires. We rolled to a stop in a convenient farmyard and I told my riding mechanic what I thought was the trouble: "Broken brake line." We discovered the source of the leaking brake fluid and devised a ramp of planks to raise the rear wheels, all the while being watched in openmouthed wonder by an audience of farmers and their children, who seemed fascinated by the sight of an American racing car. One of the older children asked me how much I would sell the Nash-Healey for, and I immediately had a figure in mind: "Two lire." At this, they practically rolled on the ground.

We crudely refitted the broken line but it was slow work with our few tools; then I slid back inside the car and tried the pedal. Again, under pressure, it went all the way to the floor. We decided to bend the line over where it had broken near the rear axle and hammer it flat, going on with only the use of our front brakes. This we did, replacing the lost fluid and getting back into the race. But we had lost so much time during our repairs that the roads were again being opened for normal traffic. We found ourselves narrowly avoiding cars, cycles and honking trucks. The front brakes were spongy and after several near crashes we abandoned the chase and turned back to the starting point in Brescia. To continue would have been patently foolish, and we might have killed someone if we tried, most likely ourselves.

In all, it had been a brief and disappointing venture, but I flew back to the States with the determination to re-enter

this race the next year and do better. (Which is what all racing drivers tell themselves on such occasions.)

5-

An old dream of mine, racing in the Indianapolis 500-mile classic in my home town, came close to reality in May, when I was offered a chance to drive the Brown Special. I am indebted to "Browny"—the Indiana Chrysler dealer who owned the car—for the experience of the Brickyard, and for the satisfaction of having passed the driver's test there. I'd driven a variety of cars on many of the world's road courses and I naturally wanted to compete at Indianapolis, one of the most important and famous of them all. But, as I was to learn for myself, there is a vast difference between road and track racing, and between the machines developed for each type. In previous years other notable road-racing drivers had discovered the same thing, among them Louis Chiron, Gigi Villoresi and Alberto Ascari (and, more recently, Juan Fangio).

The basic technique is different: Road-racing machines "break away" or drift at an angle farther from their line of travel than do Indy cars. Therefore, they are not pointed in the direction of travel as closely as the track cars. With its softer suspension and treaded tires, a road-racing machine is quite controllable in this drifting attitude, while the Indy car will drift much less, the rear wheels following almost directly behind the front. The wide, near-bald Indy tires and the stiffer suspension tend to get a better bite on the Brickyard. And they are carefully "jacked" by uneven spring rates, to carry more weight on the right front and left rear wheels, thus favoring the uniform left-hand turns at Indy. I was advised by my old friend and fellow driver Duane Carter, who was experienced at Indy, that the chirping sound of the tires in a semidrift meant that I had better straighten out, or expect to spin. (I gladly followed this practice, and found it to be characteristic of the better drivers there. They never allowed their cars to get badly "crossed-up" on the oval.)

The effect of this extra traction on me personally was that my entire racing experience became inapplicable. I approached the turns at Indy at speeds that would have carried me off the circuit in a wild slide had I been driving a sports car. However, when bearing into the turn itself, the car refused to drift. It tracked neatly in line or (most unnerving!) slid toward the very solid cement wall. Villoresi remarked after his Indy drive in '47 that a road-racing driver needed to have at least one "500" behind him—having acquired complete familiarity with the special technique—before he could hope to turn the trick at the Brickyard. (Ascari climbed up to 12th place before he crashed in '52, and Fangio, after passing his driver's test in '58, did not attempt to qualify, stating that he felt he had no real chance in the race itself without more practice there.)

I received plenty of help and good advice in my tryout that year. Mauri Rose, Sam Hanks, Bob Sweikert, Fred Agabashian and Bill Vukovich were all very helpful. I'd met "Vuky" in Mexico when he was down for the Carrera, and found him to be a very decent fellow under his tough, brash exterior. Fred Agabashian was not only a fine driver, but was really hospitable to this "outsider"—highly competent and very articulate in his explanation of certain points he thought I should know about.

After I passed my driver's test (a lengthy and somewhat involved process in which a certain number of laps must be taken at varying speeds under official scrutiny), I took out the Brown Special for my qualifying runs. The best I could average was 133 mph—and the minimum required to make the grid that year was just over 135. Sweikert then took out the car and returned to the pits after a slow lap to suggest several modifications, including a lower gear ratio and stiffer shocks. The Brown Special was not typical of most Indy cars; it employed independent front suspension (the rule is a straight front axle) and the box frame was built of aluminum alloy sheet. The car was simply too flexible, shuddering vio-

lently on the rough bricks of the front straight, with the front wheels dancing a jig in the turns.

Time was running out, and Sam Hanks suggested I try Ray Crawford's new Kurtis-Kraft. Crawford had not passed his driver's test that year and sportingly left his car in Sam's charge for any other driver Sam wanted to put in it. (Ray was back the following year to pass his test and figure prominently in many subsequent events.) Though I liked the feel of the newer, lower car much more, I had just seen Chet Miller killed at the tricky southwest turn and I was in no mood to try anything spectacular with a strange car in a form of racing that was foreign to anything I had done in the past.

Thus, in the eight laps I was allowed, my times still did not quite reach 135. The Kurtis was taken over by former Indy winner Bill Holland, who qualified it among the fastest of the day. (Bill later confessed that the "reducing-machine effect" of the steering had numbed his hands in three laps. But he decided to go ahead and run the car in the race itself, which he did, finally retiring with mechanical trouble.)

I was, of course, disappointed at not making the grid, but I had learned a lot on the bricks. Primarily, I had acquired an insight into American track racing, the people, the problems, the cars—and I had a great deal of new respect for this form of competition. But I also realized that it would be foolish of me to take time out from the busy world of road racing—to make the intense effort necessary to learn this specialized technique, for the sake of one race a year. Indy was admittedly not my cup of tea, exciting and interesting though it had been. I personally preferred the complexity and variety of road racing.

My good friend Zora Arkus-Duntov—a man of undoubted wisdom—once summed up the Brickyard with these words: "Indianapolis is like a violin with only one string, but on this string you must be a virtuoso."

I had no time to brood over Indy; I would need to catch a plane out at once in order to meet Elizabeth, our young Johnny and a truckload of baggage at the dock. Destination:

Paris. Briggs had assigned a new C-5 Cunningham (200 pounds lighter than the C-4, with engine and chassis modifications) to Phil Walters and me for Le Mans in June. I was glad to be returning to familiar ground, and the unique challenge of a full day and night of all-out effort on the difficult Sarthe Circuit. Hope springs eternal—and we had reason to think that this was to be a Cunningham year at Le Mans.

CHAPTER

TEN

Twenty-Four Hours at Speed

WE SAILED for Le Mans on May 26, 1953, on the *Queen Mary:* Elizabeth, myself, both our mothers, Johnny (now a big boy of two), Briggs and Lucy Cunningham, their daughters, several mechanics, motoring journalist Tom McCahill and his wife—and Joe, Tom's handsome black retriever, who was a real sports car fan. It was a grand party.

Landing in Cherbourg on the 31st of May, we rented a small apartment in Paris, having moved in our 15 pieces of luggage, a stroller for the baby, and assorted household items. Leaving in early June via a Sunbeam-Talbot sent to us from England for the summer, I went on to Le Mans. Elizabeth trained down to join me later that month for my third attempt in the famous 24-hour contest.

The 1953 event was remarkable for the number of factory teams participating. Stakes were high, and to the victor belonged the spoils of zooming sales all over the world. Some 20 factories, many with names as old as the motorcar itself, accepted the trial and engaged every weapon of engineering skill, technique and tactics at their command to gain the victory. Their directors, not insensitive to the many-sided lure of the sport, ordered the exploitation of every novel device and method which could contribute to the performance of their cars.

On the morning we left town in the growling Cunninghams for the circuit itself the roads were crammed with people, shouting and waving cheerfully as we rumbled along at low revs. We had to be at the pits by noon to empty our tanks, put the three cars through a final inspection, and refill each tank with 60 gallons of the authorized gasoline in the presence of the officials who would then seal the caps.

There were 300,000 fans altogether at the Sarthe Circuit for the big race this year. These people are unique in motor sport. They have an extraordinary knowledge, backed by a kind of sixth sense concerning the potentialities of the competing teams. They knew as well as we that Italy had the strongest threats, but they didn't discount the sleek Jaguars. And we could tell by the reception they gave us that they looked to the Cunninghams for a possible history-making surprise.

As race time approached, Briggs was understandably nervous. During one of our team meetings just prior to the event he told us: "I get impatient and might blow my top. If I see Eddie [a chain-smoking mechanic, and a natural wit] with a cigarette in the pits I'm just likely to punch him in the nose. I hope you'll understand and not think anything of it." To which Eddie replied: "Oh, sure, Briggs—and if I punch you back I hope you won't be offended." Which promptly broke up the meeting.

The weather was ideal for racing—a warm, clear Saturday afternoon with a slight breeze rustling the forest of bright flags as the cars, 60 strong, were lined up along the pits. As they were numbered according to engine size, we with our big 5.4-liter power plants, had numbers 1, 2 and 3. The only car positioned ahead of us at the edge of the long, waiting line was a late entry, a supercharged French Talbot which, since Le Mans rules specify that supercharging doubles engine capacity, was classified at over eight liters. After us came a pair of Allards (possible threats with their Cadillac engines, provided they could last the distance), then the other Talbots with veteran drivers Louis Rosier and Pierre Levegh (who

was, in 1955 on this same circuit, to figure prominently in auto racing's greatest tragedy). Next, a pair of Anglo-American Nash-Healeys, four big Ferraris, four Jaguars, a trio of Alfa Romeos, the Aston Martins, Austin-Healeys, Bristols, the French Gordinis, and four more threats to us: the Lan-(ias, returning to the field of their first success after years of absence. And so on down the line to the smallest cars in the event.

Their drivers included such aces as England's Stirling Moss, Reg Parnell and Mike Hawthorn, Giannino Marzotto (recent winner of the Mille Miglia) and his brother Paulo, World Champions Alberto Ascari of Italy and Juan Fangio of Argentina, Karl Kling of Germany, Taruffi "The Silver Fox," Maglioli, Farina and "Gigi" Villoresi of Italy—and two of my old friends: Chiron of France and Tom Cole of New York. Here they were, at one minute to four, all crack drivers, the cream of international talent, waiting impatiently within their painted white circles for the signal to bolt into their now-silent machines facing them across the narrow track.

That grand old man of road racing, Charles Faroux, surviving originator of the race thirty years before, took his position with the French tricolor in one hand, his turnip-sized watch in the other. I stood anxiously on the pit wall, my eyes on Phil Walters who waited with the others. Phil would have the first stint behind the wheel of our new C-5; I would relieve him after three hours if all went according to plan. (Since Briggs had raced for 20 of the 24 hours in 1952, the rules had been changed limiting any one driver's total to 18 hours, or 80 laps.)

The long seconds were over; the flag in Faroux's hand snapped down, and the drivers broke for their cars, only the dry scuffle of their moving feet audible in the sudden pre-race hush. Savage, lionlike roars marked the start of finely tuned engines as the bright machines streamed away in a swirl of smoke and dust, reaching for the coveted lead. Phil was precise and deliberate, befitting the length of the contest, content to let others "get the jump" on him while he calmly

fastened his safety belt—required equipment in the States and our personal preference even in Europe where few wore them. (Most of the Europeans were afraid of being trapped in a flaming car.) Phil was coolly determined to risk nothing in the dodgy scramble for early positions. Now the last car was gone, and the surging chorus of 300,000 excited voices rose with the dust on the summer air.

Surprisingly, an Allard led for the first lap, but characteristically retired shortly thereafter, giving the number one spot to the disc-braked Jaguar of Stirling Moss. Phil was still not extending himself, riding comfortably within the first ten. All of the Jags were running extremely fast—apparently at full speed—which seemed very rash, considering the many hours ahead of them. We in the Cunningham pit were mainly concerned, however, with champions Ascari, Fangio and Farina in the Alfas and red Ferraris; these were the cars we considered to be our most dangerous competition. But the pattern had been set: hard and fast.

Behind the pits, I visited my six-months-pregnant wife and Lucie Cunningham (with her two daughters). They were in charge of the large house trailer Briggs had brought along, stocked with enough hot coffee, tea, bouillon, chocolate bars, Cokes, chewing gum, et al., to supply our crew of three dozen for the full 24 day-night hours of speed. They even supplied hamburgers for homesick American stomachs. (Lucie had the beef specially ground and shipped in from Paris.)

In the charged atmosphere, wives and friends chatted nervously, the women giggling too loudly; they were obviously feeling the tension. The mechanics appeared more nonchalant, but each had an ear tuned to the passing cars. Le Mans rules prohibited a machine from pitting for gas and oil before completing 28 laps—or about 240 miles—so there wasn't much they could do at the moment but wait and listen.

Reports ran down the line of pits: The Farina-Hawthorn Ferrari was out with brake trouble which could not be remedied. (Farina and Hawthorn were fine fellows, but let them win another day. With them safely out we had one less threat

to concern us.) I recalled the incident in our garage when I was proudly showing Hawthorn the white Cunningham with its wide blue stripes, that Phil and I were slated to handle. We were trying out a few new ideas this year, such as a solid front axle for more roadability, and we were hoping for a long-awaited Le Mans victory with this new C-5. Mike tried to be polite, but was obviously skeptical of this piece of Yankee ingenuity with its enormous engine. "Looks fine." He grinned, and then added, "But I'm glad I don't have to drive it!"

Roy Sherman, one of Cunningham's top mechanics, broke into my thoughts with a worried exclamation: "Look at Phil the next time he comes by. I think he's in some kind of trouble!" And though Walters shot the C-5 past us at about 150 mph, I could see that his head was bent strangely down. Yet he didn't seem to be slowing his lap times. It was puzzling.

At 6:50, when he rolled into the pits, we had our answer. As he leaped from the cockpit, he yelled: "Get rid of that damned bug deflector!" A mechanic ripped it from the hood. As Phil and I exchanged a few quick words, he told me that the plastic gadget had set up an adverse air current that had been beating his face raw. It was an example of the folly of racing with an untested item, no matter how minor (it had been installed just the night before).

By now Fangio was out with a seized piston and the Moss Jaguar was being worked on in the pits. Tony Rolt in another of the green Jags had set a tremendous lap record of 111 mph—a pace which simply could not be maintained. Two of the French Talbots had retired, the supercharged model in quite a hair-raising manner. At 100 mph plus, its brakes locked, putting the car into a wild, uncontrollable skid which sent it caroming into a dirt bank. The driver was only scratched.

So now it was my turn. I was keyed up and eager to get going, welcoming manager Stan Sedgewick's okay to run the C-5 somewhat faster. Phil agreed that the extra speed would not strain it unduly. Pulling down my goggles, I

nodded and dropped the gearshift lever into first, scrambling away down the pit straight under the Dunlop bridge. I knew I must be careful through the twisting Esses, feeling out the big car with its heavy load of gasoline. As I cleared the S curves into Tertre Rouge, I saw Reg Parnell's badly bent Aston Martin. You could always figure on plenty of wrecks on this part of the circuit; two years before, the Frenchman Paul Lariviere crashed fatally after plowing through the sand bank on the far side of the curve.

Through an easy sycamore-lined bend that leads to a deserted roadside cafe, I passed a gaggle of smaller cars-entering the long 3 1/2-mile straight, where I was able to hold the Cunningham steadily at 160. The engine was in full cry as I whipped past woods and open fields, topping the crests spaced along the road. I now had time to check the instruments: oil temp okay, water temp okay, generator charging, the exhaust note clean and sharp. Everything okay.

The turn at the end of Mulsanne loomed ahead, and the brakes pulled our C-5 down from 160 to 30—the safe speed for this slow right-angle corner. Beyond the turn, a looping trail of black skid marks ended in the burning wreck of a Bristol, smashed into a kilometer stone. Graham Whitehead had miraculously escaped when the engine suddenly flew to pieces, locking the rear wheels and spinning his car down the road in long, slow gyrations. (The faster a car is traveling when it spins, the wider and slower the loops. A slow-moving car will snap around rapidly until it stops but a car with more than 100-mph speed only gradually loops down the road in a fearsome, uncontrollable pirouette until it stops or slides off the edge.)

From Mulsanne through Indianapolis and on to the slow Arnage corner (where I had detoured into the escape road two years before) is a narrow and winding stretch, sometimes no more than 15 feet across. Then down through a pair of flat-out curves and over another blind hilltop where a stop light hangs ready to flash a red warning that a wreck is blocking the course immediately beyond the hill. Two quick turns

past Maison Blanche with its typical French farmhouse and up a rise to the pits and grandstand area again.

I fell into the rhythmic pattern of the race and b enjoy exploiting the potentialities of our unorthodox but able Cunningham. My confidence grew with each succeeding lap, and I kept increasing speed until an EZ sign from our pit slowed me. I was enjoying the fresh wind and the sharp exhaust note and I passed the smaller cars with growing confidence that they would not obstruct.

Near the Tertre Rouge corner where Parnell had slammed into the bank, a new footbridge arched over the race course. Fans were jammed at the vantage point where first the Esses slowed us down to a sliding 80 miles an hour and then the right-angle bend cut our speed to half that. While the carnival flashed ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds in the corner of my eye, a loudspeaker shrilled out reports on the progress of the race that momentarily pierced the roar of motors and wind.

Sailing around the course, dodging slower cars, diverted by long skid marks that ended in piles of twisted metal and broken machinery, I couldn't keep up with the progress of the race. When I passed a potential winner I never knew whether 1 was on the same lap and actually moving into a higher place or not. We went by the pits too fast to learn anything about positions in the race, for they didn't try to signal any but the most essential information. Nor could we read the signal placards hung on long poles held out over the course unless we slowed down and concentrated on looking. That was why the Cunningham team had devised an ingenious method of contacting its drivers. A large orange disk with a black cross—we called it "the squawker"—would be held out to us as we went by at 150 or so as a warning that the next time around there would be a signal. Then we would slow down on the straightaway past the pits to about 120 so we could read the letters: MO (raise the lap speed by two seconds); GO (speed up six seconds); EZ (lower two

seconds); SLO (decrease six seconds); IN (come into the pits on the next lap).

Dusk settled, then darkness—with racing headlights slicing the night around me—and, at 10 **P.M.,** I got the IN sign and obeyed it. As I pulled to a stop and cut the engine, Phil clapped me on the shoulder and happily informed me that we'd moved up from ninth to fifth place—and that the entire Cunningham team was still running.

I told him how the C-5 was behaving—still very well—and that he should watch out for the slow corners that were now getting slippery with much oil and rubber in the groove. Phil nodded, and with his extra cushion under him, he took off briskly into the darkness.

Our pit crew filled me in on the way things were going. Jaguar still held a commanding lead with Rolt and Duncan Hamilton firmly dictating the car-breaking pace, one full lap ahead of an Alfa, followed by the Ascari-Villoresi Ferrari, the Kling-Reiss Alfa—then our C-5 with Phil and me aboard. To this hour the records of Le Mans were roundly shattered.

I walked back behind the pits to have a hamburger with Elizabeth. It tasted wonderful between slices of sturdy French bread with plenty of sweet butter, salt and pepper. As I ate, I looked over the chattering crowd: mostly serious racing fans, a scattering of outrageously dressed French teen-agers, some of the "arty set"—and our American boys with their Cokes and distinctive caps. Now I had to rest (although I felt more like discussing the race), and so I stretched out on a bunk and managed to drift off to sleep. At 1 **A.M.** someone shook me awake and told me Phil would be coming in soon. I gulped a quick cup of steaming coffee to warm up, and kissed Liz, telling her not to worry, that we were doing fine. I was tired but stimulated, hoping our luck would hold, yet a little afraid it wouldn't. I could hear the big Cunninghams going by outside in the night, the low-pitched thunder of their exhausts a reassuring sound. I moved to the pit wall and watched the Alfas shoot past, trailing blue fire when they backed off. Phil, as usual, had done well, gaining ground

steadily during his three hours at the wheel. But so had Moss in the Jaguar; Stirling was now in seventh place (from 21st after his long delay in the pits!) and going strong. When Phil came in he reported that the brakes were fading, and I nodded glumly at the bad news I had feared.

The brakes rumbled on the downhill run into the Esses; yes, they were weakening. I knew I must begin backing off the throttle earlier and brake more easily unless we were to run the last hours completely without them—a frequent, but highly dangerous practice at Le Mans.

Now the dreaded fog was drifting in. From isolated, wispy patches it thickened to an intermittent, opaque blanket. A brook bisects the course—first on the straightaway and then again just before the tricky Maison Blanche curve. As the cold, pre dawn air drifted across the warm, damp fields, the clouds swelled and covered the course. Sometimes we couldn't see a hundred yards ahead. In spots, I was only guessing when I turned into a corner. The cars all used the regulation yellow headlights that French law requires on the highway, but they didn't help much in that gray dawn fog. The route itself was not lighted, except for the pit area and at the carnival where spectators were bunched. On some of the corners there were scattered reflectors. The gradual right swing before the Maison Blanche left, which was so soon to prove fatal, had a reflector that I could aim for, but after that I was guessing. Some drivers possess an extraordinary knack for driving in fog; Duncan Hamilton in the lead Jaguar was one of them. His lap times only dropped by some three seconds—a fantastic performance under these conditions.

At near half distance, in the faint light of dawn, I felt the cold through my coveralls, but soon warmed to the news from the pits which told me we had gained third overall! I toyed with pleasant speculations about our position at this stage, optimistically projecting our success into the second half of the contest—but I was abruptly interrupted.

I'd just opened full-throttle after the 120-mph left at White House (where the car leaned in a grinding strain against

centrifugal force) when a sudden shock rang through the entire machine. The engine raced wildly and we were coasting. An axle? The clutch? Would the whole complex effort end on the shoulder of the road a few yards ahead? A wave of disappointment swept through me. Nothing worse than to sit alone with a broken, dirty car in a silence briefly shattered by luckier ones. But here was a possibility—the gear shift lever was in neutral. Once re-engaged, the engine took hold. But the lever jumped out of gear again at the same place next lap. This was dangerous as well as mechanically foreboding. A pair of Cunninghams had been lost two years before for the same reason, resulting in crashes. Next time, at White House, I discovered what had happened. Centrifugal force in the curve had pressed my relaxing body against the lever, minutely displacing the gear mesh. Then the over 300-hp load of our high-torque engine forced the parted gears as we climbed the hill. It seemed incredible but there was absolutely nothing wrong. Just my own clumsiness. We still had our big chance!

In the thin light of an uncertain gray dawn, I answered the pit signal, IN (about 4:45). I reported the engine running too cool and an extra radiator cover was quickly snapped in place. Phil got away in the brisk morning air still third behind one Jaguar and one Ferrari. The Alfas were out, both with transmission troubles, and the two remaining Lancias were no threat. Altogether, 25 cars had abandoned the race.

Louis Chiron's Lancia had spun off the road at 140 mph, headlights crazily sweeping the sky, trees and road to front and back. After the race, Louis explained that it had started when he violently avoided a small car that dodged in front of him. "On that wild slide," he told me, "I said out loud: 'Louie, you are finished.' " Half an hour of digging and he was running again, but not for long. He and the last Lancia threat withdrew within the hour. The race had settled down to a contest among three makes: the incredible Jaguars which continued to hold the road *and* the lead, the Cunninghams and the Ferraris.

Then tragedy! At 6:30 **A.M.,** Tom Cole, who had savagely pushed his Ferrari up to sixth place from 10th, roared into the White House curve at high speed, skidded across the ditch and smashed into a farmhouse. Without a safety belt, he was catapulted from the open car as the Ferrari shot back across the road. Tom died instantly when he struck the pavement. A good driver—if an extremely hard one—he was respected in the racing fraternity, and had always been a close friend to the Cunningham team. His death stunned us all. We would have stopped at once if that would have helped, but it wouldn't, and the race continued.

An hour after Cole's death Phil rolled unexpectedly into the pits with a thrown tread. Dangerous, but Phil had kept the road and limped in under power. The C-5's body was bent and blackened by the lashing rubber.

After a fast two-minute pit stop during which the car was gassed, given three quarts of oil and changes of both rear wheels, I took over from Phil. But, going through the 120-mph Dunlop curve, I smelled burning rubber and thought I saw a wisp of smoke in the cockpit. It must have been a tire hitting something, I thought, as the body shifted and leaned in the fast curve. I'd had blowouts from this cause before, and didn't want one here at Le Mans. I mentally crossed my fingers at 160 down the long, fast straight, hoping the crash and wrench of a blowout would not pitch me into the trees. (Trees have always frightened me; their web of roots makes them uncompromisingly solid.) From the pits, the mechanics could see nothing, but my frantic signaling as I went by told them I was worried, and they called me in on the next lap. Two very substantial mechanics thereupon barehandedly pulled the body (bent by the thrown tread) away from the tire. After losing only a few seconds I was on course again, immensely relieved. A big red sun came up strong and burned the gray mists away for a brilliant summer morning, clear and fresh.

But at each sight of Tom Cole's skid marks, an irresistible chain of thoughts about this old friend began with the knowl-

edge that he was gone: his obsession with racing, his excited voice when talking about it, his miraculous escapes (he once crashed a plane in the wilds of Argentina), his disregard of life's formalities (permits, entry forms, passports, meant nothing to him)—even the garbled Italian he had learned to deal with the Ferrari factory. All the things that had shaped and characterized Tom Cole were gone....

The passing sights of Le Mans were no longer of interest: the campers with tents and trailers, the baby carriages, the men shaving by mirrors hung in trees, the church services conducted in open fields—all the carnival sights. Compared to the stunning fact of Tom's death they seemed drab and lusterless; his loss dominated my thoughts.

Then a fresh crisis seized my complete attention. In the range of heaviest strain on the clutch (130 mph in fourth gear), the engine suddenly raced. I eased off, alarmed, and gently regained speed trying to analyze the new problem. I knew that slipping clutches got worse, not better. It was probably oil from the rear main bearing, but whatever the cause it was serious. The trouble grew rapidly worse. Should I come in for adjustment, which was at best an unlikely solution, and possibly lose the race? Carbon tetrachloride dumped on the clutch would help, but there was none in the car. Sand had worked once, but only for a short race; it was no good here.

As I was braking for Mulsanne, Moss's green Jaguar loomed up behind. Stirling was exploiting fully his disc brakes by running hard into the corners before shutting off. This gave him an advantage at every curve and on this one he gained several hundred feet. He was close behind me and characteristically in a hurry as we left the corner to enter the more intricate parts of the circuit. The superior acceleration and good roadability of the Cunningham could normally stand off the Jaguar until we came around to the end of the straight again, but with the slipping clutch it would be difficult. I realized that if Moss should hear my engine run away when the clutch slipped, he would notify his team that we were in trouble,

and the Jaguar behind us would attack our position. So I braked very early for the next curve, pulled far to the right and signaled Moss to pass. By his startled expression Stirling must have thought I had lost my mind—carrying the courtesy of the road to ridiculous lengths. When he was safely out of range, I decided to gamble on an old trick, but one that does not always work. I deliberately slipped the clutch badly until it left a trail of burning oil and lining, then carefully avoided the slightest strain, as it was hot and very weak. After two slow laps, the clutch was cool enough to try again, and it was now positive and strong—as good as new. And I had lost no time on a pit stop.

Three times now I had feared we were out of the race: when the transmission kept popping out of gear, when the tire scraped against the body, and then during this incident with the slipping clutch. We had survived them all, and the shuddering brakes were still holding, so it seemed that luck was riding with us this year. With only five hours remaining in the race, I felt we would surely finish. Still, anything could happen. Le Mans has a history of last-minute crises and late retirements, reversing the expected order. We could reasonably hope the Jaguars and the Ferraris ahead would fail, moving us into the lead during the last laps. But again, as in 1951, *we* might be the ones to drop out. I vividly remembered my deep discouragement when we had been running second at the 18th hour, and engine trouble had put an end to our high hopes.

While I didn't know it at the time, it was just then that the fast-running Ferrari driven by Ascari and Villoresi was slowing considerably. From a solid second, they had been forced into the pits with the same trouble we just had—a slipping clutch. For them, quick repairs or luck were not enough. Villoresi surged out of the pits with engine revving uncontrollably as he tried to make the clutch bite and hold. But the car was doomed, dropping to third, fourth and then fifth before he had to abandon it entirely.

The fierce pace was taking a steady toll. When I turned over

to Phil at 11:20 **A.M.**, more than half the field had retired. Two Jaguars remained ahead of us, with another behind. Could they last? The year before Pierre Levegh's Talbot led until the last hour and then failed, handing the race to Mercedes, whose cars had been too far back to overtake. Maybe we would have their luck. The Jaguars had been pushed ruthlessly, and all three Cunninghams were going strong in third, eighth and tenth places.

Soon after noon I was back on the familiar road, flanked by retirements spectacular and mundane. (One fellow had simply run out of gas.) The Cunningham was sound under me, considering 20 hours of punishment. I was set to finish at 4 **P.M.** and felt confident I could. Suddenly a pit signal ... IN! I pulled up and started to climb out, but was told, "Stay there!" Jack and Roy yanked at the front side of the car, threw a piece of jagged metal in the seat and waved me off. Wind buffeting had fatigued the light aluminum body and a panel had come loose. The whole hood was bouncing and straining at its straps, threatening to break away. Another pit sign: *IN!* What now? And so close to the end. Again, I pulled up to our pit, where I was shouted back into the race with Roy's: "That was the OK sign, not IN!" Angrily I rushed off to make up lost time, muttering to myself: "That *was* the *IN* sign ... I can still read!"

Just before the finish Duncan Hamilton in the leading Jaguar pulled up behind me. I thought, He's crazy! Safely in the lead with only minutes before the finish and he wants to race! I felt obliged to find more speed. We slid the turns and breasted the crests, scant feet apart. "If Hamilton wants to risk his first place I'll take the odds," I told myself. "Our Cunningham might be second instead of third!" I pushed our tired veteran harder and we whistled past the pits nose-to-tail at full speed into the final lap. I had to gain before the corners or the incredible Jaguar brakes would put him past me. Insane! But he was crazier than I to drive like this on the last lap. The crowd rose with a roar as we passed the check-

ered flag, the Cunningham bare feet ahead. But of course the Jaguar was *laps* ahead over-all, and had won Le Mans, 1953.

Hamilton and Rolt had broken all records: 2540.3 miles in 24 hours of blazing sun, night, fog, slides, crashes and an indescribable variety of trouble—for an average speed of 105.85 mph. Moss and Walker were second at 104.81, and in taking third, Phil and I had covered 2498.2 miles at 104.14—more than seven miles per hour *faster* than last year's record-breaking winner!

It was then that I learned we had set the speed record for the kilometer at 155 mph—and also that we had scratches of paint on the body sides. (Wind pressure, we discovered, had forced the sides of the hood out a few inches, and apparently we had scraped other contestants in passing. We had not heard it because of the din of wind and engine.) Alberto Ascari, whose Ferrari had failed in the closing hours of the race, had established a new lap record, averaging 113.5 mph on one tour of the 8.5-mile circuit.

Another Jaguar was fourth, then the bright red Ferrari coupe of the Marzotto brothers (the only one of the team cars to finish). A Gordini was sixth, another of our Cunninghams seventh (driven by Briggs and Bill Spear), with our last car (Charlie Moran-John Gordon Bennet) in tenth spot. Ours was one of only three teams that finished intact.

It had been a long, tiring contest, and we had naturally wanted to win, but we all shared a feeling of accomplishment at doing as well as we had against powerful competitors like Jaguar and Ferrari, though this feeling was dulled by the passing of Tom Cole, a friend we would not soon forget. In the milling, excited crowd that swarmed the road, I found Duncan Hamilton, surrounded by his overjoyed crew, celebrating on the spot with a magnum of champagne. I congratulated him on the victory and then asked: "Dunc, whatever possessed you to race flat-out in the last few miles and risk your win?" His habitual smile widened with the reply:

"Oh, we always like to have a go, old chap!" And what can you say to that?

The awards were given out on Monday afternoon at the Auto Club headquarters, where we sipped dry wine, ate sugary little wafers and listened to countless sugary speeches. And although it was raining hard, crowds of townspeople stood along the walk to watch us enter and leave, many of them pressing the various drivers for their autographs. In France, as in most of Europe, this kind of recognition is quite normal. As Phil remarked: "It makes you feel like a star outfielder for the Yanks!"

On Tuesday we drove back to Paris to ready ourselves for our next race—the 12-hour contest at Rheims, where I was to utterly destroy our big Le Mans Cunningham, a machine we now regarded with almost personal affection.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

A Crash at Rheims

RHEIMS was to be run over the Fourth of July weekend. The date was simple coincidence, but to show their sympathy toward the Americans present, the French set off a pretty impressive display of fireworks. It was the only time all summer I heard Lu, Briggs' daughter, indicate homesickness. As the rockets were crashing above us, her face clouded up a little, and she turned to her mother and said, "I think I wanna go home."

Maybe that was an omen, I don't know. If I had had the insight of a child, I might have said the same thing. It wasn't the fireworks that bothered me, though. It was that first fast curve on the course.

Somehow I knew that curve meant trouble for me. During practice, going through it, I thought the rear axle had broken loose from its centering bracket, the way the car waddled. That's how rough it was. I actually brought the car to the pits for a check. But the Cunningham was all right. It was just that I didn't like the fast curve and I guess it didn't like me.

Elizabeth had come with me to Rheims a few days before the race, after we'd dropped Johnny off with his pair of grandmothers in our rented house in Paris. She'd had a premonition about this race, and she just didn't like the feel of the place. She said it looked too fast. The road was pretty

narrow past the pits, and our concrete stall with the open side facing the road and the grandstands across it must have made a sound trap of some kind. When one of the big ones flashed by, a burst of exhaust would jolt the air and you could feel a piercing vibration in your eardrums. I explained that we passed the pits at Le Mans just as fast (about 150 mph), so what was wrong with this? She hadn't been around the course and it wouldn't have told her anything if she had, but she stuck to her guns. She just maintained that it seemed too fast. Women in general and pregnant women in particular seem to have a way of knowing things. I wouldn't say I didn't like the course, but—to be honest—I had liked some others a lot more.

The lap record was well over 100 mph on this famous old circuit which had been the venue of the important Grand Prix of France since long before the war. About five and a half miles to the lap, the course was roughly the shape of a triangle with the hypotenuse snaking through four fast curves over rolling farm country. The first of these curves was the one I was concerned about. The rest of the course was straight, the two shorter sides of the triangle rolling over the low hills to 30-mph hairpins.

The road climbed past the pits to the top of the hill where the Dunlop bridge, shaped like half a tire on end, crossed over it. The bridge was a marker of more than the hilltop. Before the bridge was the starting line: the tribunes, the timers, the lights, the pits, the social part of the race where friends and officials wandered between the paddock and the pits, greeted campaigners from other races and detoured by the bar regularly. This was the heart of the champagne country. Past the bridge was the curve. At night the bridge caught all the light from what we called Broadway. You could feel a slight compression as you popped through it into the deserted darkness. No lights and no parties here; just the approach to the fast curve, almost invisible after the bright lights. You went into it fast because you knew you had done it before, not because you could see it or know how

you were going to do it again. That's how it was; before the bridge was Broadway, and past it was the fast curve where everyone was on his own in the dark.

During night practice this darkness beyond the bridge was split by the flaming wreck of a French Panhard. While passing in the curve, one wheel got in the gravel of the shoulder and sent the Panhard spinning. It tripped on the ditch, rolled, and threw the driver onto the road. All race cars carry fire extinguishers, and the first driver on the scene doused the Frenchman's flaming clothes. The following cars stopped and drivers rushed up with their extinguishers, but the wrecked car was hopelessly enveloped in flames, now licking at the inverted wheels. After the ambulance had gone, the red pyre, towering into the night sky, was an unholy sight as we plunged into the darkness under the bridge.

The race started at midnight and ran for 12 hours until noon the following day. In the carnival atmosphere before the start, the refreshment stands did a bustling business with their staple drink of champagne. The ubiquitous loudspeaker relayed lively dance music, advertised as jazz, from the pavilion, and the crowd was in a playful mood before its all-night lark in the balmy summer air. With the special French talent for abandoning themselves to the light society of a public party, they seemed to say: If you are foolish enough to chase yourselves around the countryside all night in the fastest cars you can find, we are foolish enough to stay up to watch and enjoy ourselves.

Our two American Cunninghams were favored by many after their outstanding performance at Le Mans three weeks before. Briggs would drive one, relieved by young Sherwood Johnston, eager to do well in his first race in a Cunningham. Phil Walters and I were again teamed on the new C-5 in which we had finished third at Le Mans.

These were still big cars as sports machines go, weighing 2500 pounds without fuel or driver. The Cunningham group had modified the big Chrysler engine until it presently developed over 300 dependable horsepower. We had four car-

buretors so that it could "breathe" while turning at its peak of 5400 rpm, and double valve springs to make the valves close at this speed. We now had to hedge a bit on the *Made in USA* label by using a four-speed transmission from Italy that gave us the ratios required to apply all the available power and to help us down from high speed for the slow corners. Without engine drag to help reduce speed our brakes would have taken an even more severe beating, perhaps to the point of failure. Our magnesium wheels were light and strong. We could reach 100 mph from a dead stop in about 10 seconds, the time it takes a powerful modern passenger car in optimum tune to reach 60; 5400 rpm on the tachometer gave us 156 mph, the maximum we could use for more than a few seconds and expect the engine to stay together, although the urgencies of the race permitted brief bursts over 160.

Entered against us were the light French Gordinis, always astonishingly fast, a strong team from the Italian Ferrari camp, two formidable French Talbots, and among others, Stirling Moss driving one of the English Jaguars that had won Le Mans. It was strong opposition, but we had confidence in our cars and hoped to win.

At the stroke of midnight, Phil began our race well, dashing across the road, scrambling into the car and pulling smoothly away under the bridge among the first few. There had been the extravagant display of fireworks flashing and cascading in the northern sky, but the tumult and noise of these initial laps in darkness offered even more of a show. Gordini, Jaguar, Ferrari, Talbot, and all the other teams seemed to be trying to win the 12-hour race in the first hour. The dance band behind the paddock gave up.

More than half the competitors were driving little racing sports cars derived from small French production models. They were superbly made and wonderfully fast for their size, having a top speed near 115, from an engine smaller than many motorcycle engines. Their relatively slow acceleration and top speed made passing them a ticklish business when the fast cars would pass with 50 to 80 mph greater speed, espe-

daily when the quicker machines might be overtaking near their maximum of 150 to 160. When entering a fast curve or approaching a hairpin, passing became very difficult to judge accurately. There were so many small cars and our Cunninghams were so rapid on this circuit that we were constantly passing someone. "It's like a warm Sunday afternoon on the Merritt Parkway," was how Briggs described it.

Jean Behra, the popular Frenchman, led the race from the start, driving a Gordini, followed by the veteran Italian, Maglioli, in his red Ferrari coup£. The U. S. racing colors of blue and white were third: Walters, in our C-5 Cunningham.

Phil came in to refuel at 3 **A.M.,** and after checking over the the car, I eagerly started my turn. The machine felt heavy with a full load of gas (330 pounds of fuel alone) but the engine was singing and would reach maximum revs, giving me about 156, before a downhill run on the longest straight. Behra had thrown a tire tread and spun off the fast curve, luckily keeping on his wheels, and now Maglioli was leading by nearly a lap, with our car second. This was a good position and it was still early in the race. We were well within striking distance as the new tires wore into a shape that gripped the road better. With each lap the fast curve following the plunge into darkness under the bridge could be taken a trifle faster.

I recall blowing the horn and flashing the headlights when something blinked erratically near the road on the back straight. Suddenly the point of light crossed the shoulder, and my headlights caught a red fox bounding across the road with inches to spare, his thick brush horizontal with speed.

The battering wind stream and the abrupt bouncing which lifted me above the level of the small windscreen into a blast of air produced an annoyingly stiff neck that made it awkward to look around as much as I like to at night, when reflections make rearview mirrors undependable. Even our special lights were simply not adequate for these speeds, and our path on the course was fixed as much by memory and optimism as by sight. It seemed sometimes that the same small cars would be overtaken twice in a single lap, there were so many of them.

This, with the lurching and wallowing through the rough curve, seemed to induce a mild vertigo in the featureless night. I was never so glad to see the stars dim and the eastern sky lighten in a race before. The dawn broke and there was no more overtaking at high speed with only a pair of dancing taillights by which to judge the delicate business of passing on a narrow road.

Five of the 12 hours were now behind us. Failure to anticipate another driver's intention sent me down the escape road at a hairpin for a loss of perhaps five seconds. It would have been more except that the escape road curved quickly back to the course. While closing fast I had committed myself to pass a little open car on a short straight, with plenty of room to make it before the hairpin, when he started moving deliberately across my path. I had too much speed to brake and drop behind; such an attempt would have ended with a helpless slide into the rear of his car. I had no choice but to accelerate past, in spite of the looming corner, before he cut in front. Luckily, I made it into the escape road, which on that corner happened to take the place of the usual ditch or stand of solid trees.

The Cunningham was feeling good, getting lighter as the fuel tanks emptied and the wearing tires increased their bite on the road. I could go faster on the pit straight until finally I was holding the throttle wide open as I passed under the bridge. This was enough, though, as the entrance into the curve was then a fine problem with the car shifting and pitching erratically over the bumps. Any increase of speed here now became a matter of how soon power could be resumed in the curve. I found my absolute limit to be gradually increased throttle, started when the car was set into its new direction on the curve. Then I would be at full throttle just as the end of the curve came in sight, where the rev counter read 4500—about 140 mph. I settled down to that, feeling any further improvement would entail unreasonable risk. It was nearly light now and competition could be recognized across the

fields leading to the triangle of the sharper hairpin. I identified Maglioli's red Ferrari as the car that for hours had been behind me on every lap.

I had just sighted the end of the fast curve and gently opened the throttle wide when suddenly the rear end of the car broke to the outside of the curve, quick and decisively. Oil, I thought—a patch of oil as slick as ice! Whatever it was I knew I was in real trouble. I turned the wheel toward the slide to keep from spinning, but the car was angled across the road too far for the steering to compensate at full lock. I was heading across the road, pointing hopelessly off my line of travel and charging for the ditch and a field below. As the flying gravel of the shoulder rattled against the undercarriage, I leaned far over into the passenger's seat and thought of the dozens of times I had expected to be in this spot when luck or opportunity had intervened at the last moment. "This time," I told myself out loud, "you're *in* for it."

There was a wrench on my safety belt at the first end-over-end plunge. Each time we hit, I thought it had to be the last. Each was earth-shaking, frame-breaking, impossibly sharp and stunning. (*The car must be torn to pieces, the frame tubes and the engine must be skating across the fields—no two pieces could possibly stay together.)* The crashing and slamming went on for an unconscionable time, the car in convulsive gyrations as I pressed to the side in flashes of awareness, still holding the wheel and bracing elbows against hips to stay in. Then, dead silence. I sat up with a strange sense of a gap in time or memory, and faced a bewildering sight. Instead of a road, a smoky wheat field. Instead of a broad sloping hood, a dirty litter of oil-spattered junk threaded with ripe wheat, steam wafting from the pulled water hoses and the hole in the cocked radiator where the filler neck had been.

A fine dust settled like mist on the quiet scene. A hand turned the ignition off—my own, with a red tear on the back of the glove. Landed upright and no fire. A crumpled piece of alloy like a chunk of wrecked aircraft lay a few yards ahead, reminding me of my crashed P-51 in Germany years ago.

I am at Rheims and I have had a wreck and I have blood in my mouth. It is dripping in my lap but I am all right. I am a normal optimist and not surprised to be all right. But as I look around I have a hunch I am lucky. I don't know what happened. Everything is at odd angles—the steering wheel, the cowling; wheat and earth in the car, the front of the Cunningham and the door gone. A car goes by sounding muffled; then silence again. Muffled by distance? I know I am at Rheims, but where? I think of Elizabeth waiting at the pits and I am suddenly in a hurry to get there and I feel very energetic and impatient. I unhook the safety belt and take an unusually short step to the ground that almost trips me. Nothing I can do here. The car is not going to burn. The left front wheel is gone, the left rear is out of line with the chassis. Magnesium wheels don't bend, so there is structural damage under there.

I feel light, as though drugged or dreaming, as I go toward the sound of cars and climb a bank, crawling through the weeds at the top when a loud red Ferrari flashes by scant feet away. It is leaving the fast curve and I now know which direction to go. I turn back and run toward the pits. Two incredulous gendarmes approach. With tentative smiles, they ask if I am from the wreck. They seem embarrassed. I tell them everything is all right. There is nothing to do to the car; and I have to get to the pits. I run on, reassuring them over my shoulder. Here are my skid marks. They show all the tires up and in the right position. I wish one of them had been flat. I wrecked a car and I'm looking for a reason, a good reason. Another gendarme and a nurse are running toward me on the other side of the road. A couple of Deutsch-Bonnets pass as I have an exchange like the one with the first gendarmes. I can run very fast with no effort. (I should do this more often—very pleasant with the wind in your face!) A white Cunningham comes by and I signal thumbs-up, but get no response as the driver is intent on the curve. I can't tell if it is Briggs or Sherwood because there is a lot of dust or mist cutting visibility. Here is Behra's Gordini in the field. It went

squarely over the chipped rock ledge which ripped out the bottom and dragged the body out in the back.

It is a long way but I seem to run without tiring. I feel irrationally carefree and even elated, as though I suddenly had no responsibility, no problems, no possessions or plans to worry about. (A shipwreck survivor may have lost all his goods as well as his ship; he may even have some explaining to do later, but at the moment he wades ashore he has nothing but his pants, no duty but to hold them up, and he has survived.)

The side of my head is warm, and blood is running off my helmet strap and down my clothes. I stop at a first-aid shack to get cleaned up. I know I am all right but I must look pretty bad. I don't want to scare Elizabeth or anyone else in the pits. There are at least a dozen people in the tiny shack who greet me as if I were Lindbergh landing at Paris. They all help, patching my ear and cleaning my clothes and helmet as I try to tell them in French what happened. I could remember it all then: the quick breakaway that went too far to recover, the awful feeling when I gave up and ducked under the cowling, a flashing memory of Tom Cole at Le Mans when I thought I was having the Big Crash.

I'd counted on that cowling brace that looks like a piece of the Brooklyn Bridge, and it had held.

The Cunningham C-5 that Jack and Roy and Phil and John and everyone had sweated over day and night was a write-off. A few pieces of it might race again, but they would be very small pieces. I realized that right now no one was thinking about the car. The garbled reports that reach the pits after a wreck are terrifying. If there was an eyewitness from a following car who had since stopped at the pits, he would have told a frightening story. Elizabeth must be sick with worry.

I hurried from the shack with assurances and many thanks in clumsy French, ran down to the pits and along the back of the booths to the Cunningham team, to find Elizabeth—thank God—sound asleep. Everyone was extremely kind, offering

coffee, pills, bracers, coats, chairs, everything available. They were not interested in the condition of the car. Bandages were changed, although they had just been put on. (Doctors must be like mechanics—no one else does it right.) Every member of our team required detailed assurances that I was all right; all insisted that I lie down, the last thing I wanted to do. Not one person asked me how I could have been such a fool as to wreck the best car we had. Not one. The crowning disappointment was to learn that just before the wreck we had gone into the lead. (Maglioli's Ferrari had been disqualified for a pit infraction.)

An hour later Elizabeth woke and I told her that Phil and I were out of the race. 1 had carefully combed my hair and was dressed for visiting cathedrals. I said I had had an accident, which explained the bandages. She looked incredulous and showed it—a girl needs a little time after she wakes to get her disguises up. She couldn't accept the possibility that I had wrecked the car without a good reason, and she held out for an oil patch or a bad tire. I was okay and that part was all right. Glad she had been asleep. She had heard my name and much unintelligible comment about our Cunningham No. 10 over the loudspeaker but paid no attention, thinking we had probably gone into the lead. Okay.

I had been noticing a growing stiffness and an acute sensitivity to movement in my head. My brain felt as if it had turned to jelly. When I moved, there was a piercing pressure in my temples which felt thin as parchment. Every muscle and tendon was sore, and unless I accurately balanced my head over my shoulders the cords in my neck protested sharply. I was very tired and a little nauseated, eager now to lie down.

The sun became bright and strong. Stirling Moss seemed sure to win with his Jaguar—as indeed he did. The short and fierce Grand Prix would soon roar away. The drama of the race moved along its set schedule. Our other Cunningham with Briggs and Sherwood aboard went on to finish third.

As wrecks go, this had been a good one. No one else was involved; no one was even angry. I never did find out what

really caused it. "You all right?" Briggs kept asking me. I guessed I was, but I couldn't help wondering about that curve —whether I hadn't simply overreached myself. And the C-5 had been an exceptional machine in its own limited way, full of novelty and promise—a potential winner on almost any circuit. We had lost a really fine car.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Over *the Roof of the World*

I WAS scheduled to drive a Sunbeam-Talbot for the Rootes Group of England in the 2000-mile Alpine Rally less than a week hence, but I didn't see how I could possibly squeeze myself behind a wheel again for some while. Still, I determined to try—and, early in the week, went on down to the Cote d'Azur to join the team. Elizabeth didn't have any premonitions about the Alpine (she had become pretty inured to being married to a racing driver by now), and the throbbing pain in my temples had fortunately disappeared. The best psychological help for a pilot who's crashed is to make another flight, and it works in racing too. Besides, I couldn't just sit around in Paris, brooding about the wreck.

My misgivings were primarily physical rather than mental anyhow (though Peter Collins, who rode down to the South of France with me, observed that it took a full 100 miles before I began to act like a racing driver again). The slightest movement was painful, and every muscle and tendon ached. I thought exercise would be the healthiest remedy—and what could be better exercise than a strenuous cross-continent rally? So I determined to leave my name on the list and braced myself to drive the Alpine.

We took off in the dark, my navigator Peter Miller and I in our trim British roadster. Ahead of us stretched the 2000-

mile course through five countries, with more than 30 rugged mountain passes to climb. It would tal us six days to finish —if we *could* finish—this 16th running of the Alpine.

As we cleared the outskirts of Marseilles with its throngs of spectators milling about the roads to watch the start, I opened the throttle wider and eased off for the first control point, 140 miles away. But I didn't open up too wide. Unlike a race, a rally doesn't reward the swiftest—not necessarily, anyway. There are controls set along the route, 29 of them altogether. You're required to reach each one in exactly a given time, plus or minus a couple of minutes of grace. If, in spite of flat tires, running out of gas and possible accidents, you can manage this over the long, tortuous route, then you win a *Coupe des Alpes* (or Alpine Cup) one of the coveted trophies for navigating accuracy, driving skill and general persistence. For the Automobile Club of Marseilles and Provence picked some of the worst-paved, most devious and steepest mountain roads for their event. There's no room for squeamishness as you slide around narrow turns over the roof of the world several thousand feet above the valley floor. And always, you must be on guard for the regular traffic of the roads. An unsuspecting motorist driving against the grain of an Alpine Rally can suffer several kinds of shock at what he runs into—literally as well as figuratively. Head-on collisions are all too frequent.

On that dark night of July 10, 1953, as we turned off the coast road and headed north to Aix-en-Provence, Peter and I prepared ourselves for the all-night drive and the troubles that waited in ambush. I was still extremely sore and sensitive in several critical spots of my anatomy from the severe accident only six days before in the Cunningham, but as I had suspected, the third-class roads chosen for most of the event provided an effective if crude form of massage, and I found I loosened up as the Rally progressed.

Aix-en-Provence may be famous as one of the most beautiful and artistic cities of all France, but we had no time for it, pressing on to our first control. A shade ahead of schedule, we took the opportunity to gas; and Peter, who represented the

Sunbeam-Talbot Company from England, paid the bill. He was to handle the money of the five different nations we would pass through, and it was no small assignment to keep it straight and ready when needed, along with the car papers and passports that had to be stamped at each of the 16 customs and immigration stations on our route. He had to anticipate the Rally control points, navigating the whole trip past literally thousands of crossroads where a wrong turn could mean failure. There was no allowance for error, for time was the pressure that made the Alpine Rally a contest.

We moved up and over our first pass, the Col d'Izoard, a shade above 7000 feet and the first of a total climbing spree of some 115,000 feet for the trip. By 3 **A.M.** after the bone-chilling mountains (top down, of course), we swung sharply up again to Montgenevre, a resort town near the Italian border, altitude 5600 feet. Peter held out our pass book to be stamped with the hour and minute at the control station, and we were still right on the dot. No penalty marks yet, and the go-horsepower, 2250-cc Sunbeam was running nicely. Though it was bitterly cold up in the Hautes Alpes in the early dawn and we hurriedly put the top up, we didn't want to spend the time to put in our side curtains. We warmed ourselves reflectively with the thought that we were about to cross the same pass that the Emperor Charles VIII negotiated when he invaded Italy in 1494. Now, four and a half centuries later, and on a somewhat different mission, Peter and I dove down into the Italian plains before Turin.

Remembering from the previous year—my first try at the Alpine when my car broke down and I didn't finish the route —that the morning traffic in this big Italian city can be troublesome to Rally contestants trying to make up time, I slid the turns and corners in appropriate racing style to reach Turin with minutes to spare. We gassed up again, got our book stamped and hit the superhighway toward Milan. We had to maintain a speed of about 75 mph for an hour and a quarter, whatever the traffic conditions. From there we left the concrete for a short road leading to Monza where we had

emphasis was placed on mechanical acumen during the three hours allowed each night for servicing.)

Before we went to sleep that Saturday night in Cortina, we received official confirmation that we were doing well. Of the 102 cars to start, 40 had been penalized—10 marks for every minute ahead or behind schedule at a control point. Eleven of the cars had abandoned the contest entirely, the others continuing for the fun of it and in hopes of at least finishing, even though they no longer had a chance to win cups.

Early the next morning, we were up and off for the "round-trip" 190-mile "Circuit of the Dolomites," a highly competitive loop that included a 30-mile time test up and up to the top of the difficult Pordoi Pass and a return to Cortina.

Soon after we started up the loose gravel road I could feel the car behaving oddly, and I asked Peter to lean out and take a look at the tires. He reported that the left rear wheel was shimmying like a Hula dancer. Since I didn't want to stop until we had finished the time trial to the top of the pass, we pressed on, despite a growing sponginess in control. But when we reached a paved road on the way down the other side, I pulled up and stopped to the left of the road, so as not to block other cars positioning for a left hairpin turn just beyond. We could stop there because the Dolomite run was a "closed" circuit in the Rally, with no other traffic permitted. We could safely use the whole of the road to make our corners without fear of unexpectedly running into something coming from the opposite direction. Like Europe's closed-circuit races for sports cars, this Dolomite Circuit attracted a real mob of spectators, packing the shoulders to watch us go by. They made a gala border, the women in their bright, lace-trimmed bodices and bonnets, and the men in hiking garb with leather shorts and Tyrolean hats. For this mountain country had been part of Austria before the First World War, and the natives retained their traditions and customs.

While we were parked, our car jacked up for the wheel change, a couple of other contestants passed, took the turn

below us and went on. Then along came Dr. John Barker of England in Sunbeam-Talbot No. 505. He entered the turn too fast and started to slide. At the howl of tires, I looked up from my lug wrench and saw his car skid across the road, slam into a stone post and carry it away. The Sunbeam's tail flew into the air and the machine tumbled over the edge out of sight. We heard a sickening crash and then another, echoing through the Dolomites, while the unfortunate car and its two-man crew toppled helplessly down the mountainside. I called to Peter to finish the wheel, and ran to the brink. The Sunbeam was lying almost directly below, upside down, wedged in some rocks, its wheels still spinning. As I picked my way toward the wreck, I yelled, "Switch off the ignition!"

When I reached the smashed car, a hand reached out one of the broken rear windows, and then a man slowly crawled through. He was followed by Dr. Barker. They were all right, except for a few minor cuts, but they were pale and shaken and rather dazed, not quite seeming to accept this sudden change in their plans. The three of us climbed back up the mountainside to the road where Peter had our car ready to go.

"Say, old boy, what do we do now?" Dr. Barker said as I started to get in the car.

"Oh, you'll be all right," I reassured him. "The Rally is going through now, but we'll notify the officials about your accident, and someone will come along to pick you up."

We couldn't take extra passengers in our car, which was a two-seater, so Barker and navigator, Sleep, had to sweat it out at the hairpin. At least, they had an exciting part of the course to watch. We saw their ruined automobile again, days later. They had it hoisted back on the road, and though the body was demolished, it would still run. Game as they were, Barker and Sleep drove the wreckage back to Cannes, taking short cuts, in time for the post-Rally ceremonies and prize awards!

After changing the rear wheel, we were stuck with no spare. The loose wheel had worn the lug holes oblong, so we

couldn't use that again. So for the rest of the day's run, we simply wished for luck.

We got our wish in one particular incident shortly afterward. Toward the summit of one of the several passes, we overtook another Rally car. I tried to get by him without success because of the snowbanks that had encroached each side of the road, but when we approached a fork, he chose the right while I swung for the left on the chance that this was the right direction. I could imagine his shock when he discovered the right-hand fork ended in an impasse where a wall of snow had cascaded onto the road. We sped on, appreciating the fact that luck is indeed a major factor in the Alpine.

In the middle of the course, we had to stop for gasoline, not being able to make the 190 twisting, climbing miles on a single tank. To our surprise and disappointment we had trouble finding the gas station in Feltre, the recommended town to stop. In an attempt to make up time, for we were already 15 minutes behind schedule, I was driving like Gangbusters, as my Indianapolis friends put it. Instead of getting completely filled up, in our haste we got only three quarters of a tank and about three kilometers from the finish we ran out of gas. Since contestants were allowed to carry a can of five liters (something over a gallon) of extra gas, we quickly poured it in and made Cortina, to our surprise, 14 minutes ahead of time! We had run the last part of the course faster than we needed, unnecessarily punishing the car and the tires, and we chided ourselves for not having timed our progress more accurately. But we were still in the running without penalty marks, though the wobbling rear wheel had reduced our speed in the time test to the extent that we were nowhere near the leaders in bonus points. Eighteen more cars had drawn penalties during the day, leaving only 44 of us with perfect scores after the first two stages of the Rally. (Besides Barker's accident, Elliott's Sunbeam-Talbot crashed into a wall, and Vegler's Ferrari sedan was pretty well bashed in from having skidded into a stone abutment on the treacherous Pordoi Pass.)

The cars all seemed to cover as much ground skidding and sliding sideways to the road as they did moving forward, for snow coated the Dolomite Circuit. It had stormed there Friday night, and slush made a skating rink of the roads. Every turn in this mad tour posed a threat to the cars, the chances of success and the crews themselves.

We were back in Cortina in time for a late lunch, which was not too well received on our nervous stomachs. Though we had survived and even enjoyed some success in the first two stages, we had a new section through Germany to cover the next day, followed by the notorious Stelvio Pass into Switzerland. But our real apprehensions concerned the famous (or infamous) Gavia Pass, a rough, narrow, unguard-railed 8600-foot climb into the sky. Crack driver Maurice Gatsonides, a half-Asian Dutchman who had won first prize in the Monte Carlo Rally in January, predicted that it would be not only impossible but suicidal to try to maintain the established speed of one kilometer a minute over that cloud-shrouded, booby-trapped pass.

A long night's sleep reduced our nervous fatigue and restored some of our equilibrium for Monday's four-country tour. Starting from Cortina, we first headed north to Austria, over mountain passes, zigzagging all the way. Once across the frontier, the mountains became lower and despite a heavy rain that slowed us and an early delay for gas, we were able to reach our first control point on time.

Most border people are accommodating, recognizing the cars as Rally contestants and waving us through customs as quickly as possible. No one is expected to be smuggling, of course; yet officials seem to size us up with a practiced eye. In one of the Monte Carlo Rallies, a competitor, suspected of carrying contraband, was delayed for hours at a border while the guards practically took his car apart. He had been a potential winner but that incident canceled his chances, and elaborate apologies afterward gave the poor fellow scant consolation.

In Austria, and still on schedule, we took the famed Gross

Glockner Pass fairly easily, which was better luck than some had. Marry Sutcliffe from England, driving with his wife in a Frazer Nash, struck a stone in one of the unlighted tunnels I hat knocked his steering gear completely out of kilter. From then on, he had to back up and make two approaches for each sharp turn, which naturally ruined his performance on the hairpins. Still, the Sutcliffes took their damaged car across the finish at Cannes with just 70 marks against them—equivalent to only seven minutes' delay. Another contestant hit a bicyclist, and one of the several women in the Rally, Dr. Marie Kelleher, rolled her car all the way over and back onto its wheels. She kept on going, though at somewhat reduced speed along the rain-washed roads.

A miss in our engine stopped us for a spark plug change before pushing on to Munich, the northernmost and newest part of the Rally course. Rushing through the lovely twin towns of Garmisch and Partenkirchen, where the U. S. Army has set up a big rest home and ski center for its troops, we noted that we needed to fuel up before taking on the Alps again. Not until we had the tank full and the German attendant waiting with outstretched hand did we realize that we had taken the junket through Deutschland with too few marks. So we had to take our leave of this charming Bavarian resort amid a certain monetary confusion, stuffing a wad of lire (Italian), marks (German), francs (Swiss and French), shillings (English), schillings (Austrian) and a quarter or two in U. S. currency into the bewildered German's hands.

Passing the glacial Zugspitze on our left, on our way back to Austria, Peter shouted: "Stop! The passport's missing!" We pulled up at the side of the road and started a frantic search, fearing we'd left the document back at the gas station if not all the way back at the Austro-German frontier where we had entered. What with the gas, money and passport problems, I began to think this was just one of Peter's bad days, and I suggested that he try to get himself organized, for in a race against time like the Alpine, the navigator's performance is *the* essential element for success. This was not

sarcasm and was, in fact, an eminently polite exchange, considering that navigator-driver bickering frequently attains a pretty hot pitch in the tension and close quarters of a typical rally. For his part, Peter restrained himself manfully on occasions when I was remiss, notably when he was almost thrown from the car as I completely miscalculated a Stelvio hairpin. (On the 1950 Monte Carlo Rally, a teammate, piqued at his driver over some slight caused by the tension of the competition, simply climbed into the back seat and refused to offer any further help along the journey. The harassed driver found himself obliged to handle all navigational details by himself, a nearly impossible task.)

We located the passport on the floor of the car under Peter's seat and took off again. But I had lost sight of the other cars close to our time schedule, always a disturbing development. Keeping sight of a "gaggle" is good insurance in keeping on schedule (though it *can* be ruinous when everyone gets lazy). Yet we made the next control on time, and certainly Germany wasn't as serious a problem to us as it was to others.

In the late afternoon, we began one of the tightest sections of the whole 2000 miles—the Stelvio Pass at the border of Italy and Switzerland. This steep and often dangerous Alpine pass rises 9052 feet above sea level. Rally officials had cleverly situated their control point just over the crest and had designated the steep run up the mountain, which consisted of one hairpin after another throughout the eight and three-quarter miles, as the time test for the day. Perhaps the officials wanted the chance to cool off during that hot summer afternoon. But this test certainly didn't give the engines any chance to do likewise.

Shortly before starting the tricky Stelvio, we found we must fill up with gas to reach the nearest station on the other side. We had to stop at the first station we saw. This was unfortunate for two reasons: First, we were obliged to buy a low grade of gas which wasn't as effective on the climb as high octane, causing the engine to knock badly; and second, we

only had enough lire for 32 liters (about nine gallons). As we expected to burn about 30 liters getting up one of the highest road passes in the Alps, we were obviously shaving it a bit close. If the engine ran a little rich we stood a good chance of running out of gas. Still, perhaps because we didn't pause to look at the "surroundings of severe beauty and the wonderful panorama" (see Nagel's *Guide to Italy),* we reached the control on time, though we didn't set any records.

Down that loose-surfaced, steeply pitched road, we hugged the far right, for, as a recent Rally reconnoitering driver explained, "certain tourist traffic may be met, and the roads do not allow for any fast cornering on the wrong side." In our right-hand-drive British car, Peter was at least spared the sickening sensation in the pit of the stomach each time we slid to the sheer drop at the edge of the road.

We should have guessed that we would run out of gas before reaching St. Moritz. But we had our spare can in the trunk and lost only a few seconds that we could afford. In Switzerland, we could drive easier. The Swiss, conservative as always, are the least enthusiastic of all the nationals involved in the Rally, and they don't tolerate any special consideration. They seem to classify the inhabitants of the rest of the world as mad people who fight in wars and drive the Alpine Rally.

They insist on the usual customs procedures, not in the least concerned that a Rally competitor may be behind schedule. The average required speeds are lowest of all in Switzerland—about 30 miles an hour. You must be especially careful going through towns because Swiss police have a habit of phoning ahead when a Rally car enters so that their compatriots in uniform at the far side of town can nab the contestant on the way out if his elapsed time indicates a speed over 30. Time schedules make no allowance for any extracurricular activity in the chambers of the local justice of the peace, Swiss style. So we practically coasted the rest of the way into St. Moritz, the sun coming out for the first time that day to dry the slippery roads.

With our car locked up in the *pare ferme* and cool drinks

in hand, we reviewed with other contestants the progress of the Rally so far. There were still 68 cars in the event, 42 of them, including ours, with no marks against them. Knowing that nothing but trouble lay ahead for the overconfident, Peter resolved to stay alert and keep plugging. Though 10 cars had won Alpine Cups the year before, there was one year (1946) when none finished with a perfect record, and in 1949 only one car came through completely "clean."

St. Moritz gave us a needed day of rest. We appreciated it, for the following day brought our trail back through Italy again to Val d'Isere in the French Hautes Alpes. At 375 miles it was not a long run, but it *was* difficult and dangerous. After crossing the Bernina Pass, very twisty and loosely surfaced, we doubled back north once more to have a crack at the notorious 8600-foot Gavia. It was as bad as its reputation—a goat trail with jagged drops of thousands of feet. Near the peak, on a rock shelf, we passed a French Renault with the rear bashed in and a stalled Lancia, with its female crew. I doubted that there was passing room, but with no choice we inched by on the outside, hearing the loose rock slipping away alarmingly under our wheels. The shelf was cracked and chipped, and pieces of it continued to drop off into space as we crawled by the cars. A few hundred yards beyond, four skid marks went over the bank. Later, we found out that it was Gatsonides in his Ford. He had tumbled and bounced about 50 feet into a dry river bed, but like Dr. Barker, he got the car back on the road and drove it to Cannes. There was no headroom left for the navigator, however, the roof being caved in like a squashed beer can.

Soon we had returned to a part of the route we had traveled in the opposite direction the previous Saturday, followed by a fast run along the superhighway for some 80 miles and another 100 miles over well-surfaced Italian roads until we reached mountains again and the border between Italy and France. We sped through the ancient town of Aosta (founded in 25 **B.C.** by the Romans) and on toward the Petit St. Bernard Pass, where the time test of the day faced us. Up 7200 feet into

the clouds in something less than five miles, we twisted and turned and skidded on the narrow road. Whenever we poked our nose out of the clouds, I could make out the massive height of the majestic 15,872-foot Mont Blanc a few miles to our right—a thrilling sight. Throughout the climb, the "tail wagging" of our Sunbeam attested to the smoothness of our deteriorating tires (no replacement of the original set was allowed), and I was concerned that we might not reach the approaching end of the Rally with our record still intact. (The tough day's drive had knocked a dozen more competitors out of the running for Alpine Cups.)

In France, at the resort town of Val d'Isere, we got a welcome night's sleep. The last 360 miles were reported to be the most difficult of the whole event, and a profile map of the route looked like an X-ray of a shark's jaw. One nasty section, only 40 miles long, took more than an hour to cover, rising over two mile-high passes, then once more toward the longed-for warmth of the Cote d'Azur. The tunnels through these mountains were particularly "dodgy." Not lined with tile or stone, they dripped water constantly. Ink-black and completely unlighted, they were pocked with deep chuckholes. Without a second to spare, we would plunge into these dark pits from the brilliant outdoor sunlight, and I confess I couldn't see a thing. I had a creeping sensation in my scalp when I thought of the unseen jagged rocks protruding from the uneven tunnel roof. I don't know how much Peter could see, but he had no choice other than to trust me as we pounded and slithered through.

Falling rocks were also a major problem, not so much because they might land on us in our open car, but because they obstructed the road. Swinging around a curve, we would occasionally skid toward an unexpected boulder in our path, whereupon I would give the wheel a violent wrench and we would barely squeak by.

At Brian^on we remembered to gas up, and struck out for the timed climb of the Izoard Pass, again a little less than five miles in length, following the same route we had taken Friday

night during the first stage of the Rally. From one pass to another, along poorly maintained back roads, loose and narrow, up and down and all over again, we pushed our car as much as we dared, hoping tires, engine, transmission and a score of overworked components would carry us through. At some control points we barely skidded up to the official in time to save a penalty, but eventually we reached Grasse, France's famous city of perfumes. We didn't stop for purchases, however. From there it was a downhill dash to Cannes and the finish line at the harbor.

On this road to Cannes, the steering gear of another competitor's machine previously damaged in an encounter with a kilometer stone collapsed unexpectedly. The car missed a turn and hurtled over a cliff. Though George Hartwell escaped by jumping out, his co-driver was seriously injured.

It was late afternoon when we reached the famous seaside home of the bikini. And we were on time, having done the entire circuit on the established schedule! Immediately, we had to pass our final test—the inspection and functioning trial. Windshield wipers, brake lights, horn—everything necessary to the operation of a car on normal highways—had to work adequately in order to avoid penalty. And all the parts you started with still had to be with the car. Serial numbers had been recorded at the start, and any unnumbered parts had been painted with a special chemical difficult to duplicate. Though the Alpine Rally is, in a way, sort of a gentleman's land cruise, nothing is taken for granted. This cautious inspection prevents things being done in the heat of the moment that might be regretted later.

Many an optimistic contestant loses out in the last miles. That happened to the Fabre brothers, Rene and Jacques. In the final miles before Cannes, their little Panhard engine began to gasp and ping under the load, and it staggered across the finish a minute late. This was enough to penalize them 10 marks and drop them from the cup-winning circle.

After our inspection, we had to take a short running test to prove that the car operated properly: forward from a dead

stop, across a line on the road, stop, back across the line, then ahead and around a barrel back to the beginning, where you must stop with the front wheels over a line, rear wheels behind it. Times are taken on this test, too, as on the hill climbs during the various stages of the Rally, with total bonus points determining over-all and class winners.

After we had done the test once, I went to the hotel. I was singing in the shower when someone blew in the door and notified me I had to do the test over again. It was our fault, Peter's and mine, because we had failed to follow the rules which specified that each car was required to run the test twice. I quickly dressed and rushed back to the proving ground.

We passed the second time and had, at last, won our *Coupe des Alpes* for a perfect score, which gave me the honor of being the first American to do so. After cocktails and dinner at the elegant old Hotel Carlton on the Croisette, awards were presented, with the amazing total of 25 cars winning *Coupes*. (This surprised the sponsors so much they didn't have enough cups to go around, so the French winners had to wait for theirs in the mail.)

Out of the 102 starters, we finished 20th over-all and sixth in our class of 29 cars between 2000 and 2600 cc. The little rear-engined German Porsches did extremely well, finishing one, two and four with an Italian Ferrari taking third place. Of the six Sunbeam-Talbots teamed together by the factory, four of us won Alpine Cups, including Sheila Van Damm who earned a *Coupe des Dames* as the sole woman driver to finish without penalty this year, and only the second to do so in the 16 years of the event.

Late that night, Stirling Moss, who had duly won his *Coupe des Alpes* with the highest point score for Sunbeams (and 14th place in the general classification), Leslie Johnson, Peter Collins and I flew out to the next race in England. It was a bright moonlit night, and we could clearly see the snow-capped peaks and the dark chasms through which we had all struggled for the past few days, alternately freezing in

the Alpine wind and choking in the hot summer dust of the valleys, cursing our luck and our abused machines. We passed in a matter of minutes the rough terrain we had spent hours crossing on the tortuous gravel roads. That had been the hard way. But that was the way we would always prefer to do it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

From Germany to Georgia

AFTER the Alpine we moved out of our small, crowded French apartment and, through friends, found a very comfortable house for rent in Neuilly, only five minutes from the heart of Paris. Since I would quite likely be driving in continental events for the next two to three months, we settled in for the summer, relieved to have found such "an utterly charming place." (In the words of Elizabeth.)

The place *was* nice. The outside garden had its own fountain and the house itself was built of white-painted stone, with graceful, shuttered windows and a tall black door under a canopy of colored glass. The center hall was tiled in yellow and blue, with Venetian teardrop chandeliers and delicately made white satin furniture. Of course it was not the ideal spot for our active two-year-old, but Johnny had the front yard to go wild in (complete with a very climbable chestnut tree), and he was held in a more subdued state indoors by his two grandmothers and Liz.

The news that I was sought to drive a Cooper-Bristol Formula II machine in the Aix-les-Bains Grand Prix race in late July was passed along by Harry Schell (the well-known Franco-American driver). Harry told me the offer was 32 per cent of 250,000 francs, plus hotel expenses. Would I come?

Of course I agreed, as this would be my first chance at the

fast, fenderless single-seat Grand Prix cars—and I was anxious to have a go in a genuine GP race under almost any terms. I contacted Alan Brown, the team manager, on practice day at Aix-les-Bains, and he handed over the Cooper-Bristol. When I sat in the small cockpit my knees were wedged against the instrument panel! With the pedals adjusted, I jammed my coat under me to give a bit more leg room. Now, at least, I fitted in the car, though it was a tight squeeze. (GP cars are simply not designed with lanky Americans in mind.)

Mechanical trouble plagued us from the first lap of practice. The engine was cutting out on the hairpins and it would not rev on demand for downshifts; then both first and second gears flatly refused to engage.

Back at the garage we worked on the gearshift and clutch stop, and Bruno the mechanic promised to try to cure the engine ills by the next day's events. (The Grand Prix was to be run in two heats.) But the car seemed far from well prepared, and I mentally predicted trouble as I took it out again for more practice.

But soon I began to really enjoy myself. After manhandling the massive inertia of the Cunningham it was great fun to whip this light (approx. 1400 lbs.), agile little machine through the turns. And the short, tight little round-the-houses circuit was as charming as the old resort town on Lake Geneva itself. It ran along a picturesque canal lined with fine buildings and docked sailboats with their pennants fluttering, then down a narrow back street past shops and fruit stalls, onto the broad boulevard flanked by gardens of bright flowers, to the hairpin curve, then along the beach—a flash of striped awnings and bikinis—back to the starting line along the canal.

Many of the top international drivers had attended. Peter Collins and Lance Macklin were in their element, with at least half a dozen pretty girls to share. John (HWM) Heath was on hand with his attractive Laura as were Trintignant, Marimon, Behra, etc. We all thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, taking a cool dip between practice sessions and finding much to be amused over. "So the car's a pig," I told myself. "Never

mind, it's a fine race and with a lot of luck the old Cooper *might* go after all!"

But on the warm-up lap the following day the engine stuttered and misfired again, fouling the plugs. We changed them and Alan shook his head. "Looks bad," he admitted. "Just run as long as you can."

I decided that my only chance to place—though that chance was slim indeed—was to simply keep going and avoid pit stops, as we had neither time nor the proper equipment to make repairs.

I qualified behind the Gordinis and Marimon's Maserati, with Peter Collins beside me on the grid. At the flag, the Cooper misfired off the line and I was last away, feeling like a clown. Alan had mounted small tires at the rear to reduce the gear ratio (having no alternate gears with him), but this also reduced road adhesion. I found that the car would not behave in the turns as it had in practice, and with the gasping engine slowing me still further I was simply outdistanced by all the leaders. It was a depressing experience, and I felt awkward and foolish trying to stay out of everyone's way. To add to my discomfort, the gearshift knob refused to remain tight and had to be twisted on again after each shift. Soon my palm was raw from this—and I was tempted to abandon the entire abortive effort. But I did not; like show business, racing demands the "press on" policy for better or for worse, and so I continued.

Collins slipped his HWM by inside the hairpin as my engine faltered, and I could see by his wide smile that he felt he'd neatly dispatched "the Yank." However, as he came out of the next turn he slid on a patch of oil, smashing straight into a row of hay bales. Grinning wickedly, I made an appropriately rude gesture to compound his embarrassment. But he had his revenge a few laps later when he got his car back into action and neatly passed me again.

Although it seemed interminable, the race finally ended. It was soon time for the second and final heat—and this session was to prove somewhat less frustrating.

In fact, after about three laps, the engine began to run distinctly better, and I felt that now I had a chance to bid for a decent position. My spirits rose as I saw that the car would respond properly to the throttle, and I began moving up. The Frenchman, Cabantous, with whom I had been dicing rather vigorously, slid into the curb on the narrow S turn and sent a hay bale spinning across the road directly in the path of my Cooper. I missed it with the front wheels, but my right rear caught the bale solidly, and it exploded in a yellow shower. Still, I had suffered no damage, and was able to push on, eventually passing several cars I had not previously been able to "get a look at" in the first heat. My final position (fourth over-all in the official listings) delighted me as I had considered the car hopeless after the initial lap of the afternoon.

Once we'd driven our cars into the pits most of us changed into swimsuits and headed for the beach. After a few cool drinks and a dip in the blue-green waters we agreed that, mechanical troubles or no, win or lose, Aix-les-Bains was indeed a fine place to go motor racing.

2.

Originally, Briggs had planned to stay in Europe and enter his Cunningham team at the Nurburgring in August, but my wreck at Rheims (along with other factors) had changed his mind, and I was left without a mount for the *XVI Grosser Preis Von Deutschland.* But as every serious racing driver is obliged to know the Ring, and though I had been there twice before, I still felt I had much to learn about driving a fast car on that complex circuit. So I planned to go there for the show if nothing else, hoping that I might be able to get a ride for one or two of the weekend's races.

In line with this, I telegraphed Herr Porsche that I was available for the production up to 1500-cc race, and that I would be most happy to handle a Porsche for him. I also had some hope of snagging a Maserati in the main event for sports

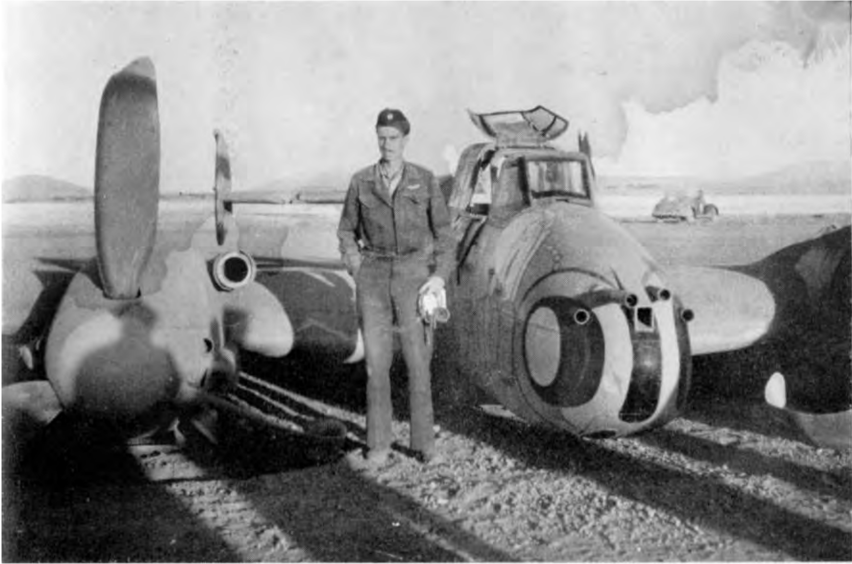
cars, since its scheduled driver, Gonzales, had crashed in Portugal and was not yet strong enough for the Ring.

I drove down with pressman Barnard Cahier, savoring the trip through the pine-covered mountains. Rows of bright streamers on poles along the traffic-congested roads into the circuit indicated the popularity of the coming event, and enthusiasts swarmed the course itself. (It is open to the public all year round, closing only for practice and competition.) There seemed to be a thousand motorcycles converging on the Ring, most of them handled with a spirited skill peculiar to the racing atmosphere.

In the garage area I found the Porsche group, managed by the congenial von Hanstein, who greeted me with his warm "Welcome, old friend," and told me that a production coup£ *was* available, providing its present pilot, Mile. Gilberte Thirion (one of Europe's top women drivers) would agree to my taking over. I had always respected this girl, not only for her beauty and intelligence but also for her genuine ability behind a racing wheel. (In one Porsche race she was a full two minutes ahead of all the men when forced to retire.) Thus, feeling something of a villain, I approached the charming Gilberte as she pulled the car into the pit area after a trial run on the circuit. "By all means, take it, John," she told me, smiling at my guilty look. "It has been raining and I do not like the rain here. I will be content to simply *watch* the races."

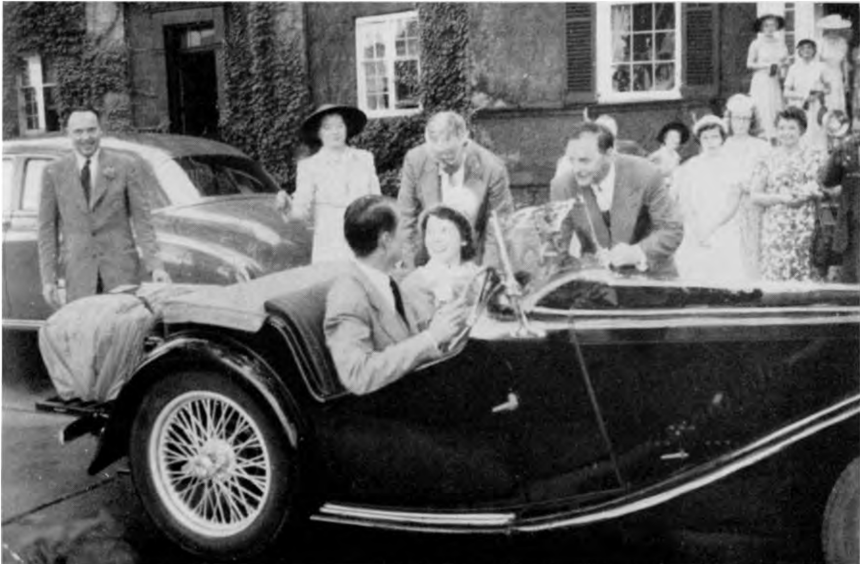
As the Maserati I had hoped to drive had been withdrawn by the factory I was especially grateful to have this car. The little Porsche coupe looked solid and sounded healthy, and since I had driven one much like it here in 1952, I knew that the car could be trusted to the limit. It would be well prepared and dependable; the rest was up to me. (And after my recent experience with the malfunctioning Cooper-Bristol this was a distinct relief.)

Following six laps of practice the next morning I brought the Porsche to the pre-grid for the production race. I still was far from knowledgeable regarding the vast 14-mile circuit



1943: Captain Fitch stands beside a captured ME 110 after he crash-landed the German bomber in Algeria.

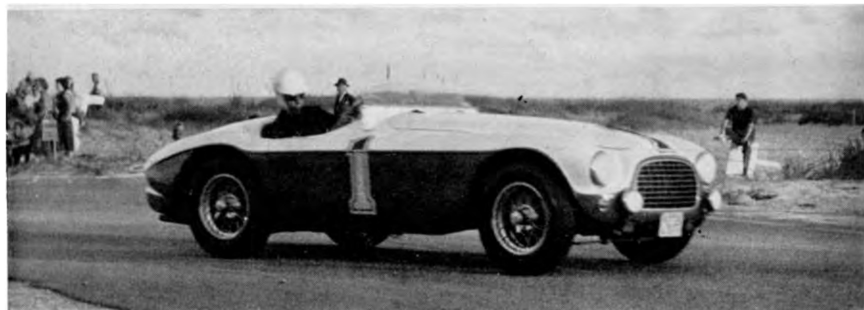
June, 1949: Fitch embarks on his honeymoon trip with his new bride, Elizabeth, in their MG-TC.



Robert James Witt

June, 1951: Fitch and Co by Whitmore roll the F-W Special into the garage prior to scoring a class win first time out at Bridgehampton.

December, 1951: Speeding to victory in Bill Spear's potent 4.1 -liter Ferrari at Palm Beach Shores.



September*, 7952: W/fh (7e/f *to right) Lofty England, John G. Bennett, Max Hoffman, and Sir William Lyons at Watkins Glen in the C-type Jaguar.

November, 1952: Surrounded by a crowd of Mexican fans, Fitch brings in the Mercedes 300 SL for gas during the brutal 5-day Pan American road race.

Richard F. Adams

February, 1953: Elizabeth Fitch shares her husband's triumph after another Cunningham victory at Tampa Air Force Base.

July, 1953: The battered, crushed cockpit of Fitch's C-5 Cunningham after his spectacular end-over-end crash at Rheims, France.

Rootes Motors

July, 1953: Directly following Rheims, Fitch races against time and treacherous mountain roads in the Alpine Rally, driving a Sunbeam-Talbot.

July, 1953: Fitch cracks a joke at the Alpine victory dinner in London.

H. R. Clayton

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July, 1953: Driving a Cooper-Bristol at Aix-les-Bains in France. This was the first Grand Prix event for Fitch and he scored an over-all fourth there.

September, 1953: Fitch, in the No. 26 Frazer-Nash, gets an outside start in Ireland's Tourist Trophy race near Belfast.

Copyright Belfast Telegraph

October, 1953: In the big Cunningham at Turner Air Force Base in Albany. Fitch won the 50-mile race that afternoon.

November, 1953: Fitch comes home winner in the big East vs. West race at March Field in California. Here he receives the huge trophy from actor Dick Powell, while actress June Allyson waits to deliver the victory kiss.

Trend

1954: Scraping through the arch at Ravenna for an action sequence in the Fox film The Racers.

1954: Passing the staged wreck of a Ferrari (note painted-in skid marks) in the "Mille Miglia" scene in The Racers.

1954: The "Burano" stable for the picture. Note Fitch-designed insignia on truck. (Fitch is third from right.)

1954: With one of the Grand Prix "Buranos" used in the film, at the Nurburgring.

G. Ferri

May, 1955: Into the narrow bridge at Popoli during the Mille Miglia. (Note the left rear tire where it was buffed against a curb in Pescara.)

May, 1955: Crossing the finish line at Brescia after a brilliant class victory in Italy's Mille Miglia with a Mercedes 300 SL. No other American has ever matched this performance in the grueling 1000-mile event.

Sunday Post

June, 1955: With the Mercedes team director, Alfred Neubauer, drivers Fitch and Pierre Levegh discuss the condition of the Le Mans circuit prior to the race itself.

June, 1955: A column of gray smoke marks the spot where Levegh plunged off the course in the Mercedes 300 SLR in auto racing's greatest tragedy. In the foreground is the battered Austin-Healey of Lance Macklin. Levegh was killed, and with him over 80 French spectators.

September, 7955: Fitch in the SLR awaits the start of the Tourist Trophy race. He shared the winning car with England's Stirling Moss.

September, 1955: Fitch cranks the Mercedes around a tight curve on the tricky Irish circuit. Note body damage caused when Moss *left the road.*

Scafidi

October, 1955: Leading Castellotti's Ferrari at the Targa Florio in Sicily.

October, 7955: In the Sicilian mountains with the SLR.

Worner

1955: The Mercedes *team (left to right): Fitch, Titterington, Collins,* Moss, *Fangio and Kling.*

July, 1958: At Lime Rock, in the 2-liter Maserati. Fitch placed third in SCCA championship listings with this car.

Bill Hughes

and its many turns, but the tight little machine gave me confidence, and I was looking forward to the battle.

In view of the reputation I was beginning to acquire, it was perhaps not the wisest move to compete in a minor race of this nature. I was pitting myself against the "Porsche experts," who know the Ring intimately, and who had developed their cars to a very high state of racing efficiency. My factory Porsche was sound enough, but Fd been warned that most of the other Porsches had been "worked over" and were faster. But I refused to worry about the impression I might make on certain important observers and grabbed the chance to compete, and to learn more about the Ring. Then, as now, I took great pleasure in the sport of racing, whatever the event or the issues.

Our group (about two dozen machines) moved up to the line and Baron von Diergardt held the flag aloft as we revved our engines, poised for the signal. I was positioned in the approximate middle of the pack, between two other Porsches, and we all got away in a neat falange, accelerating evenly down the wide front straight into the first turn. The closely matched performance of these cars kept them grouped; no one was able to gain an advantage for the moment, and seeing the leaders three and four abreast through that first lap was both comical and frightening. I was managing to hold my position into the wide left after passing the pits, but in the next turn a tan coupe slipped inside near the apex and I was forced to brake and ease over to keep from sideswiping him, and he went past. We plunged into a pine-flanked valley, winding down through the next turn flat-out, slowing for the one that followed, which was trickier to negotiate. The tan coupe ahead of me and a blue one entered the turn together, both sliding at exaggerated angles. It was no surprise when they both lost control, the tan Porsche broadsliding to the left in a slow arc and the blue one spinning fast in the opposite direction after a desperate attempt to recover. Both cars were looping down the road in front of me, almost seeming to touch nose to tail as they rotated. I was too close to brake

effectively, and it was too late to dodge around them. But, by a remarkable coincidence, the two revolving cars presented their sides to my path simultaneously, and I slipped through the sudden gap between them, swerving to the left to avoid the nose of the blue one as it swung about. Naturally this near miss cost me some distance, but I was too grateful for that incredible coincidence to worry about delay. Only one thing mattered at the moment: I was in the clear and completely untouched!

Several times during the following lap I was reminded that I had not yet properly mastered certain turns. I'd come out of a blind bend to find I was going too slowly for the next curve. I determined to improve on these next time around.

The final section of the Ring is comprised of ridges and hills, broken by two bridges, and here I could see how far ahead and behind my opponents were. Those ahead seemed alarmingly distant, but on the other hand no one seemed close enough behind to threaten whatever position I was now holding. My best bet for improvement was a maroon Porsche coupe about 300 yards in front (all others were out of striking range). So, I began to concentrate on catching him.

On the wide front straight by the stands I seemed to be barely creeping along, though the car was at its absolute top speed. The broad road gave this illusion after the narrow run between the mountains. In the pit an official held up five fingers as I passed, which meant I was holding fifth over-all. Fine! Nailing that maroon coupe would give me fourth, with a chance to finish in the money if all went well with my car and if any of the leaders should have trouble.

I reached the spot where the two Porsches had spun in front of me and saw them both off the road, the tan one upside down and the blue one in a ditch, their drivers standing morosely beside them. The snaking black tire marks down the center of the road were my own, and again I appreciated my very good fortune at getting through unscathed.

A series of blind turns—on which I was still a bit uncertain—cost me some ground in my close pursuit of the coup£, but

I regained this as the lap progressed. I was just a few yards behind when we swept into a fast-climbing bend at about 75 mph. The maroon Porsche shot straight off the road, through a fence, and rolled into an ill-placed car park for spectators. It looked fairly serious and I hoped that the pressure of my car behind him had not sent him off the road. (I was later relieved to discover that both the driver and the spectators were okay if considerably shaken, though several cars were "knocked about somewhat" as the British announcer put it.)

So now I had my fourth spot. I passed other derelict machines parked at the road's edge, and wondered if any of the three leaders could be among them. I reminded myself again that to have any final place I must finish, a reminder heightened by several "close ones" on parts of the circuit with which I was beginning to assume familiarity. So, with no one in sight to pursue, or to overtake me, I settled down to a steady pace to ride out the race.

On the last lap I thought I recognized Nathan, one of the top Porsche "specialists" who had won this event the previous year, walking along the road back to the pits. Since he was certain to have been among the leaders I now had a good chance to finish third. Which was precisely what happened; I got the checkered flag for third over-all, behind a pair of Swiss drivers, and Herr Porsche generously congratulated me for my efforts. It had been a most enjoyable battle—and I am still pleased (and not a little amazed) to think that no German driver finished ahead of me that day on the Ring.

3-

An abortive attempt at the Irish Tourist Trophy in September resulted in a DNF (did not finish) for co-driver Pete Wilson and me when our team Frazer-Nash lost a wheel (with Pete up).

From Ireland I went directly to Monza, Italy, where I had been offered a tryout on a GP Maserati one week prior to the

Italian Grand Prix. I got in only four laps the first day on the sweeping, fast circuit, but they were all exciting. I found that the car broke away very easily in the rear, but that it could be drifted in this attitude with security. And the steering, engine and transmission proved a joy. The brake action was somewhat delayed, due to long pedal travel, but it was firm and solid.

The next day I took a few more laps, though I was forced to slow for a truck picking up bales at the *Curva Grande.* The truck was in a different spot each lap, so I had to exercise caution there, but I did have a fine time in the high-speed bends of the historic old circuit, and liked the Maser more with each lap I put behind me.

No real hopes for me were involved in this test, and it was more a friendly gesture on the part of Maserati than anything else. They had a full team for the season (Fangio^ Gonzales, Bonetto and young Marimon) and it was not likely that any of these competent hands would be replaced by an American sports car driver. I'd enjoyed the Maser (and can still hear the shrill note of the finely tuned engine) but by experience and inclination I was more disposed toward the "fender and lights" machines—cars that serve the double purpose of touring and sport, at least theoretically.

However, in the Italian Grand Prix itself that following weekend I got a ride with HWM. Lance Macklin and the Frenchman Cabantous were driving the other team cars, and though we all did our best these tired machines were no match for Ferrari and Maserati.

Mine was best-placed of the HWMs at the start, but was delayed when Bira's Maserati balked. But soon I got under way and was beginning to be comfortable on the circuit when my engine cut out and I was forced into the pits. John Heath wrenched off the accelerator linkage, welded a break, and refitted it—all in five short minutes! Then I was back in the fight again, admittedly suspicious of the machine. A few laps later I was back to have a fuel line tightened (it had been spraying me with alcohol). Finally the engine seized and I

walked back to our pit—a slow, thought-provoking way to travel in a race, though quite dependable. Lance and the Frenchman were already out, so mine had been the last of the HWMs.

The race was developing into one of the all-time classics, a battle of champions in which Ascari, Fangio and Farina fought wheel-to-wheel from the start. Lance and I went up to the *Curua Grande* to watch the action. Ascari had been leading during several laps near the end, so I was able to get good odds from I,ance on my wager that Fangio would be the victor. The three aces bored into the final lap, still battling desperately. Then Ascari crashed on the last curve, diverting Farina, thus allowing Fangio (and Fitch) to win.

4-

Two strangers approached me at the pits after this race, one dressed like a New York insurance board executive, the other like a Florida banker. I presumed that these fellow Americans were rich enthusiasts vacationing in Europe, and I must admit I did not look forward, at the moment, to discussing the merits of the Offenhauser power plant vs. Ferrari or hearing a long, repititious account of how they had wrestled their new Cadillac over the St. Gotthard Pass. But I quickly became interested in them when I heard they were the producer and writer on a racing film to be made the next season from an exceptionally good novel (*The Racer)* written by driver Hans Reusch. The sudden and involuntary vision of two of the most desperately hectic occupations (racing and picture making) compelled to function together on a European circus itinerary was almost alarming. This would be the grandest riot since the sack of Rome!

Julian Blaustein, the producer, and Charlie Kaufman, the writer, were disarmingly stable and sane. Kaufman was having some problems bringing his script up to date and orienting himself to a sport which was new to him. Neither of them had ever seen a road race, but they had almost memorized the

book that their company, 20th Century-Fox, had bought and had read some others on the subject. They were catching on fast.

Since I was obviously preoccupied at the moment, they suggested seeing me later in Paris to talk about the picture, as I was one of the few Americans racing in Europe at that lime.

Weeks later, in a velvet-lined suite in Paris which would have done credit to their best set designer, we talked it over with the author of the book, Hans Reusch.

Hans, a composed sort of Swiss, sat stiffly on the straightest chair in the room. He'd survived a serious crash in his Ferrari just a month before. The extent of his painful injuries was still unknown and he couldn't plan to help with the picture. The conversation was general—one might say exploratory—because of Julian's and Charlie's insatiable curiosity about every aspect of racing life.

A professional script writer, Charlie had to get the feel of this particular world as he had gotten inside other worlds in the pictures he had worked on before. A telling professional asset was his own personal warmth and natural kindliness, a sympathetic key to the confidences and emotions of the people he dramatized. He was a small, graying man you would never notice in a crowd, but once you have talked with him, you don't forget him. My wife, who was with me at this conference, was an unwieldy eight months pregnant but after a few minutes of conversation with charming Charlie, she felt like Gina Lollabrigida.

A constantly ringing phone and endless knocks at the door produced the expected atmosphere of chaos and confusion one associates with Hollywood affairs. Telegrams, messages and deliveries continually interrupted Julian's questions about the cars and drivers, etc., and Charlie's interest in odd racing situations, slang expressions and current terms of endearment peculiar to the trade. When the phone rang, Charlie answered the door. When the doorbell rang, he invariably picked up the phone with undaunted good will.

Charlie told us that the film would use the same theme and many of the incidents from the book. This, he assured us, was not a superfluous statement among movie makers. The story was summed up for me:

"John, this is a *spectacle*! ... big as all outdoors in Cinemascope and color. Everything! Big, sweeping action roaring from one side of the wide screen to the other. This is the kind of picture they're *crying* for now. Action and violence so real you can feel it. Big stars. A big budget. Two and a half million. About a young Italian race driver with a mean streak. He double-crosses his buddies and even his girl friend to get to the top. To win. He wins and everybody turns against him. He's on top and alone and he begins to slip. He goes from bad to worse and right at the bottom, when nothing means anything to him any more and he is about to smash himself up on purpose, he gets a hold of himself. He loses a race to save a friend and everything comes back to him. He's a human being again. Oke?"

The scene of the action would be the racing circuits of Europe... from Italy's rocky passes in the Apennines to Monte Carlo's palm-lined avenues on the Riviera where the roar of engines would shatter the sunny peace; to the bright wheat and poppy plains of Rheims, and the brooding pine valleys of Germany's Eifel Mountains. It all sounded great to me.

We talked for an hour and the idea was dropped that I might be asked to join the filming unit as technical adviser. No doubt they would need a lot of help. I didn't know what racing I would be doing the next season aside from the Cunningham at Le Mans and Rheims. The idea of helping to make a technically accurate picture of my favorite pastime, introducing it to literally millions of people who had never seen it, was tremendously appealing. Road racing was, in effect, a new thing at home. There was more curiosity about it than dependable knowledge, and a widely distributed romantic film with an accurate racing background could, almost by itself, establish its form and fascination in the public

mind. No less appealing was the thought of growing rich for a summer's work. (I only hoped the general conception of the movie world's wealth and generosity was correct.) No final plans were made and we parted with a rather loose date to meet when I went to California to race in the fall.

As we left, the phone rang and Charlie patiently answered the door.

5-

Monza had been my final race of the European season, and we repacked our baggage, now numbering 20 pieces, for the trip back to Connecticut. It had been a stimulating year: the Monte Carlo Rally in January, the Mille Miglia in April, Le Mans in June, Rheims, the Alpine and Aix-les-Bains in July, the Nurburgring in August, the Tourist Trophy and Monza in September. And now home again for the Sowega event in Georgia, scheduled for late October.

Once again it was a race with the stork, for Elizabeth gave birth to our second boy, Christopher, on the morning of October 23, 1953—and I was forced to leave for Albany that same afternoon. But again, Liz gave me her blessing, assuring me she'd be fine until I returned.

For the Albany event (called Sowega because of its location in SOuth-WEst, GA.) I was back at the helm of a blue-and-white Cunningham roadster, one of four team cars Briggs had in the lists against the Ferraris, Allards, et al.

Competition was stiff, with some 53 cars lined up behind the starter. There were three team Allards (one of them driven by Zora Arkus-Duntov, whom I was later to work closely with on the SS Corvette); Kling and von Hanstein were over from Europe with Porsche Spyders and three Ferraris were on hand: a 4.1 for Bill Spear, another for Phil Hill and a 2.7 for Bill Lloyd. It shaped into a battle.

After a rolling lap (Indianapolis style) the field was released and I grabbed the number one spot with my C-4. Our team strategy called for me to go hard with engine and brakes,

saving tires in the corners, and try to finish the race without a pit stop. Phil Walters was to set a killing pace in an effort to blow up the Ferraris, then pit for fuel and tires, while I moved up to take the lead. In this race, however, our strategy did not work. Phil soon passed me and Spear was right behind him with the red 4.1, sounding mean and sharp. George Huntoon slid into a marker barrel early in the going and retired his Jaguar. I made no serious attempt to stay with the leaders, yet I was going hard enough to be within striking range when the competition began to falter in response to Phil's blistering pace.

Which didn't take long. As the Spear-Walters battle raged, several machines fell by the wayside. Lloyd's 2.7 Ferrari was out and an Allard retired with a bad clutch. By lap 14, both Porsches were in the pits with fuel pump trouble, another Allard had called it a day and Hill's Ferrari ran out of oil. Walters had a 34-second lead on Spear's 4.1, but at half distance he came in for gas, tires and minor adjustments.

Now I was in second, with Spear far ahead of me, pulling away. I was still favoring my Cunningham in the corners, particularly in the right bends, hoping to make my tires last through the race. Phil had put two of the Ferraris out of action, but Spear was still going strong and sounded healthy. When his lead increased to a full 2 minutes 34 seconds, I got the MO sign from our pit, and began to give the car everything it could take in a last effort to close the gap. (Phil had been delayed in the pits and was now running well behind both of us.)

I'd reduced Spear's lead by 26 seconds when my brakes began locking. In the first instance I slid to a complete stop, wheels locked, at the end of the straight; later, I had to dodge through a gap in the marker barrels, stopping for the second time off course. I knew then that I had no hope of catching Spear.

He won the race; I was second and Phil finished in third spot. Jim Kimberly brought his 4.1 Ferrari in ahead of Briggs and Charlie Moran in the other two team Cunninghams, thus

splitting our ranks. My tires were all completely worn, and the right front had only a lap or two remaining. This was the "end of the line" that we had reluctantly anticipated. It would take more than tactics, hard driving and luck to bring a Cunningham in ahead of the new 4.1 Ferrari, but I was nonetheless quite eager for the opportunity to tangle with Spear's 4.1 again.

In just two weeks—at California's March Field—I was to *have* that opportunity.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Victory in the Promised Land

As THE 1953 Mexican Road Race was coming up in late November, I agreed to drive another Chrysler for Carl Kiekhaefer, but the November 7th race at March Field in Riverside, California, preceded this event.

On the afternoon of the 5th, I took a plane for Los Angeles. In Hollywood I again talked to Julian Blaustein, the Fox producer, that evening about working with Fox on *The Racers* but no conclusions were reached since the film was still in the "uncertain" category.

However, as a potential technical adviser for his studio, Julian invited me to visit the 20th Century-Fox lot the next morning with Charlie Kaufman, and like most tourists I soon found myself fascinated with this artificial wonderland. When we arrived, via Kaufman's elegant, chauffeured Cadillac, we were informed that no films were in progress at the moment on any of the sound stages, but that we were free to tour the huge 400-acre back lot.

We first took a look inside one of the buildings in which props were stored—and the interior was amazing. Here were soda-parlor stools, spears, antique Persian stringed instruments, entire office switchboards, clocks of all descriptions, jewelry, desks, totem poles, drums, fake walls stacked like playing cards, furniture from various periods, anchor chains

and pool tables. Kaufman told me that all four floors were jammed with such items, worth at least five million dollars.

The back lot was even *more* incredible. Here was an entire three dimensional man-made world, complete with a portable sky (an immense piece of painted canvas as tall as an apartment house, with sliding stands for adding clouds or new shades of blue). Here were giant wind machines, a forest of trees with no tops (for light), oil wells, a railroad station with a steam locomotive waiting on the tracks beside it, Fifth Avenue buses, an early U. S. stockade, jousting fields hung with bright banners, rural villages and western main streets, the downtown section of a typical eastern city (with wooden fire escapes painted to resemble steel), old taxis, a miniature ocean with a four-masted schooner riding the water, medieval castles, Egyptian sets with fake plaster busts, high-spired churches, log cabins, African huts—a fantastic mak^-believe kingdom through which we slowly drove our modern black glory-wagon. There were so many discordant impressions, wrenching one back and forth through time, distance and culture, that it was dizzying. Charlie could see that I was impressed.

Saturday morning I climbed into the C-4 Cunningham and rolled out to check the car and size up this interesting 314-mile airport circuit. With a sooo-foot front straight and a 5600-foot back straight the course promised some fast lap times, but my C-4 was giving me a lot of trouble on the turns, plowing badly and locking its brakes as it had done at Sowega.

Back at the hangar-garage we removed the extra sway bar that had recently been installed, cut the stiffening rib on the back of the brake shoes to make them more flexible and adjusted the shocks. I hoped this would do the trick.

Race day: Sunday, November 8, 1953. The main event, for 50 laps, saw our Cunningham on the grid with some 30 other machines including three 4.1 Ferraris (Spear, Kimberly and Sterling Edwards), Masten Gregory's C-Jaguar, Indy winner Troy Ruttman's big Mercury-powered Kurtis, Californian Bill Pollack's Cad-Special with a Fiberglas body, Tom

Bamford's Allard—along with smaller threats such as the Ernie McAfee 2-liter Siata V-8. I was wary of my C-4, still not sure of the brakes and suspension, but hoping that they'd be okay after the efforts of the previous afternoon. I very much wanted to win this one over Spear (in case Phil didn't) to prove that the sun had not yet set on the Cunningham, but I felt my chances were only fair at best, depending on luck and the condition of my C-The -mile jagged swing around the macadam runways and taxi strips, narrow hairpins and wide, flat-out corners, would give tires and brakes a severe test, and once again, as at Sowega, I was going to try for the full distance without pitting for gas or rubber.

Jointly sponsored by the SCCA and the U. S. Strategic Air Command, this was advertised as the first big meeting between East and West—although one of California's best drivers, Phil Hill, was not in the contest. The fans packed in for a record gate of 70,000, filling the special bleacher seats to overflowing and crowding the four miles of wooden snow fencing around the circuit.

At 2 **P.M.** we lined up for the start. I had drawn a good position in the second row and should have moved out nicely; instead, when the flag dropped, I simply spun my wheels as the pack roared around me. A light film of sand on the runway had acted like oil under my wheels, and when I finally obtained enough traction to roll ahead by changing to third gear I knew I had a lot of ground to make up on the leaders.

Walters was ahead in the C-5, with Spear in second; Kimberly and Ruttman were battling for third. But I was moving up, having passed most of the field by lap 3. On the next tour I edged by Kimberly and closed on Ruttman for third. I caught Troy on the outside of a fast right coming onto the back straight at about 110. When we were side by side neither he nor I wished to back off and lose the third-place slot. But our mutual stubbornness exceeded the limits of elementary physics, and sawing desperately at our respective steering wheels, we slid through a patch of sand well past the circuit

markers. I did get by but as we accelerated down the straight A1 Torres, the starter, "scolded" us both with a wagging flag as we passed the line.

Phil was still leading Spear up ahead while I chased both of them, greatly relieved to discover that my brakes were functioning as they should and that the C-4 was solid and stable through the turns—a vast improvement over practice.

I was saving my tires, particularly on those clawing right turns which predominated on the zigzag, clockwise circuit. The 135-degree turn at the end of the long back straight was one of the worst, but the brakes brought me easily down from 150 to 60, allowing me to take it smoothly.

Phil's C-5 was faltering. Low oil pressure forced him into the pits as Spear swept into the lead with the howling red 4.1. Ruttman was out of the race with connecting-rod failure, and I had my sights set on Spear's Ferrari ahead of me when he disappeared in a burst of blue exhaust smoke. Seeing my chance, I pushed down even harder on the already flat-to-the-floor accelerator pedal. As Bill rolled smoking into the pits I took over the number one spot. It was a fine moment, and I savored it to the full on the long straight with the engine singing sweetly at 5500 rpm. Again, a blue-and-white Cunningham was showing them all the way home!

Flashing by the pits I caught the EZ sign (meaning that I should slow by two seconds per lap). This didn't seem right to me. Kimberly was now moving up in his 4.1 and Spear was back in the game after his stop, so I felt that a slowdown signal was risky. Yet the next time around I got the SLO sign. Now I must drop another four seconds to the wolves! Furious at this enforced slowdown, I nevertheless obeyed and cut my speed for several laps, though checking Spear's advancing position by keeping him in sight across the flat airport. With each lap he crept closer. I angrily jerked a thumb over my shoulder as I went by our pit, telling them that both Spear and Kimberly were making bids. They responded with a MO sign, giving me the opportunity to resume speed again.

Worried about tire wear, I took a quick prearranged detour

through the wide pit area for a check. While I was still rolling I got the okay sign from Phil and Jack Donaldson, and continued on, still holding my lead.

I couldn't help thinking that every lap I had run slower than necessary had added to the pressure and strain the car must now undergo to maintain its lead. But that's the way of racing. Either you are on a team and obey your pit signs or you run a car of your own. Still, it was sometimes very difficult to follow orders which seemed impossible to understand, as in this case.

Spear had overtaken Kimberly and was moving up steadily on my C-4. I hated the idea of his passing me and winning as he had done at Sowega, but I could not risk a blowout by forcing the car too hard on the turns. A pit stop would put me entirely out of contention. Yet Spear was swiftly closing the gap, and I could see no way to remain ahead of him unless one of his tires should let go under the pressure.

Which is just what happened. On the next-to-last lap, with the charging Ferrari just six seconds behind me, Spear's left rear blew as he was accelerating out of a high-speed corner. He was forced to bump to the pits on the shredded tire—a stop which cost him the race. By the time he had changed the wheel and resumed the contest Briggs had passed him into second. I took the final lap at greatly reduced speed, favoring the worn tires, vastly relieved to see the checkered flag. Behind Briggs and Spear, Masten Gregory finished in fourth spot just ahead of Kimberly. It had been an enervating struggle, but the C-4 had taken me to a nonstop victory.

The trophy, in true Hollywood tradition, was the most colossal, ornate thing I had ever seen. Actor Dick Powell presented it to me while garlands of flowers were draped around my neck—and actress June Allyson proffered the traditional buss. I felt as if I'd won the surfboard championship at Waikiki Beach.

Back at the pits, I examined my tires. They were entirely bald and one had worn through two plies. It was a repeat

of Sowega: a close thing. I'd covered 50 laps in just under two hours (1:59:59) for an over-all average of 88 mph.

I sent a telegram to Elizabeth after the dinner, then found it a real treat spending the evening with two old squadron pals who had made the AF their career. I remembered them as the "carefree flyboys"; but they were now not nearly so buoyant under the weight of the colonel's eagles they wore on their shoulders. Their humor was still intact, however, and if it seemed to me that time had washed away a shade of their color I knew they were probably thinking the same of me. After all, it had been 10 long years!

By 4 A.M. the next morning, I was asleep in the officers' quarters on a bed hospitably furnished me by the Strategic Air Command. I needed the rest, because I was to take off again that afternoon for Mexico—and a final attempt at the car-destroying Pan American Road Race.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

A Mixed Season

THE Chrysler I was to drive in the *Panamericana* didn't arrive for another seven days, but we put the time to good use logging parts of the road and transcribing our notes from the tape recorder.

Our luck was no better this year than it had been in '51. The torque converter split on the first leg and this meant that we were out of it. We could only move along slowly under our own power. We picked up Jack Ensley by the side of the highway; he'd run out of gas. Next Bill Vukovich became a passenger; Vuky's transmission had failed. He was protesting loudly: "Just when I was beginning to cotton on to this damned racket the stinking gearbox had to go out on me!"

We passed more retirements and several minor accidents. Then, beside the harsh black road, on the long Tehuantepec straightaway running below sea level, we came upon the wreck of Stagnoli's Ferrari. The car was capable of 180—and to judge by the erratic skid marks that stretched for hundreds of yards before leaving the road, the car must have been doing all of that. Apparently a front tire had blown. After a futile fight to hold the road, the Italian's Ferrari had shot off through the gnarled brush, rolling many times and catching fire. All that remained was a blackened chassis. (Stagnoli had

lived for a few minutes, but died in the car that was rushing him to medical aid.)

The silence and the shimmering heat intensified a difficult moment. No one said anything, but we were all thinking, trying to find our rational footing. We all knew the stakes in this game we played, but they were not always so easy to accept. We piled back in the Chrysler, mumbling some vaguely appropriate superficialities, and soberly motored on toward Oaxaca. A few hours later we were declared officially out of the race, since we had not covered the first leg in the minimum time allowed for our class. I was disappointed, but certainly not surprised.

On the plane back to Mexico City I frankly told Carl that if he ever wanted me to drive for him again he would have to provide a car that would stay together. As he was a proud man with considerable technical accomplishment behind him, the remark obviously rankled. (Not long after this he organized a crack team of Chryslers and dominated the stock car championship for several seasons.)

2.

It was good to be back in Stamford again. I had three months between races in which to get acquainted with my new son, Christopher, and I made the most of them. I'd promised Elizabeth that we'd live in Florida for a month or two while I competed at Sebring, then go back to Europe for Le Mans and Rheims. This would eliminate family separations, yet allow me to fulfill my seasonal commitments with Briggs Cunningham. Beyond Rheims, my plans were indefinite; I hoped that the job of technical adviser on *The Racers* might materialize, but I could not count on it as yet. I'd received perhaps a half-dozen phone calls and letters about the script from Charlie Kaufman (who now had his job nearly completed), but no contract had been signed.

A few days before we were due to leave for Florida I got another phone call, this time from director Bob Snody, who

was about to take a camera crew to Europe for some advance shooting. He told me to call Julian Blaustein on the coast.

I did as Bob suggested, putting through an immediate call to 20th Century-Fox studios in California. The talk was brief—and successful. They agreed to pay me $350 a week—for a job I would have enjoyed doing for nothingl Beyond racing, I could not imagine a more delightful way to spend the rest of the season.

3-

For Sebring, in March, Briggs decided to follow the old saying: "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em"—and entered a 4.5 Ferrari in addition to one of his Cunninghams. I was to share the 4.5 with Phil, while Briggs and Sherwood Johnston drove the team car. Despite the added threat of a four-car Lancia team—in addition to the usual strong Aston Martin entry-Phil and I were favored to repeat our victory of the previous year. Certainly the Ferrari was as fast as the best of them, and there was no finer co-driver than Phil Walters. But a lot could happen in 12 hours, and as Le Mans veterans we were well aware of this fact.

Three of the Lancias immediately took the lead positions on the first lap, with Ascari, Fangio and Taruffi roaring by the stands in 1-2-3 order. Phil pulled into the pits on lap 6 to replace fouled plugs, a stop which cost us over five minutes. The lone Cunningham suffered from various ailments, dropping back gradually as the race progressed.

Fangio went out with gearbox troubles; the Spear-Hill Ferrari withdrew with crown-and-pinion failure; the Ascari Lancia pitted for good with a broken axle shaft. Indeed, Sebring was living up to its car-breaking reputation.

I took over for Phil and found that we were in third at the fourth hour. At the halfway point we had moved into second, behind the Taruffi-Manzon Lancia, a position we held into the seventh hour. But our brakes were rapidly fading, and in order to slow the 4.5 we had to shift down early, putting an

extra strain on the overworked engine. It was too much for the Ferrari; the engine failed on lap 104 and our 4.5 joined the 30 other unfortunate machines (including Cunningham and the entire Aston Martin team) in the dead car park. Stirling Moss and Bill Lloyd won five hours later in their small Osca, defeating a Lancia and a beautifully driven Austin-Healey. Two other Oscas rounded out the top five. It had been a race of surprises and upsets, in which the mighty had fallen and a small "David" had taken home the laurels.

4-

I left for Europe ahead of Elizabeth this year in order to locate a suitable place for us to rent during the '54 season. House hunting is a poisonous chore in Europe, as rentals are rare and the language barrier rendered the newspapers useless to me—and even face-to-face negotiations were studded with misunderstandings. But I kept at it, and was very lucky in finding just what we wanted: the Villa Clerici in northern Italy, near Lake Como and the Swiss border. I sent for the family and we moved in, sharing the rambling house with fellow-American Mas ten Gregory, also in Europe for the opening season.

In all, some nineteen souls inhabited that rambling Italian building: Liz, myself, our two sons, their nursemaid, Masten, his wife and three children, their two nursemaids, a cook, her gardener-husband, and their four-year-old twins, the house servant, the housemaid and her little girl. None of us Americans in the house could speak Italian and none of the Italians could speak English, so things often got quite complicated. Our bright young German housemaid, Evelyn, generally saved the day. She was the sole translator for the entire household, and was kept pretty busy with this constant chore alone.

It was Le Mans again in June, this time with the modified Ferrari that had joined the Cunningham team. Phil shared the wheel with me while Johnston and Bill Spear drove a

standard Cunningham. Briggs and Bennet handled the third team car.

Our car had the new type water-cooled brakes as well as the modified 4.5 Ferrari engine, but it was never a real contender. I battled French champion Jean Behra in his Gordini for several laps early in the going, finally getting by him, but we were out of it shortly after with differential failure. The Johnston-Spear Cunningham took third over-all (the spot in which we'd finished the previous year on this circuit) with the Cunningham-Bennet entry in for fifth. The team of Gonzales-Trintignant in a 4.9 Ferrari won the 24-hour classic at an average of 105.08 mph, with the Rolt-Hamilton Jag second at 104.98.

"Our cars just can't stand up against the kind of opposition we faced out there," Briggs admitted after the event. "Looks like this is the last time I'll be taking them to Le Mans."

I couldn't argue with him. The big blue-and-white machines were now outdated, and Briggs had perspective enough to see he had done all that could be done with them. Further development, under the existing limitations, was obviously an unrewarding, uphill battle, and the result an inevitable defeat.

The day of the Cunningham was over.

My final race for the year had been run; I was to spend the ensuing months engaged full-time in one of the world's most fascinating and insane occupations: motion-picture making.

I was now an accredited technical adviser on the 20th Century-Fox Cinemascope production *The Racers*. And, as such, I was to enter a new world with its own incredible language, customs and inhabitants; I was to become part of what can only be termed "the Hollywood scene."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

With Hollywood on The Racers

Soon after Rheims I joined my colleague in technical advising, Baron Emmanuel "Tulo" de Graffenreid (wisely hired through the film company's office in Rome). Tulo, as he is known to anyone who has anything to do with road racing, is a Swiss champion presently retired from the sport. The Swiss have a reputation in Europe for extreme conservatism, inclining to melancholy, but Tulo is the living denial of this notion. He is a cheerful, optimistic, energetic fellow who speaks French, German, Italian and English with such volume and pleasure that serious problems fall away like autumn leaves. As Elizabeth once declared: "He reminds you of a lion cub in a blond, blunt sort of way." I knew we'd work well together on *The Racers*.

Our first assignment was a tough one, involving particular skills. The studio wanted us to obtain seven cars immediately for use in the picture: three single-seat Grand Prix racing machines and four sports cars. We were then to turn all but two into "Buranos," representing the fictional marque driven by the film's hero. The new bodies must be designed and the reworked cars ready for the camera in just a few short weeks.

I jumped at the chance to design racing cars again, an early interest I gave up when I became associated with Briggs Cunningham; and Tulo's ability to charm birds out

of trees meant he would have the cars rounded up in less time than even the "hurry-up boys" at Fox would have thought possible. Already we were clicking as a team.

While I labored over the drawings with my friends at Pinin Farina in Torino, Tulo ranged around Europe in search of the cars we needed. We purchased the three Grand Prix machines from a wealthy enthusiast's estate for a modest sum. Two of them were 1500-cc supercharged Maseratis, converted to unblown 2-liters by their last owner, and the third was one of Tulo's former cars, a 1953 Maserati with a new 2.5-liter engine.

We next found a cycle-fendered HWM, housing a rare Alta engine, which we bought from its Swiss owner.

(After completion of the film this car was later purchased by Washington's Tom Carstens who later had a Chevrolet engine installed and called it "The Stovebolt Special." It subsequently ran at Pebble Beach and other U. S. circuits.) The remaining three sports cars were all Ferraris: a '51 2.6 model with a touring body, a '53 Vignale-bodied 2-liter (damaged in a racing accident) and another '53 2-liter model which we bought from Ferrari himself after much clouded negotiation. We modified a pair of these by lowering the rear deck and hood, and by extending the nose and fender lines. The studio had been careful to point out to us that the new design must not be so distinctive that action shots of other cars taken during various races could not be attributed to the Buranos used in the production. (Many scenes in the pictures were actually segments of real events, as Cinemascope cameras were positioned around the European circuits during the entire '54 season.)

By the time Tulo delivered the cars I had completed the design work, and we immediately placed them in different small Italian body shops for reworking and reshaping, as there was not time for one shop to do them all.

Meanwhile, we took part in a "momentous" conference in which director Henry Hathaway was with us in a capacity similar to that of the bishop who drops in on a Sunday school

picnic. Bob Snody directed all the European action scenes and Hathaway spent most of his time in Hollywood, telling Kirk Douglas how to grimace as he steered a prop car around hairpin turns. Henry was a big man who looked more like a doctor about to give a nervous patient bad news than a motion picture director. He was a meticulous dresser; his felt hats, cashmere sweaters and well-tailored flannel suits were all of that soft quality bespeaking success. He had been in the business for many years, and had made some big pictures. Also, he was known to have invested in some 30 other money-making businesses and was credited with being at least a millionaire. But when he opened his mouth the typical Hollywood director suddenly came to life. He was the old-fashioned "show-me" kind of big man to whom everything that went wrong was *somebody's* fault, and he didn't mean his. Hathaway would not recognize luck. He took credit for things that went well; things that went wrong were due to the thoughtless blunder of some numbskull, often prompting his caustic observation that there were planes back to the States every day. "I'm not out to win any popularity contests," he would say, shifting an expensive Havana cigar to the other side of his mouth. "I make pictures. Any damned fool who hasn't got anything else to do can be a good guy and have everyone pat him on the back. I'm not trying to get votes. I'm making a picture here whether anyone likes it or not. And all I want are *results!*"

The director of photography, Milt Kramer, kept Hathaway company every moment he was with us in Europe. "Henry needs someone with him all the time to gripe at," was how Milt explained it. "I know he doesn't mean it, but he needs an audience. That's me. I keep him happy."

Milt did his own share of griping—and Sol Wertzel was often on the receiving end. But, like Milt, Sol didn't really mind the harsh words either. "Milt and I have an arrangement," the little man said. "When I goof Milt jumps on me until Henry calls a halt. Hell, isn't that a lot better than Henry jumping on me?"

And so it went.

"Hell of a thing," snapped Hathaway, "when we have to go out and *buy* the damn cars! Back home if you want some Fords in your picture you just go to the Ford boys and they fix you up. Same with Chevy or Olds or whatever you want. But not here. Oh, no, this old Ferrari guy wouldn't let us borrow a single damn one of his precious tin cans. Not *onel* Boy, *what* a country!"

Several "extras" around the room vigorously nodded their heads in agreement: a loose-hipped blonde with her washed-out boy friend, a sullen, lethargic fellow in the corner and a bright-faced, toothy kid. They all wanted Henry to know they were solidly behind anything he said. (Might pay off big if they ever got to Hollywood!) Hathaway made it clear he didn't know they were alive.

"We'll have to ship all these damn cars back to the States for the close-ups after you guys finish with 'em, so take care of 'em," he said. "First we'll shoot all the outdoor stuff over here. I guess it'll work."

"It'll work, Hank, you can *depend* on that," said Milt, smiling assurance.

"Maybe," growled Hathaway, "just *maybe."*

He stubbed out his cigar with a gesture of pure annoyance, ending the conference.

2.

Tulo and I were part of the official second-unit team, whose job it was to shoot the location scenes, employing doubles in action, from distant to full-figure shots. (They could shoot no closer than full-figure because an audience could then see that the double was not really Kirk Douglas, and the jig would be up. For months I was to skid around corners and into ditches for Douglas, yet I never met him.)

The first-unit work on any film is usually done at the studio, where the stars perform on a set. Thus, high-priced talents like Douglas and his co-star Bella Darvi could finish

their work on a picture (against background shots, called plates) in a matter of a few weeks, instead of plugging along with the second-unit boys on location for perhaps months while their salaries soared. Therefore, a picture like *The Racers* that *might* have cost three million could be made for a mere two and a half million.

Our party totaled about 60 souls; the entourage including the chief of photography, the production man, script girl, the money man, the wardrobe man, technical advisers and stunt men, grips and helpers, cameramen and their porters, lighting technicians and their crews. Aside from the racing cars, the Burano stable proper included a special Italian truck capable of carrying four of our cars, and the four mechanics whose job it was to keep them all rolling. Titles do not necessarily indicate duties; for instance, the chief of photography did not photograph. He was occasionally present when this took place, but his real function was as a sounding board or crying towel for the director who would expound to him on such varied subjects as human frailty, the irresponsibility of Him who commands the weather, the injustices of a distant office, etc. Similarly, the production manager, Sol Wertzel, was principally concerned with worry. If a double was not on time or soiled a coat she was to wear in a scene, Sol worried. If the camera truck broke down or the electric power faltered, he also worried heavily. He chain-smoked and coughed constantly, his hands shook and he slept in brief, fitful snatches interrupted by nightmares. The grips did more than grip. They lifted, carried, found and fixed the equipment and general pharaphernalia needed to make films. They made signs or concealed them, built camera platforms, sunshades, painted cars, cleaned cars and dirtied cars and accomplished a thousand things, some of them necessary.

Bob Snody was the man in charge of it all, directing the action and holding everything together when collapse seemed imminent. Frank Phillips, a perfectionist with a camera, had quietly taken out a large insurance policy before coming to Europe. Part of his job involved crouching behind the Cine-

mascope lens on a platform mounted on the rear of a Jaguar XK-120 at speed. At other times, he rode a similar platform eight inches from the ground on the front of a station wagon I drove. Sometimes he was placed dangerously close to racing cars on certain curves—or he might be obliged to set up his camera in a ditch, waiting for a car to come hurtling in his direction. But Frank didn't worry; he left that to Sol.

Tulo and I owed our loyalties to road racing and its traditions; we wanted the sport to be well and fairly represented. The film people owed their loyalties to the script and the box office. The differences these opposing allegiances brought out were resolved with remarkable ease, and I was delighted to realize that these movie makers did not intend to ignore the actual practices of road racing for the sake of dramatic film material. Whatever else the film might be, it would accurately portray the sport itself. Of this we were assured.

3-

Our first big action assignment was to reconstruct, down to the smallest detail, a practice session involving several sports cars, the scenes to take place on the famed "round-the-houses" Monte Carlo street circuit. Unfortunately, the actual Grand Prix of Monte Carlo was not scheduled for this season, which meant that the entire elaborate project had to be "faked." (Fox officials wanted the opening scene in the picture to establish that the European type of road racing—through the heart of a city—was entirely different from the kind of track and circuit racing most Americans were used to.)

All this was no small task—and without my old friend Louis Chiron it would have been impossible. Louis cheerfully took over, oiling the political machinery. He had been born in Monte Carlo, and loved the color and excitement of the fabled city, knowing most of the important people in it. It was Louis who talked to the Prince, who in turn talked to the ministers about taking over their city. Result: They

gave us *carte blanche*. (And that phrase has a nice sound in Monte Carlo!)

Special pits and grandstands were constructed and banners and flags were flown and the barricaded street corners were lined with hay bales. Cars and drivers were gathered from Italy, France and Switzerland for a lark on the Riviera—and 30,000 francs a day.

Louis Chiron enjoyed arranging it all as he enjoyed everything he did. If he didn't enjoy a thing, he didn't do it. He is one of those delightful and delighted people to whom life's every small detail commands his full attention and enthusiasm; his appetites and interests are endless. Louis explained his philosophy: "I do not want a big business I must worry about and slave over. I make only a little money, yet a little is enough for me. I do not want many things, because they must then be cared for and this, in itself, is a business. I do not wish to be a big man with a sad face like your Mr. Hathaway. Many of my friends think as I think, and we are all very happy."

At nine in the morning our group assembled on the broad quay, bright with striped canvas pit booths and the flag-decked grandstand opposite. Immediately behind us was the tiny harbor sheltering the yachts belonging to royalty, a few of them owned by plain businessmen and, rumor had it, a couple of extraordinary chiselers. Around the immaculate harbor rose the cliffs of Monaco's "federal" buildings; the royal palace, candy-colored apartments and the grand-style hotels, always popular with the decaying generations of Europe. On the ultimate point sprawled the storied Casino, one of the least satisfying myths of adolescence, where solemn people exchange valuable bits of paper late into the night. When the business of make-believe moved into the land of fairy tales, there were bound to be some scenes not called for in the script.

Alberto Ascari, a very real world champion who had just won the very real Mille Miglia, pulled up in a red Lancia with his racing colleague, Villoresi. The others were serious but

not necessarily frequent race drivers who had come to help for the same reason they raced: it might be fun, so why not?

Snody walked out to the street between the grandstands, moving through the crowd around the cars, trailing his whipping boy and assistants. Don't sell a man short who worries for a director. He is the one who immediately answers such questions as "What's that damn dog doing on this set?" when the dog doesn't appear to be doing anything at all. Or, "Why, in God's name, can't I get any co-operation from my own people?" when he hasn't told anyone what he wants. Of course, a successful worrier can't afford to blurt out the truth. He says something diverting, and at the same time consoling, a cross between a field psychiatrist and a male nurse. He has a clouded life and dies young.

The grandstands were filled with an authentic-looking race crowd through Chiron's adroit arrangement of a mutually beneficial pact between God and mammon. Shooting was scheduled for Sunday and the priests did not welcome a decimation of their Sabbath flock. Louis made a deal, agreeing that shooting would be postponed until after services if the priests announced the movie venture and asked their congregations to proceed to the quay at the end of services. If observing the movie makers at work should not prove enticing enough, a raffle was offered as further bait. Tickets were distributed and every hour a lucky number holder won 10,000 francs.

Close-ups of the champion drivers on hand were made, then several cars, an Alfa Romeo, a Jaguar, an Austin-Healey and an HWM raced by between the pits and grandstands according to script demands. The story situation was given like this: "Here's this young guy Gino with a crock of a car he's spent his last dime on. He and his faithful mechanic hopped it up themselves. Every nut and bolt. He's trying to break the big time and get a factory car, but he's nobody. He meets this rich dame before they qualify and there's something going on there. This kid's got a mean streak but he's a good chauffeur and he starts blowin' everybody off. Matches Dell

O'ro's time on the big factory Burano. This dame is watchin' with her boy friend and her dog when this cat breaks loose. The dog chases the cat and runs in front of Gino's car. He misses the dog but wrecks himself. She yells and runs over. Cut. Now we'll shoot a few scenes of the kid blowin' everybody off and then we'll do the wreck. Okay?"

We moved on to the tunnel which carried the coast road through the cliff face below the Casino. We were to run three cars through the hundred yards of darkness. Gino would pass the other two as we broke into the sunlight again, just to make it interesting, while the camera car followed close behind, grinding film. With firm instructions to the police closing the roadway at either end, we started. As we thundered through in tight formation, suddenly all brakes screeched at once. Rounding the bend in darkness, we had all seen the silhouette of a motor scooter puttering innocently into the mouth of the tunnel. When the careening cars skidded to a stop and explanations were angrily demanded, the rider indignantly stated that he was the chief of police and could go wherever he liked! Anger inevitably loses its edge in translation. There is nothing more maddening than to wait for the meaning in a long-winded exchange which one suspects has long since departed from the intended point. The confusion was compounded by misunderstandings and more translations. We finally pointed out that the physical laws were not influenced by "office"—and tried again.

When this scene was "in the can," we moved on. "Now we're going to get the racing on the Riviera atmosphere ... the Casino and the Hotel de Paree," said Snody. "Everybody standing around the gardens watching the qualifying. We'll have some fancy convertibles sitting around behind the hay bales. And some of these horse and carriages. We got our extras dressed up and there will be plenty of side-liners. We get the whole pack coming through with Gino in the middle. This is an establishing shot. This gives the atmosphere of the place. Okay, kids, let's go."

This was a howlingly good scene. It is difficult enough to

get a dozen highly bred sports cars to start at the same time for a real race when mechanics work for days to make sure that they will—and these "odd-dozen" machines were far from race-prepared. They were a mixed lot, including Ascari's Mille Miglia Lancia, a special "Flying Disc" Alfa Romeo, the cycle-fendered HWM, a white C-Jag from Switzerland and several Ferraris in assorted stages of tune. They balked, sputtered and reluctantly fired into life, died and restarted. As soon as one engine was going well, it began to overheat, waiting for others. Eventually, the polite signals of drivers in overheating cars degenerated into fist waving and angry shouting. When the signal to go finally came the pack roared up the hill in *very* convincing style. I suspect that all the frustrations of the day were vented in that wild ride. Women screamed and horses bolted as we slid into the Casino park with engines racing and tires howling. One car spun out and violently mounted the sidewalk as the pack swept on through the quiet town in a whirl of dust and blaring exhausts. Either the cameras caught the action or Snody was afraid to risk another try, because he nodded and told his crew, "Wrap it up!"

Now it was time to do the crash scene. The dog-and-cat man was a pleasant young fellow in a sweatshirt with a well-trimmed black poodle on a leash. He carried a normal-looking gray cat in a wicker basket over his right arm. "Time for us?" he asked.

"Yeah," replied Snody. "Now this is the scene with the girl and her dog where Gino loses it trying to dodge the pooch. Let's go!"

I was to double for the hero in this scene, and dressed as Gino I roared the HWM down the street to an X marked on the pavement, swerved sharply toward the curb and into a loose bale. A shot of the dog chasing the cat would be added just ahead of this action sequence and the special-effects boys back in Hollywood would finish the "crash." Although it seemed strange to frantically dodge a dog that wasn't there,

it did save wear and tear on the dog and, incidentally, eliminated the need for close timing.

This scene was shot over and over again: with the racing car alone, with the dog alone, with the camera car taking the place of Gino's HWM. Once, the poodle really threw himself into the act and chased the cat with such spirit that we couldn't find her. In the scramble that followed, shouts of "Catch that lousy cat!" were echoed by *"Attrapez le chat!"* To prevent a repetition, the director's first assistant carefully placed himsef behind the hay bales flat on his back out of camera range, to intercept the cat. The two of them, man and feline, worked together remarkably well considering their brief acquaintance and the language barrier.

This concluded the shooting in Monte Carlo and we next took off for Italy, and some "Fox Mille Miglia" footage. From our local headquarters in a resort hotel on the Adriatic coast, our convoy filed out to shoot a road scene. We had four passenger cars, a camera car with outrigged platforms front and rear, a camera truck for the equipment and props, followed by two bright red racing sports cars with their helmeted drivers. A police car and four motorcycle officers herded us along. We were a kind of civilian Foreign Legion mixture of Italian, American and French, including one Russian and one South African. It was an easygoing, congenial crew and though we had some overage adolescents, we didn't have any politicians or even nationalists. It was enough that the sun was out, the mountains were startlingly beautiful and we had an interesting, if difficult job to do. The scenes we made were always constructed directly from the script, which was presently concerned with the principal character, our hero, Gino, battling with the likable villain, Dell O'ro. The script read:

EXTERIOR-ROAD OUTSIDE VILLAGE-MOVING SHOT-DAY

The sun is high now. Gino's foot is hard down on the throttle as he overtakes in quick succession two other cars.

INTERIOR—GINO'S CAR-SHOOTING TOWARD THE ROAD AHEAD-DAY

> They are approaching a small village. Along the narrow street the sidewalks are brimming with spectators. Another car is ahead and Gino starts to overtake him. It is Dell O'ro. Hub to hub the two cars funnel into the narrow path leading to the city gate, wide enough for only one car. Either Gino or Dell O'ro must give. Piero, Gino's riding mechanic, wets his lips nervously, grips his hands in alarm as Gino roars on. Finally the other car slows down. Piero sighs with relief as Gino shoots ahead. Sparks fly from his hubs as he grazes the arch and tears through the village.
>
> CUT.

Tulo and I looked at each other. *One* of us was going to have to hit that arch. And it obviously would not be simply a matter of easing over and scraping by; at this speed we would be past in a split second. The arch had to be *hit*. The grips had lined it with a layer of special plaster reputed to be light and soft, but Tulo and I were skeptical of its solid consistency. We were discussing this near the arch where (aside from our immediate crew) some 300 extras, called to play race spectators, were milling about. They needn't have been called because the whole town had turned out. This was a situation that provoked Italian curiosity beyond endurance: strangely dressed foreigners with lots of odd equipment, police, a crowd of extras, and racing cars! They pushed toward us, noisily speculating on what it was all about. When an Italian in the street is curious or wants to listen to a conversation, he steps right in, sometimes *between* the conversationalists, and unabashedly takes in every word whether he understands or not. This is not impolite; it is the custom. (Obviously, if a man chooses to conduct his business on the street, he cannot expect privacy.) We could barely hear each other and occasionally one of us would be swept away by a surge of the crowd. It would heave like the sea when a truck lumbered through the arch. Children pulled at our sleeves and brave, bad boys climbed into the racing cars. In a whirlwind of confusion and noise, numbers were painted on the cars, the owners of vehicles parked along the street were

found and asked to move them, camera locations were chosen and set up, extras were placed along the curb and false mustaches were glued in place—all to the delight of the responsive audience.

It was decided that I would hit the wall. The double for "Piero" who would ride with me nervously fingered his new mustache as I grimly contemplated the arch which seemed to have grown narrower in past minutes. The hubs on our sports cars were like large wing nuts, knocked on and off with a hammer for quick wheel changing, and these hubs protruded to the side far enough to hook the arch and swing the car into it. This was my candid appraisal. Depressing.

Dogs, children and an old goat on a rope were underfoot at every move. A curious urchin leaned onto the freshly painted numbers on my Ferrari just as the paint can was kicked over, to the shouts of *"Basta! Cretino!* Give them room!" and loud, good-natured laughter. To hedge on the accuracy needed to hit the arch just right, I bolted a short length of iron, hooked at the end, to the side of the car. If I missed the arch altogether the hook would catch some wire imbedded in the plaster, giving the appearance of a solid blow.

Bob delivered the last word: "Okay. These two cars come blasting down the street hub to hub, see? Everybody yelling. Gino—that's Fitch—passes Tulo who plays Dell O'ro, so close he hits the arch. The stuff flies in the air and the camera car is right behind and we get the whole bit. Now everybody yell and wave. You're all excited. This is a big thing here and you're all crazy. Okay? Now tell them, Joey, in Italian."

Joey, our Italian interpreter with a long sad face, was one of those friendly, agreeable people who can be counted on to do things wrong if there is a choice. He was always around, talking constantly, except when needed. Joey told them in Italian, taking three times as long, and we moved the cars out into position. At a flag signal, we roared off down the narrow street lined with shouting extras. Just before the arch I slipped past Tulo and lined up the Ferrari. We would just miss the

looming wall, I thought. The cars had been in their exact positions and it should be a good take. I flicked the wheel toward the arch at the last instant.

With a loud thump and shower of debris, we burst through; the jolt had shifted the car half across the road and I was sure we had overdone it. The usually noisy crowd was silent as we stopped. The dust settled, and, feeling pretty sheepish, I slowly climbed out to survey the damage. Our "Piero" was pale, but managed a thin smile. The fender was crumpled and a gouge ran down the side of the body which itself had shifted on the chassis. The camera car drew up with shouts of "Great scenel That was the real schmaltz!" Frank was enthusiastic about the action he had seen through the camera viewer and Bob was very pleased. So, if the car itself proved to be sound after a checkup (we had many more scenes with it) we had gotten away clean after all. The crowd recovered its exuberance and engulfed us again, the trucks were loaded and we trailed off into the mountains for the next scene.

4-

Tulo and I were beginning to understand something about motion pictures and the people who make them. There is an unstated but generally respected axiom in the business: the public concept of an activity sets a limit of portrayed behavior which cannot be exceeded either for purposes of story convenience or for the sake of the actual rules or ethics of that activity. For instance, if the movie-going public thought that all Englishmen wore derby hats, every Englishman in a picture would have to wear one. To persuade the audience that all Englishmen do *not* wear derby hats would be considered an educational deviation from the picture story, detracting from the presentation, and a matter of no consequence to the producers. Unfortunately for us, road racing is generally thought to be a rough game in which competing opponents fight dirty and cut each other up at every opportunity. Of course it is a highly ethical sport, with

physical danger as a stern umpire, in which fair play and even courtesy is expected and given, with rare exception. Observance of the letter and the spirit of the rules increases rather than decreases with the level of driver skill. This working axiom made the job more difficult for Tulo and me as we both were deeply involved in racing and we earnestly wanted the sport with all its compelling fascination to be fairly represented in the first widely distributed film on the subject.

Although Hathaway did inject a few "cut 'em up" scenes of deliberate shunting, to which we objected in vain, the over-all compromise in which the bad actor played rough within the limits of legitimate racing practice was a credit to the producers. They invariably accepted our judgment and interpreted the script on technical matters according to our advice. The promise they had made earlier was being kept.

These movie people were, generally speaking, a likable, sincere group. However, in every group there are some occupational characteristics that set it apart and often leave it misunderstood. In movie making one of these characteristics is abruptness. It is due to the urgency of the work which is regularly behind schedule. Efficiency is what movie makers are striving for when they insist on big things in a hurry. Suppose they need 500 well-dressed people as extras for a certain scene. The other necessary props are present; in our case this meant good weather and properly functioning racing cars. Also, 40 to 60 technicians and helpers—from skilled cameramen to sign painters—are on duty, and each draws a good salary for his job. With an overhead running into thousands of dollars a day, they *really* need those 500 extras. If the weather goes bad (or one of the cars) the situation becomes serious. This explains what, to casual observers, often looks like unreasonable impatience on the part of movie makers. Also, like those in the newspaper game, movie people are loyal to the hurly-burly life they lead. The hardships, the frequent overwork, the outlandish and often primitive places where they are called upon to chase rainbows and run fools'

errands because their jobs depend on it, produce in them a campaigner's loyalty to a difficult life.

5-

Our next setup was on another Italian road and we expected to have it wrapped up in an hour. Below an ancient tile-roofed village in the shadow of a simple stone church tower, a winding black road climbed past a low cemetery wall. The imposing statuary inside (many roofed-over like small temples) stood like a miniature city among dark pines and cedars. Tulo, now doubling for Gino, had pulled smartly to a stop past the cemetery gates for the first part of the scene. Now, as Dell O'ro, I was to drive past waving in mock salute. Simple. We were ready to go when one of the motorcycle cops raced up to say a funeral procession was approaching. No one had thought to check at the church when this location was set up. The procession was paced by mourners on foot, so we might have time for the take before it arrived. At a waved signal I started from the bottom of the hill, smoothly rounding a bend at high speed into the scene and past Tulo's car. We returned to the camera where Bob and Frank stood with long faces. "It just didn't have anything, no *stuff*" Frank said. Bob agreed there was "no schmaltz." We took it again, and this time I deliberately skidded around the bend into the scene—not the way to make time in a race, but just the thing for making pictures. More long faces. The action was fine, but a bicycle had turned out of a farm lane just as we passed. The management's attitude was clear: "Can't you bastards keep a few feet of road clear? It's not much to ask. Now wake up and get on the ball!" This was shouted to several sad-faced assistants.

We were just ready for another try when the sky darkened. A large black cloud was crossing the sun. "That'll take at least five minutes to pass," said Bob. "I wouldn't be surprised if M-G-M had something to do with this. Where's that funeral now?" A shouted question to a lookout placed it

at half a kilometer, but slowing on the hill. We still might make it. As soon as the sun broke through, the flag fell. But as I approached the stalled car, an agitated assistant ran out into the road waving us down. Piero's false mustache had fallen off! After a few unkind words to the make-up man, we were ready to try again and dispatched the motorcycle cop to hold up traffic as usual. He started bravely, sensing the urgency of the situation, but spluttered to a stop within a few yards—out of gas! Bob is a generally peaceful man and a considerate, well-liked director, but his comments on this particular series of events have to be heavily censored. It is accurate to say that he was gravely disappointed.

We finally shot the scene just as the funeral procession approached the ultimate corner. The most hardened film hands were perspiring freely and they were all visibly relieved to hear "Wrap it up" for the day's work.

The next afternoon we were in the gentle hills of Emilia to shoot a "wreck" scene. Here the script read:

> PORTION OF ROAD-DAY
> Two cars are tangled in a bad crash. An ambulance stands beside them and attendants are lifting a driver's limp and bloodstained body. Gino drives into the scene, pauses, then rushes on.
>
> FADE OUT.

Now the logical place to find wrecks was in the nearby Ferrari sports car factory, and they had a wide selection. The cars had been collected from racing circuits all over the world to be repaired, and most of them were in that process. We managed to have a couple hauled to our location. One belonged to Hans Reusch, the author of *The Racer,* and was the cause of his current indisposition; the other was the work of a friend of mine back in the States, and I was sure he wouldn't mind our borrowing his wreck for an afternoon. We positioned them on a fast downhill curve below a small village, one in the ditch and the other against a light pole. As we painted black skid marks on the pavement, upset kilometer

stones and tested smoke pots to place in the engine compartments, a crowd appeared seemingly out of the fields around us. They were a cross-section slice of the population. Conservatively dressed middle-aged businessmen with briefcases strapped to their bicycles, barefooted brown peasants with kindly faces, debonair young blades slouching on their sparkling motorcycles, combing and patting their carefully styled hair, ghostly masons with a film of stone dust overlaying their natural colors from thick wooden-soled boots to battered caps, a bearded young priest in solemn black, and always and delightfully, that phenomenon of Italy, the Girls. In the remotest village of the poorest country sections they walk the lanes and smile from doorways in dazzling well-filled blouses starched stiff with morning cleanliness. By some marvel of management, and inborn female arts, they have a style and know what to do with it. Proud but friendly, they are clear male objectives in the daily welter of doubtful ends and confounding purposes, and they know it.

But, as Tulo would say, "true to the Fox," we pressed on manfully under the hot sun. The ambulance had arrived and the double for the injured driver was made up with the innocuous bottled catsup from Hollywood. An Italian playboy had come along to run his sports car through the scene with Gino. He was a carefully dressed, compact little man with a brush mustache. He told us that he did a little painting in his native Florence but stated there were only three things which *really* interested him: beautiful women, racing cars and fast horses.

The scene was prepared and the crowd herded behind the camera, the road cleared and the cops dispatched to stop traffic. Halfway down the hill, the last car of the procession, a Fiat, suddenly stopped, and the driver disappeared. "What the hell is that jerk doing?" demanded Bob. *"Anything* to queer our scene. Joey! If you're not too damned busy casting your next leading lady could you pay some attention to our problems and keep that damned road clear?" Joey, who'd been leaning into a car window blissfully conversing with a

pretty stand-in, looked wildly around, then broke into a run lor the abandoned Fiat. The Baron, doubling for Gino again, waited lor Bob's signal—with the Italian playboy nervously gunning his engine in the background. Now the traffic held ul) by the road blocks began a discordant symphony of impatience, accented by the booming horn of a bus.

"What in God's name is Joey *doing}*" shouted Bob. "What have I done to deserve this? Ricko, take the car down there and get that road clear. Son of a bitch if I can see how an idiot could be so damned stupid if he studied it."

Ricko was a fat Neopolitan who took everything hard, and his perspiring face worked with the effort of catching the meaning of a language he only half understood. Joey and the driver came up the road, and after a shouted exchange, Ricko returned with his report.

"Well, sir, Joey say he don't find the man. He look and he look and he yell... nothing. After ... the man come back and when Joey ask him where he been, he no nice with Joey. He tell Joey bad things. Joey tell..."

"All right, Ricko, forget it," snapped Bob. "He's moving his car now."

The Fiat pulled slowly away and Joey turned in triumph, waved gaily and stepped off the road and out of the scene. The waiting race cars were signaled and the playboy stormed into action. He snaked past the wreck scene and the grinding camera, at full throttle, Tulo a hundred yards behind. At that moment Joey bounced up on the road into camera range watching the first car disappear, spoiling the take. A choked silence. Joey looked curiously at the Baron's unexpected car and his characteristically carefree walk slowed to a despondent shuffle as he realized his mistake. The features of his long face hung like a bloodhound's by the time he reached the camera. He was spared most of the invective directed at him by distance, and heard only the murmured end of a masterpiece of workmanlike swearing. Five minutes later, however, he was happy as a lark again as he elaborately ordered the police to open traffic, adding instructions to get on their toes and

stay on their toes. The scene was wrapped up on the next attempt and we trailed off to shoot a night sequence.

For days and sometimes weeks after the races we remained on the circuits and, with the help of private entrants retained by the day, photographed specific incidents called for by the script. More often than not, the incidents involved some rather desperate driving. De Graffenreid ran off the road and tore down 20 meters of wood fence at Spa. Granted the wood was hollow balsa, it was still solid enough to pull the car toward the ditch in a cloud of splinters. He swerved across the road through carefully placed race "traffic" and apparently plunged into a stand of trees and exploded. (Actually, he drove into a side road camouflaged by brush, where a bucket of racing fuel was thrown on a small fire, creating a frightening burst of flame and black smoke.) The Baron escaped with a few splinters from what would appear on film as a disastrous crash.

6.

Finally the second-unit work was done. All finished. We had thousands of feet of color film (much of which would be scrapped), and we had traveled over most of the Continent to get it. It had been a tough job, though certainly an interesting one, and when I said good-by to Bob and the crew we felt like members of a family who must now separate.

Tulo and I hoped the finished picture would be a good one. Technically it should be, for we had some distinguished assistance along the way. In addition to Ascari, Villoresi and Chiron, we managed to talk Fangio, Lang, Hermann, Manzon, Frere, Marimon, Biondetti, Schell and Rosier into making brief appearances before the cameras. The racing scenes these drivers contributed to were sound and accurate. We could only hope that the cutting, editing and assembling of the material would keep them sound, and that an accurate picture of Continental road racing would reach the public.

My sojourn in Europe was not over (we stayed through

flic winter in Italy and Switzerland); and I had another fascinating experience ahead of me, for in just a few more weeks I would become an official member of the Mercedes-Ben/ team for the 1955 season, driving for them in the Mille Miglia, at Le Mans, in the Tourist Trophy and the Targa Hoi io.

It was destined to be a year of triumph and tragedy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In the Thousand Miles

WITH journalist Gunther Molter, I drove to Stuttgart in late December of '54 in order to discuss the coming season with Alfred Neubauer. Gunther had been a pilot during the war, and on the way down to Stuttgart we compared dates to find that we had met before—as enemies in air battles over Germany! Molter was a strong believer in the supranational fraternity of airmen (as was Hans Klenk, another jolly fellow who'd flown for Germany, whom I met in Mexico when he rode with Kling). We discussed the mutual respect pilots have for one another all over the world, regardless of nationality or alliance, and decided that it was much like motor racing, an occupation transcending boundaries and national prejudices.

I had enjoyed my run with Mercedes in Mexico and was hoping to drive for them again for the '55 season. Therefore, the purpose of this trip was to "sound out" Neubauer on the subject of rejoining the team. When we arrived we found that he was at the Hockenheim circuit testing the new Mercedes, but Dr. Nallinger, the team's chief engineer, assured me that I was a likely candidate, although the drivers had not yet been officially chosen. We discussed the value of having an American on the Mercedes team, and the fact that it would certainly boost the sales of their cars in the States if I did well by them in Europe.

The next day, after a brief tour of the plant, Neubauer met us in his office at the Daimler-Benz headquarters. The big man was not in the best of moods; he groaned and pointed tp his head, telling us that he was crazy with preparation for the race at Argentina. My comments were translated by (Gunther who in turn translated for Neubauer.

We talked of the Mille Miglia, and Neubauer asked me how many times I had been over the thousand-mile route. ' Four or five," I replied to Gunther. He translated: "Five." This information seemed to please Herr Neubauer, and he said that Kling had only been over it *four* times. But nothing definite was decided regarding my berth and Neubauer said he would have a meeting with the directors after Argentina to reach a final decision. He promised to wire me at our new home in Lugano.

We had left the Villa Clerici and moved to Switzerland, settling in Lugano, near the southern tip of the country, and renting a second floor, and part of the third, in a delightful old house high in the hills, where we were to spend the next 11 months.

During this period, in order to keep myself fit, I'd make a daily 3-mile run on foot through the Swiss countryside—usually in the morning after breakfast. Incidentally, there are many interesting opinions on just how a driver should condition himself. The majority of the acknowledged best did not smoke (including Fangio, Ascari, Farina, Gonzales, Villoresi and Trintignant). Such a distinguished list of non-smokers leads to the conclusion that smoking tends to dull the senses and that the slight loss of equilibrium has an effect on driving ability. I was always moderately severe with myself in matters of training, yet I smoke a pipe and have done so for years. I personally don't feel that it has affected my driving. I am inclined to think it is an individual matter. But for me, the daily 3-mile run was essential.

A few months had passed when the wire from Mercedes arrived in Switzerland. I was on—set to drive a production

300 SL for a try at the *Gran Turismo* class in the Mille Miglia. Apparently Mercedes hoped to leave the production class to private entries, as they knew that this was popular in the nations involved (Belgium's Gendebien, Italy's Casella, various Frenchmen, etc.). But they must have worried about just how well these independents would represent Mercedes —with the notable exception of Gendebien, of course—and so they had signed me on as insurance. (Later, when I asked Neubauer how strong a bid I should make for an *over-all* position he roared with laughter, not expecting me in the first ten over-all finishers. Perhaps foolishly, I had more ambitious ideas.)

My navigator and passenger for the run was a young reporter from a large picture magazine in Hamburg, sent to cover the race firsthand for that publication. Kurt Gesell not only could speak English, but also he was intelligent—and instead of possessing the streak of madness required to join this rash event, he was simply innocent, never having had any previous contact with automobile racing.

As we attended a final meeting held by the ebullient Neubauer, who ticked off details of refueling and repair depots, I suddenly realized that I was much too anxious about the outcome of this event to be really enjoying it. Our 300 SL coup£ was a production touring car, as sold off the showroom floor, a fact that had been carefully attested by the racing committee who even weighed the car on local scales to assure that it had not been specially lightened. I was perhaps too eager to win our class, so much so that I had to ask myself if racing like this was, after all, a pleasure. The answer for me: rarely before the event, always after it and for a few moments during it. Well then, why do it? Because the anxiety brought on by being in the race is nothing compared to the disappointment of being left out. It's a little like the song "I'm So Miserable Without You It's Almost Like Having You Around." Neubauer boomed on. "If your gas tank is punctured by a rock, you will find fuel stations at Vicenza, Padova, Rovigo and Rimini. We have mechanics who can change

plugs at Pesaro, Pescara, Rome, Florence and Bologna, but our best repair stations are at Rome and Bologna. At each control we have lemonade, aqua mineral, tea, coffee, vermouth and brandy," he said, bending back a finger like a sausage with each refreshment named. "Does anyone want anything else?" Fangio, Moss, Kling and I smiled at the idea of this overabundance of drink (for which there would be no time) and shook our heads as Neubauer continued, "And each control has a place for pee-pee!" (This had been bothering some of us less accustomed to Latin lack of inhibitions, and was a popular provision.)

I was especially interested in the prospects for Stirling Moss who, besides being a good friend on the same team, though in a different class, carried with him the red-bearded journalist Denis Jenkinson, one of the Mille Miglia's greatest enthusiasts. "Jenks" is utterly captivated by the event for its physical length and variety, its place in the history of motor racing (being a descendant of the pre-World War I intercapital races) and perhaps as a kind of throwback to the spectacles of the Middle Ages. His passion for it made him extraordinarily good in his navigating job; he could remember whole sections of the long single lap without reference to notes. Previously we had planned to form a team, before Stirling had joined the Mercedes factory, so I was anxious to see him succeed in the contest that had so completely captured his imagination.

We were to start at 4:17 **A.M.** in the morning and consequently carried the starting number 417 plastered on our car, enabling spectators anywhere between Brescia and Rome to tell at a glance where we stood in the race. We could expect about half an hour of racing in darkness on an unknown road, quite a different matter from running at night on a known circuit such as Le Mans, where the lie of the road becomes completely familiar and cutoff points are well established. We had to find and appraise the hazards by the light of our own headlamps, while many cars in our class would start later in broad daylight. But starting positions were

drawn by lot and we hoped for our share of luck elsewhere.

We had made a dozen lists marking off items as they were checked: goggles for both of us (in case the windshield was broken), a chamois and towel and two liters of mineral water in a thermos mounted between the seats. We had confirmed that it was all right to use lights all day (I liked to use every means of catching the eye of spectators, to prevent one dashing in front of the car), and that our fuel supply was surely adequate for our longest run from Pesaro to Rome. We had practiced changing a wheel in case of a flat and got down to a minute 40 seconds, and we had tools, tape, wire—a great many things which would do more to satisfy our desire for intelligent order than our needs in a race that permits no time for both repairs and success; it's a matter of one or the other.

Having done everything we knew, it now remained only to keep our wits about us and never let up the pressure to gain seconds, the rest being a matter for the good or bad circumstances we would meet on the road—or rather, simply luck.

We were up at 2:15 **A.M.** searching the bleak night streets for a *caffe latte.* We found a corner shop harboring a mixture of bleary clients left over from the night before and a few red-eyed but excited crews filling their thermos bottles prior to their start.

Thirty minutes before our departure we were in the garage and starting our engine. But what was this? We heard a strange whirring sound as the engine was gunnedl The clutch throw-out bearing had been changed the night before. Had a sleep-groggy mechanic improperly assembled the clutch? In a moment the whirring disappeared as the oil warmed, and the first of many panics subsided.

We moved through crowded streets to the flag-draped grandstand before which stood a brightly lighted ramp. At exactly one-minute intervals the flag dropped and a competitor would roar off into the night in a dazzle of flash bulbs. We inched forward behind the tireless Neubauer through a maze of cars, competitors, friends and well-wishers, now push-

ing our Mercedes to prevent fouling the plugs. Finally it was our turn, and after confirming yet again that our lights were on, the flag dropped and we leaped away down the ramp. I have a horror of being forced out of a race by some overeager foolishness at the start; and the longer the race (I remembered last year in the Mille, when the Nash-Healey had forced me out on the first leg) the more distasteful the thought. And so, while my eyes adjusted to the darkness and my nerves to the weaving crowds obscuring the curves, I refrained from full use of the loud pedal.

Out of town there were brief gaps in the black wall of spectators; the solid little coupe was firm on the cobbles, the engine smooth with a pleasing hard quality under heavy load, as we approached 6000 revs equaling 150 mph plus. Night racing on unknown roads not being my idea of fun, we slowed when in doubt. Even if we lost some time, we could not risk a crash when the light would come in 30 minutes.

We rushed down a cobblestone straight along a canal criss-crossed by tram lines, through a featureless winding section before the first village demanding caution, with a sharp left over a blind crest crowded by ancient buildings. A pair of brilliant red taillights appeared ahead, conveniently indicating the lie of the road to come. But we quickly caught and passed the lone pilot of a Zagato Alfa who kindly waved us on. Next, 6000 rpm (now over 150 mph) down a leafy tunnel of sycamores vague in the uncertain illumination of our own headlights. Mists floated across the road from the overwater space, more felt than seen, marking the southern tip of Lake Garda. We easily passed several cars who became aware of our approach by our lights—night racing's only virtue. In a fast left we dropped down to the broad cobblestoned waterfront square of Peschiera apparently dead-ending in a solid block of buildings, but took a sharp left at little more than 25 mph over a bridge and through the narrow, one-way tunnel past the old town gate. Extreme caution at the cost of some time lost was the form here, as unexpected damp cobbles can pitch a car into a curb or a building with a suddenness that is as

astonishing as it is final to Mille Miglia ambitions. Besides, there is little gained by rushing slow corners; it is the high-speed curves taken too slowly that lose the solid seconds which quickly accumulate into precious minutes.

In a moment we were clear of the village, again bolting down a tree-arched country road at 150. To our immense relief, the sky grew lighter and we realized we would soon reach Verona where we expected to be in full daylight. We passed several Fiat coupes and Lancias favoring the right of the crown of the road; as they saw our lights approaching they obligingly moved over to let us by. As we topped a crest and passed under a bridge in a ()o mph right onto the straight into Verona, the gray dawn was bright enough to enable us to see without our own lights, and we exchanged a glance of self-congratulation that we were safely past the special hazards of the night. I recognized the blinker that marked the end of the straight and Kurt dutifully shouted, "Blinker in road-Right 40 mph."

We weaved through our first large city, short-cutting across the traffic circles we had rounded slowly in practice, leaped the hump-backed bridges and scrambled around slow corners until we hit the straight road out of town. We could really go racing now that we could see every feature of the road ahead.

In full daylight, I was able to confirm my suspicion that the Mercedes was sliding too easily—probably due to high tire pressures. The high pressure reduced chances of throwing a tread (heat generated by the flexing tire wall sometimes causes the rubber tread to be flung off), but was keeping me uncomfortably busy trying to remain on the road. The reddish rays of the early sun slanted steeply across the treetops, promising an unseasonally torrid day. The heavy mists blanketing the lush valleys had already begun to lift.

The road to Vicenza had fewer villages and, being over flatter country, brought us to that narrow city with its double arch before we thought possible. Our personal temperatures rose with the speed—happily the engine was not similarly

affected. In quick succession we raced through Padova, Rovigo —where the marked route was bewilderingly different from the one we practiced—Ferrara and Ravenna (under the familiar arch where we had filmed *The Racers* scene), and slid to a stop to have our route book stamped at the first control point in an atmosphere of panic. Then, away on a fast road winding along a river where every left curve was blind (for a high dirt bank followed the road's edge). We had marked this section *Drive by sight,* and now questioned our own reasoning, because we could not see.

The sun swung higher, and I drew out the hose to the water bottle expecting a reminder of fresh mountain streams. Instead it tasted like a vulcanizing shop, thanks to the rubber hose, but nevertheless it was satisfying. I dropped it in the excitement of scraping through a blind left that was unusually abrupt. Before Rimini, I reached for more water but discovered it had all syphoned off through the hastily dropped hose into Kurt's seat, and he had been so absorbed he hadn't even noticed! The thought of having no water made us thirstier still, aggravated by the wind which automatically blew the SL's window vents shut each time we reached high speed. We sailed over the bridges of Rimini, jogged around a church onto a winding road that frequently slowed us to a crawling 50 mph. Climbing back to speed through the gears, we exchanged alarmed glances as the engine briefly faltered over 5000 rpm—the first evidence of the trouble that was to plague us all the way back to Brescia. I switched on the auxiliary fuel pump, and the engine was smooth again, to our immense relief.

The Adriatic sparkled in the corners of our eyes as we paralleled the beach to Pesaro where we slid to a stop at a gas station. Shouts and confusion—but the cause was reassuring; we were not expected so soon! The windshield was black with crushed bugs and energetic rubbing still left streaks and spots which we preferred to time lost, and we scrambled away quickly. Soon Ancona, dazzling white on its promontory in the distance, grew larger until we burst out into a broad sea-

side square, tires skittering on cobblestones, and cut to the right through a block of buildings to climb inland again. We were quickly back to the sea, now on a shelf of hills where high speeds were again possible.

To our infinite dismay, the intermittent falter in the engine started again. This time the extra fuel pump was already on and we could do nothing but hope the trouble wouldn't become worse. We were, after all, asking a lot from our car. For hours without letup under a blazing sun, either the accelerator or the brake pedal had been used to the maximum, and we were averaging well over 100 on normal Italian roads, through cities and villages, crashing over railroad crossings at full speed, forcing the engine at every opportunity and without respite. This model, as sold by it makers, was well tested, but racing has always been the trial by fire to provide the ultimate test. At this moment, however, Kurt and I were only interested in winning, not in our roles as guinea pigs in the service of Mercedes' Test Department. Now, with this hint of engine trouble our already formidable competitors became stronger yet. We were not worried about the 60-odd Alfa Romeos, Porsches, Lancias and V8 Fiats in our class-as the 300 SLs were clearly more than a match for them. Among the Mercedes drivers, however, was the Italian Casella, who besides being a close friend and confidant of World Champion Fangio, was a shrewd driver with wide experience. Presumably he knew his native roads. But the young Belgian phenomenon, Gendebien, loomed as an even larger threat. I remembered now what well-informed friends had told me about him: "He has an amazing natural talent—really first-class. You are racing against him—you'll see soon enough!" My almost-partner Jenkinson had said, "He just has whatever it is that makes a driver *good*, an instinct for finding the best way through an unknown curve. He has a nose for topography, seems to sense what the road will do over the next hill." Supernatural talent among the opposition was more than we bargained for, and more than we could hope to resist, especially if our trouble persisted.

But racing, like other sports, admits no ifs, and more often than not, it rewards the press-on-regardless attitude which Kurt and I had agreed to adopt; we would push hard for each of the thousand miles in spite of good or bad luck, and reach the finish line if we possibly could. So "press on" it was; Kurt shouting his warnings over the din of speed: "Left 110 into town—rough!" and a moment later, "Right, 60 after bridge! Left, 90 through narrow village!" We alternately drifted neatly to the outside of a curve just as the road straightened, then slid wildly onto the shoulder with a shower of gravel when a curve was tighter than anticipated. We crossed some railroad tracks with a loud *chunk* at which the car seemed to squat closer to the ground; on others we pounded and leaped in the air, the strange silence broken by an eerie whirring of unloaded axle shafts and wheels fanning the air.

We had graded the hazards in our notes into four degrees: X-1, -2 and -3 meant careful, dangerous and *very* dangerous, all with respect to the car. X-4 meant danger of serious damage to our persons. We used the last about two dozen times in the Thousand Miles, which was, perhaps, optimistic, but we observed these well. They were usually in a high-speed section or at the end of one, where the road quickly angled over a bridge with substantial-looking abutments, or perhaps dodged suddenly between stone buildings beyond a blind curve. Our worst scare was a complete surprise. It was not in our notes for the simple reason that we hadn't seen it on our practice runs when we were slowed by traffic. We negotiated a fast right at perhaps 120, well down on the inside of the curve, drifting securely under control, and everything was fine. An invisible hump sent us flying, drive train and wheels shuddering in the air as we sailed to the outside of the curve. I backed off smartly and we landed at an angle that eventually shot us across the road for the opposite ditch. The ensuing slides and counterslides, during which I mistakenly thought we were safely under control three times, were, in a word, terrifying. We finally straightened out and after a moment's stunned silence: *"Mein Gott!* I'm glad that's over!" from Kurt. We

crept back to racing speed. (There were several unseen vertical curve incidents like it, but this one was the worst.)

The cool morning mists had given way to a breathless heat haze by the time we sighted the red buildings of Pescara ahead. Weaving through the wide city streets lined with excited crowds, I recognized a bridge that had been followed by a sharp right on our practice runs. We topped the bridge with brakes hard on, set up for the sudden turn—to find it barricaded! Our turn had been moved farther up the street. Rattled, and eager to make up for the wasted braking, I entered the second too fast, and slid helplessly over the crown of the street in a swirl of dust and sand to firmly buff the curb with our left rear tire. No damage, but the dark looks we exchanged reflected our full agreement to avoid a repetition of any such incident. We swung into a rarely used railroad underpass only a little wider than our car, across a square, and resumed speed through the scattered buildings on the outskirts of Pescara.

We had put some 400 miles plus behind us in four hours —a better-than-100-mph average. The number of events packed into this short space of time made it hard to grasp that it was not yet 8:30 A.M.—an earlier hour than many of the perspiring crews strung around the boot of Italy were accustomed to fully welcome a new day. Kurt shouted: "Right, 30 over railroad"—X-4!" This one was dangerous to ourselves as well as the car, and I was glad it was marked because the road looked straight for a mile ahead. But beyond a rise it quickly jogged over railroad tracks between stone walls, and we dropped to second gear. Climbing back to speed the engine cut completely, stuttered a moment and then pulled again. Rome had a well-staffed Mercedes depot and I was hoping our trouble could be fixed there. But even 10 minutes can be decisive in the Mille Miglia—and what could be done in 10 minutes? Very little unless the trouble is a routine matter, which was not likely. At Rome we would know how we stood in the race and, even more important, whether we needed only a quick adjustment or a systematic

search for the trouble, a matter of much precious time. It was a miserable situation for us but this is the means by which a breed of cars is perfected, and to race at all is to accept this possibility. For the moment we could postpone a decision until reaching Rome and concentrate on the twisting mountain road ahead.

We passed under an overhead conveyor near a factory marking the start of the climbing hairpins through steep hillsides gray with olive trees. Minutes later we anticipated a notorious hazard in the mountain village of Popoli: an abruptly looming Bailey bridge darting sharp right over a dry river bed filled with dazzling white boulders. The toylike bridge left only inches on either side as we swung onto it with a rattle of loose planks at a cautious 20 mph. The straight, steep climb opposite was broken by a double railroad track and we drew in our necks for the impact that thumped our helmets on the roof. At the top we wound along a serpentine ridge, bare except for low brush and jagged outcroppings of stratified rock, then crept up to 6000 in high gear (pleased that we could still make it) across the high, strangely deserted plateau where we saw the road topping crests for more than nine miles ahead. Tension grew in our buffeting coupe as we quickly overtook a Fiat crowding the center of the road. The gap looked impossibly narrow but with a clearly audible *chunk* of wind and tire noise, we popped through the gap with a few inches between our left wheels and a row of menacing kilometer stones.

"Right, hairpin climbing X-2! Left, 40 at hilltop in Aquila!" Our card was stamped by one of the athletic officials who ran alongside our car so we would not be obliged to stop completely, and we weaved on down a treeless valley scattered with herds of indifferent sheep.

After a series of curves taken at 90 to 120, we slipped through the narrow canyons of Rieti and entered the steeper rolling sheep country approaching Rome. Here the sharp "thank-you-mams" pitched and pounded our car over crests on the constantly weaving road, which became narrower and

slower in the rugged hills just outside Rome. Twenty miles later we hit the tree-lined road that had an atmosphere of a boulevard, and our speed rose again despite the massive trunks whisking by on each side.

The section through the modern apartment houses outside Rome was a nightmare of blind curves down a narrow canal of spectators. It was completely unnerving to see a silhouette detach itself and trot across the road when we were bearing down at 150 or so, and worse to see the wall of humanity heave and waver like a whip, swinging back only momentarily for our car to pass. We slowed to gain maneuverability in case of emergency. But this was diverting, for we could see the crowd better and were distracted by the gayly dressed and strikingly attractive girls who reached a high pitch of excitement, indiscriminately urging all drivers on to greater speed, decisively multiplying the hazards of the course.

Under a bright banner in a sea of excited people, our card was stamped and we quickly pulled up to the Mercedes depot marked by the three-pointed star. We were leading the *Gran Turismo* class! The rest of our competitors were far behind and so we need have no worries, though our exact lead was not known. This news and the look of surprise mingled with dismay on the mechanics' faces when I told them about the stuttering engine made the decision to go on an easy one. Rather than experiment with a cure which was bound to take time, we would proceed, hoping our present lead, even if reduced, would remain a lead.

The Rome-to-Siena-to-Bologna leg is the hardest and the most decisive one of the race. Most of it is over second-rate roads, which in Italy means that a car is mercilessly pounded; the heat and the rough mountain passes take a heavy toll. To Siena and Florence the course is neither fast nor slow but an ever-changing combination of both on which nothing can be taken for granted. Humps and sudden hairpins, tricky twists through ancient villages perched on defensive peaks or clinging precariously on sheer mountain walls, surprised us with their complexities when attacked at maximum speed.

Racing down a dusty valley dotted with towerin
cedars we burst onto a patch of gravel, slewing the car about as on a field of marbles. While I was killing speed with every means, a curve opened to reveal a dirt ramp to another gaunt-looking Bailey bridge which, at first glance, appeared too narrow to negotiate, especially at our angle of approach. With a growing appreciation of the sympathetic attention of Providence, we scratched to a crawl and edged over the loose planks.

One's grasp of what this Mille Miglia is and how it is progressing depends on one's point of view. On a map one could plot hundreds of cars and a thousand sweating men moving at a clock hand's pace across the orderly greens and tans of wood and plain, crossing railroads and rivers, disappearing into the circle of a town to creep out the other side minutes later. Two million souls, who must be quick even to catch a number, stood by the roadside where they could reach out and touch the hooting machines that flashed past with a bellow of exhaust. Millions more were crowding radios and nervous television screens. We, like the other crews shouting and sweating in their cars, grasped perhaps the least. We knew only the endless road ahead, swimming in heat. We had passed perhaps 40 cars; none had passed us. But this meant nothing, because many of our opponents, too far ahead or behind to be seen, might now be leading us on elapsed time. We didn't know how much we were losing; or had lost, but we could not be gaining because the hesitation in our engine began continually earlier on the rpm dial before my face, and I was forced to shift to a higher gear at an always lower speed. I knew we must try harder, must take the curves faster, brake later. The only satisfaction we could have at the finish was the knowledge that we had done our utmost best, win or lose.

Once while entering a fast curve, I double-clutched to synchronize engine speed on shifting down to third, and—tired or clumsy—apparently failed to rev the engine enough, for when I let the clutch out the rear end slewed instantly wide and we proceeded down the road with the car pointing

30 degrees off our line of travel. After a hectic interlude, during which the interior of our little coupe was a blur of flying elbows, we had our customary moment of shocked silence. I was about to apologize when Kurt congratulated me on retrieving the car. (He didn't know it was my fault so I didn't tell him, rationalizing that it would be bad for his morale.)

Siena came and went, and we soon swung through the broad avenues of Florence, past ancient towers, across acres of spacious piazzas to the banner where our card was stamped on the run. A Mercedes mechanic we recognized poked a slip of paper through the ventilator wing. While climbing steeply out of town toward the severe passes of the Futa and Raticosa, ominous on the horizon, Kurt shouted the information that we were now a minute *behind* Gendebien! "Are you sure?" I asked, stunned by the news. "That's what the note says!" What had happened to the "unassailable" lead we held at Rome? It was somehow lost, and if we were going to do anything about it, we would have to do it *now,* in the mountains.

Our engine was practically useless over 5000 revs, meaning that after Bologna on the high-speed final run to Brescia, we would be giving away some 20 mph to Gendebien, which worked out to a loss of about 20 minutes over the distance. But on the mountain road to Bologna, the loss of peak revs did not necessarily equal lost minutes, as braking and cornering beyond the limits of prudence could cancel a bonus of power. And an extremely rash effort could turn a deficit into a lead. This was highly unlikely against an opponent as competent as Gendebien, but we had no alternative but to attempt the improbable. It seemed likely that a few rocks would be shifted on the Futa that day!

Already dehydrated, our neglected need to replace body fluids was aggravated by the biological phenomenon that dries up the mouth and throat in times of extreme and perilous effort, until Kurt and I felt like two bags of chalk thumping and bouncing around in our Mercedes coupe. The quartered lemons thrust at us in Florence had left a burned and bitter taste, and I thought of what a blissful relief a cool drink in

the shade would be. Under the circumstances, *any* outside thought was brief; the unwinding road ahead and the constant demand to judge its limits of adhesion monopolized my attention.

Kurt's voice rose with the pitch of our effort: "Village with left, 30 through narrow building!" Perspiration dripped from his blunt chin. Poor fellow! He knew I was trying hard—perhaps too hard. The intense heat and the very idea of racing were alien to him, aside from the strain of shouting strange phrases in a foreign language. He lapsed into German occasionally but quickly recovered his accented English.

I was doing all I knew up the barren Futa to regain our lead. The sun was directly overhead at its optimum angle, scorching the bleached landscape and our vulnerable gray coupe. The whole scene was overcast with a thin pall as though the sun had sapped all color and energy indiscriminately from this exhausted-looking countryside. The heat increased our tire pressures still more and melted the tarred surface in many inopportune places. As a result, the car skidded from under us across the road at unexpected times when we thought we were secure. Kurt said *"Mein Gott!"* often and with feeling. We topped a crest in a 70-mph left and an unexpected hump tossed the rear wide. With one extreme and unmodified correction, we slid relentlessly toward a stone farm building encroaching the blistered macadam on the outside of the curve. There was nothing to do but wait and hope. Our anxiety seemed to put the action into slow motion as—yes!—the car slowly gripped the surface below the melted veneer and we straightened out past the building with an imperceptible gap. *("Mein Gott!")*

Kurt's warnings became increasingly loud and firm—his streaked face dripped perspiration faster—until each announcement of a coming hazard was delivered like a personal threat from him to me. He repeated the written appendage "Caution!" or *"Very* dangerous!" emphasizing in an exaggerated manner with his pointed forefinger like an impatient schoolteacher, "Caution! *Caution!"* each with a wag of his

finger. I didn't blame him, for I found the ride more than exciting myself, and I was well aware of the balance between the driver's habitual optimism vs. the passenger's black pessimism—all personalities aside.

Full throttle out of the rough hairpins made the car pound and slither in such a cruel way that I marveled that gears, shafts and universal joints could survive. Amazement and pity gave way to pride in our mount, this purposeful collection of materials which continued to project us across the brutal landscape with astonishing speed. We were begrudgingly aware that both because of and in *spite* of the faltering engine we were doing a thorough job of testing our machine. The crew on any proving ground would have found reason to interrupt this punishment long ago; indeed they would have halted us for investigation at the first sign of engine trouble, an age ago at Rimini.

I certainly would have begged off to refill our water bottle at the very least. But a race like the Mille Miglia is different. It's not a Roman holiday but an Italian holiday, and from the evidence of our eyes, the entire historic peninsula was our arena. The result was that we were emotionally and physically stimulated to conduct a test of unique severity; we were sure of one thing—our efforts would contribute to the perfection of this particular marque.

After the briefest respite over straighter roads we tackled the hairpins of the Raticosa, sliding and hammering up the highest peaks of the course. The routine seemed by now to have no beginning and no end; maximum speed through the gears toward the hazard ahead, and there was always one in sight; a curve chopped from view by rising rock; a brow under a thin blue sky that gave no clue of what lay beyond; or a curve obstructed by a clump of trees from which a bridge angled sharply. Then the anxious moment before the hazard revealed its nature, and the action required—either continued full speed or the immediate necessity to kill speed with all the means at hand and position the car to smooth its arc of travel in the new direction.

The brakes smelled, rumbled, and occasionally a wheel would slide, but they were always there, always powerful and positive. We became conditioned to emergency itself and it now took a long, ragged broadslide to bring either of us to exchange even a "So what?" glance.

Then, suddenly, we were sweeping through the 120-mph-plus bends on the broad cobbled avenue approaching Bologna, crazily swerving each time we crossed the central trolley tracks. Under the *controllo* banner our card was stamped, and as we scrambled for traction another paper was thrust in the window. It read: *2 minutes 20 seconds behind Gendebien*. In spite of all we could do, it now appeared we had lost first place in the Grand Touring category. On the fast roads from Bologna to Brescia we would lose a clear 20 mph on our top speed; the situation looked hopeless.

But meanwhile we were galloping over the series of bridges on the arrow-straight avenue leaving Bologna, and losing not a split second, because no race is over until the finish line is crossed. This is both a tacit code and good racing tactics, for the record books are full of last-minute reversals and victories snatched from defeat.

Geographically, the approximately 100 miles through Modena and Parma to Piacenza appear flat and straight. Actually the stretch is interspersed with gentle bends through countless villages and towns, most of them hidden by buildings or trees crowding the constricted way. Though perhaps only a few feet higher than the level valley, the frequent bridges effectively blocked our view ahead. Our reduced maximum of about 130 was still fast enough to render nerve-racking our full-bore approach to what appeared to be a solid block of buildings. Always in the back of our minds lurked the unwelcome thought that our notes might not be accurate. Simply transpose *Right F. O.* (flat-out or full-speed) *at Village* for *Right 80 at Village* and we would be playing bulldozer with a row of stone houses. Stimulated by the certain knowledge that we were losing time on the straights, I tried to re-

cover it in the bends, but the attempt produced more excitement than speed.

At *Buildings ahead—crest on Bridge 100!* I nevertheless held full throttle. The swooping ramp of the bridge produced sufficient Gs to double us over in unison; then we jerked bolt upright with wide eyes as we soared for an incredible time, the unloaded machinery thrashing beneath us. The road was straight and the landing uneventful. We exchanged a satisfied glance, sure we had made something on that one.

We were in the last hundred miles of flat, fast roads. It was uneventful topographically, but tension was mounting as we approached the finish of this long contest. Were we gaining on Gendebien? Had we made up some of our lost lead?

One section here ran arrow-straight beside a canal, crowded on each side of the narrow, patched pavement by neat rows of trees. Beyond the trees were open fields of crops, broken periodically by dense woods and a few buildings—or an occasional *trattoria,* or cafe, close against the road. Tunneling into the relative darkness of the settlements magnified the impression of speed, and the high crown of the undulating surface produced a sensation not unlike that of walking the length of a floating log. Even at our reduced maximum (130) we realized that any small mechanical failure or even a sudden diversion would probably be disastrous. (It was along this road that the Marquis de Portago blew a tire two years later and crashed to his death.)

We had come full circle. The last familiar miles back into Brescia suddenly opened in the broad plain before us. We knew this road well from brief test excursions made from our Brescia base, and my usual anxiety over the critical beginning and ending of long-distance races made me uneasy. I knew that a driver is inclined to be careless on familiar roads—and that is why they are often dangerous.

We were still racing against the unseen clock; we knew our maximum of 130 (which now seemed incredibly slow on the broad, smooth stretch) must have hurt our class position

—and we were well aware that this punishing race had often been won or lost by seconds!

Then, suddenly, Brescia was ahead, black with crowds, and we swept past the blue sign marking the town limits, having been at speed for almost 11 ½ hours. Still rushing time, we skated into the asphalt expanse of the town square, urging the tired Mercedes down the final straight to the finish banner.

Finally, in a rush of speed, we were past; the flag had fallen—and as we skidded to a halt to have our book stamped for the last time we found it hard to realize that the race was over, that we could now do something other than force this gray coupe over an endless road at top speed.

With a kind of dazed incredulity, we swung up the doors and climbed stiffly out of the now-quiet machine—into a back-thumping, crushing pandemonium. Neubauer, Uhlenhaut, black-faced Stirling Moss and Jenkinson (the *over-all* winners) and several Mercedes directors shouted their congratulations. We were told that we had taken fifth over-all behind the SLRs of Moss and Fangio, Maglioli's Ferrari and a Maserati driven by Giardini, and had won our *Gran Turismo* class, smashing the previous class record by a full hour and equaling Ascari's over-all winning speed of the year before. It was glorious news—the best we could have hoped for!

But I felt somewhat skeptical, despite my desire to believe what was so emphatically stated. Surely Gendebien had beaten us on elapsed time, considering our engine troubles. Nursing a liter of bottled water, I explained to Uhlenhaut how our car behaved, and he told me that this had happened once before, also in very hot weather. (Months later, after a test driver was killed at Hockenheim pursuing this problem, it was discovered that extreme engine heat was conducted to a valve which then directed part of the incoming fuel to the high-pressure overflow line back to the tanks. Mercedes then relocated the valve and the trouble ended.)

My hopes roae as I realized that Gendebien should be here

by now in the other 300 SL. If he arrived more than eight minutes after we did, then the class victory was really oursl And, as it happened, Gendebien arrived some 75 minutes later. He'd made an excursion off the road, bending a fender into the wheel. The tire subsequently went flat and had to be changed at the costly price of five full minutes.

I was elated, glowing with that bone-deep satisfaction that warms and relaxes mind and body. I realized that we had won *despite* Gendebien's bad luck, as we were ahead by more minutes than it takes to change a Mercedes wheel, and even without his blowout we would have surely won our class. And what did this victory mean? Simply that it is man's nature to set a trial for himself, to stake out an objective and, in attempting to reach it, do more than is often wise or necessary. I submit that in this race lies a condensation of the human condition, for better or worse. And this moment was the kind which enhances the value of every small thing, making senses more acute, thoughts more generous and friends dearer.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tragedy at Le Mans

Over 80 people died at Le Mans in 1955.

A tragedy of this magnitude—the worst road accident in history—defies words. Therefore, this chapter is an extremely difficult one to write, particularly in view of the fact that I was so closely involved in the nightmarish chain of events leading to the crash. The instrument of death, a Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR, was piloted by the Frenchman Pierre Levegh, who was my co-driver in the race. A change of plans might have found me in the cockpit instead of Levegh....

This tragedy at Le Mans, an impossible series of actions and reactions, was as unlikely as an airliner falling on a schoolhouse. Such events are called "acts of God." They are deplored by all, the dead are buried and the living carry on, trying to find a lesson. Yet airliners and schools are not abandoned—any more than boating is banned because a pleasure launch capsizes with all hands lost. In many phases of human endeavor death is part of the cost of doing business; the price of living is the risk of dying.

But by its record, motor sport has been directly responsible for saving thousands of lives through the improvements it has pioneered and developed, and cannot logically be condemned because of one phenomenon, however terrible.

The responsibility for the accident at Le Mans can be

fixed on no one. The most victimized figure in the public eye was my co-driver Levegh, who not only lost his life but, in a sense, his reputation as well. Mike Hawthorn suffered in the hands of the German press; and Lance Macklin was also publicly implicated for his part in the accident. Yet all were highly competent drivers, and it is unjust to fix the blame on any one of them. Faults in any sport are allowable, and even *if* one individual could be accused of triggering the accident, he could certainly not be charged with the tragedy that followed.

The details, after the rash of distorted newspaper versions and differing eyewitness accounts, seem to resolve themselves to these: Mike Hawthorn's D-Jaguar, due in to his pit for fuel, passed Lance Macklin's Austin-Healey 100S on the narrow front straightaway; Mike braked hard and pulled to the right. Lance also braked hard, moving over to the left to repass Hawthorn. Levegh in the fast 300 SLR was bearing down on both of them at high speed (over 150). He threw up one arm to warn Fangio behind him, braked, and attempted to slip between Macklin and the earth bank. He didn't make it. The Mercedes hit the left rear of the Healey, deflecting the front of the SLR upward and catapulting it into the air as it struck the embankment. As Macklin's car ricocheted across the track, the Mercedes shot along the top of the embankment, striking a concrete structure by the pedestrian tunnel, disintegrating the car and flinging heavy parts of it (including the engine and front-wheel assembly) into the crowd. Levegh was thrown from the cockpit and killed instantly. In all, some 80 others died with him.

2.

My part in this race had come about as a result of my performance in the Mille Miglia. Herr Neubauer seemed very pleased with my driving and wrote to ask me if I would share the wheel of an SLR at Le Mans with Pierre Levegh. The Frenchman was not an established member of the team,

being asked to drive largely as a gesture of recognition for his gallant fight against the Mercedes cars here in 1952. (In that event he had led with his blue Talbot into the 23rd hour, several laps ahead of the Germans when mechanical trouble forced his retirement. He had driven the entire race solo, and was in a state of exhaustion and shock when his bid finally ended.) Neubauer felt that it would be a popular, even diplomatic, move on the part of Daimler-Benz to have Levegh drive for them here at Le Mans.

I accepted eagerly, knowing I'd share one of the three top cars in the race (the other two SLRs were to be manned by Fangio-Moss and Kling-Simon). Ferrari might field as fast a machine, but our radical new air brake (a metal flap which could be raised behind the driver to slow him at the end of Mulsanne straight) would give us a marked advantage on wet or dry roads.

This 300 SLR was a ferocious racing car, with its powerful 3-liter 8-cylinder in-line engine, fuel-injected to deliver some 300 horsepower. It was an incredible machine, embodying the highest expression in the art and science of automotive design. (We used to joke about pulling into a local garage back home in the States and asking for a tuneup. The crowding air tubes, camshaft covers, fuel injection system and center-mounted brake drums presented a complex array the like of which could be found on no other automobile. From end to end, under its smooth magnesium skin, it was crammed with pipes and boosters and hydraulics and delicate, ribbed castings, and space frame members enveloped by tanks and ducts—a staggering complexity of parts.) A platoon of crack German mechanics was required to make these cars run, but once running properly, they seemed to be capable of going on forever. One typical installation which baffled even the European experts was a four-button panel on the dash by which we could oil and completely decommission any brake that might become defective and lock up on us. A button for each wheel!

Beside the SLR, the production 300 SL coupe (considered

to be *quite* an automobile) was as tame as a tractor, and as I had not yet driven the SLR I was anxiously looking forward to racing on this splendid machine. Chances for a position among the leaders looked very good. (Briggs was making a final try at Le Mans this year with the Cunningham—using a 3-liter Offenhauser engine—in addition to fielding a D-Jaguar for Walters and Spear, but he didn't mind my driving with Mercedes; in fact, he understood my position and wished me well with typical generosity.)

Among racing initiates, Levegh was nicknamed "the Bishop"—perhaps because his fifty years set him apart from the younger drivers, but due more, I think, to his habitually solemn demeanor, his general air of deep reflection. Levegh did not smile often, and was not a "mixer" in the social sense of the word, but he had been a prominent figure in the world of sport for many years and a victory at Le Mans had long been his most cherished ambition.

One evening before the race I was invited by Levegh's wife to dinner at their remote hotel some two dozen miles from Le Mans, and I drove out expecting a quiet if not dull evening. Instead, I was greeted with warm animation and made to feel completely at home. My uneven knowledge of French had to suffice, as Levegh could speak no English, but we managed to communicate without much difficulty.

After dessert, he asked me to walk with him in the garden. "It is good for my old friend here," said Pierre, patting the head of a sad-eyed gray poodle at his feet. "A dog needs exercise after his dinner just as we do."

We moved slowly along a narrow stone path in the moonlight, the scent of early flowers strong in the night air.

Levegh spoke quietly. "Herr Neubauer asked me if I wanted him to send out the team masseur to my place so that I could be given rubdowns before the race. But I said no, I did not want to alter my ways. I believe it is a mistake to change one's pattern of living before a race. The system should be calm and settled. One should always drive in the

same physical condition as one lives; it should be a normal thing."

He then remarked that he did not think the front straightaway past the pits and grandstands was wide enough. "It is too narrow for these fast cars," said Levegh, "and each time I go by it is with a feeling of unease, a feeling of being hemmed in."

And though I did not pay particular attention to this remark at the moment, I was to remember it later....

Back at the apartment, before I left that evening, Levegh's wife confided in me. "Oh, Fitch," she smiled, "our Pierre is *so* happy. So happy at this chance. He wants to do well."

I knew how much Le Mans meant to them—how hard Levegh had tried to win it over the years—and I smiled back at his wife there in the doorway. "You know better than anyone how good he is in this race," I assured her. "And I am delighted to be teamed with him."

Levegh and I preferred not to push the Mercedes for the first half of the long 24 hours; we would conserve the car and move up gradually for a final thrust later in the race, when the competition was worn down. I was glad that no conflict of opinion existed here; if Neubauer agreed (and I was certain he would) our strategy was set.

3-

We all drove to Hockenheim a week before the race for a special test. An SLR was to be run for 24 hours, simulating the conditions of the actual French classic, and if any bugs remained this shakedown would surely reveal them.

The Hockenheim circuit ran for some four miles through patches of dense wood, a narrow road with many fast bends flanked by ditches and marginal shoulders—in all, an unfortunate place to lose control. I tried the car in evening practice and found that the headlights with their plexiglass covers were wholly inadequate for high speeds on the narrow circuit. The trees were dark shadows as I flashed between them

at 160, the lights feebly probing the black tunnel through the pine woods. We were guided by flickering oil lanterns placed in the apex of the bends which gave us something to aim for, but these were extremely poor reference points and it was touch and go all the way around.

But as the SLR became more familiar to me, I found myself liking the car more and more. The flap-type hydraulic air brake allowed much gentler use of the foot pedal when raised behind me, and I knew this would be a great help at the end of Mulsanne. And an unexpected bonus from the new device was the stabilizing effect it had on the car through fast bends. Since the center of its air resistance was behind the center of gravity of the whole car, it felt as though the rear of the Mercedes was held into the curves against its normal tendency to drift out—as if restrained by some invisible but delicately handled cable. (I was particularly eager to try it on a wet road where normal braking efficiency, dependent on tire adhesion only, is drastically reduced. Here the efficiency of this air brake would be unaffected.) Although there was a good deal of wind buffeting when the flap was up, the total result was most satisfactory.

When Levegh had finished his practice run on the circuit he remarked that he did not like sitting on the left, that he had always been used to sitting on the right in a racing car and that this new position made him somewhat uneasy. "It is difficult enough to see team signals with the pit straight as narrow as it is," he said. "A driver *needs* to feel comfortable. And I do not feel comfortable in this car." I told him I was sure he'd quickly become accustomed to the Mercedes in the race itself, but Levegh somberly shook his head.

After a brief rest, I awoke in the chill of 4 **A.M.** and stumbled down the narrow stairs of our old country inn to find our "dry run" was off. We had only one SLR available for this test, as the others were being readied for Le Mans, and one of Uhlenhaut's test drivers had completely wrecked it. In a treacherous 160-mph bend—with only a flickering

orange lantern for reference—he had lost control. The SLR slid down the center of the road for some 500 feet, struck the dirt shoulder, took down several poles, tore through the fencing, hit a tree some 15 feet off the ground and bounced back into the middle of the road. The driver was thrown clear and was unhurt, but the Mercedes was literally torn to pieces. Only the frame, engine and three wheels remained in one unit.

4-

We immediately returned to Le Mans to practice on the actual circuit. The SLRs were the same models that had been victorious in the Mille Miglia, now fitted with larger 50-gallon gas tanks. At the end of the three evening practice sessions Eugenio Castellotti set fastest time with 3 minutes, 14 seconds in one of the brutish Italian 4.4 Ferrari team cars. Fangio was a second slower, with Kling next. But we were not alarmed by these results; we expected the Mercedes to outlast the Ferraris in the long run. The Jaguar team was actually more threatening, with their disc brakes and remarkably successful experience at Le Mans. (The Hawthorn-Bueb Jag had turned fourth fastest time.) Aston Martin was also a strong contender, with Peter Collins and journalist-driver Paul Frere in a promising new 2.9 model.

I was unaccountably anxious on the morning of the race, June 11, 1955. It was a warm, pleasant French Saturday, somewhat cloudy, but without sign of the rain that had become a Le Mans trademark. I ate a light breakfast (*cafe au lait* and *croissant*), assembled my driving gear and hurried to the Mercedes garage.

I was ambitious enough to badly want to win this race of sports car races, but I felt unaccountably harassed—as when something is forgotten—and admonished myself to avoid the slightest mistake or omission. I reviewed the dismal facts that every driver knows: Everything can be performed to per-

fection, and then some completely uncontrollable incident, such as a faulty tire or brake failure, can ruin one's chances. I concluded these melancholy reflections with: "You've got your best chance to win Le Mans, so don't make any mistakes. *Noner*

The typical Le Mans crowd of several hundred thousand waited expectantly, alternating between a characteristic holiday mood and an intense preoccupation with the many facets of the world's premier sports car race.

At 4 **P.M.** a fresh wind was chasing away the clouds, and sunlight sparkled from 58 waiting cars on the line. My eyes were on the solemn figure of Pierre Levegh, waiting without movement in the painted white circle across from our silent Mercedes. Then the tricolor whipped down and the race was on.

Castellotti was first away in his big Ferrari, followed by Mike Hawthorn on the D-Jag. All three of the Mercedes were slow in getting into the battle, and Levegh, in seventh position at the end of lap 1, led both his teammates. But Fangio passed him on the next lap, and moved up to engage the leaders. On lap 13 Fangio was third, with Castellotti number one and Hawthorn sticking close to him in second. Levegh was still running securely in seventh, in accordance with our plan to conserve the car in the early stages.

The duel for the front position was fierce, with Fangio harrying both Castellotti and Hawthorn. Speeds were truly fantastic, with Hawthorn finally setting an all-time Le Mans record of 4 minutes, 6.6 seconds (or over 7 seconds faster than the best practice time).

By 6 P.M.—at the two-hour mark—Fangio had taken the lead away from Hawthorn in a thrilling wheel-to-wheel battle, and Castellotti had dropped back. Kling and Levegh were running close together in fifth and sixth, almost a full lap behind the leaders. Kling was due in for fuel and a driver change at 6:30, and he eased off for Levegh to pass him into fifth as he prepared to brake for the pits. (Pierre was due in

shortly thereafter, when I was to take over our No. 20 Mercedes.)

Things were going well, and I now felt more confident that our plans were well made; Castellotti was obviously in trouble and would drop out. My hopes rose along with my eagerness to get behind the wheel. Kling was due any moment now, and to give the crew a little more elbow room during his hurried pit stop, I decided that this would be the opportune time to accept a standing invitation to have coffee with Mrs. Levegh in the Mercedes trailer behind our pit.

I had just arrived when the spine-chilling sound of a tremendous crash reached us: the tortured skid of tires as brakes were desperately applied, the impact of cars slamming together, the rising chorus of dismay from the stands....

"Wait here," I told Mrs. Levegh, "and I'll see what's happened."

A woman ran by, sobbing, hands over her face. A man stepped out of a nearby door carrying an injured mechanic.

The pits were in chaos, with police and volunteers running across the track, now littered with debris and dark with smoke. Directly opposite us, burning fiercely with a harsh white glare, a silver Mercedes was balanced on the embankment, already blackened by flames, but I could not make out its number. Was it Fangio—or Levegh? Kling had just pulled into our pit, looking shocked, and Neubauer was standing out in the littered road, waving the cars through with courageous presence of mind.

Fangio's wife was almost hysterical, thinking her husband dead, and then someone shouted out the number of the wrecked car: 20. It was Pierre Levegh, the quiet, intense man who had wanted so desperately to win Le Mans....

I helped in passing the injured gendarmes and pressmen (swept down by the spinning Healey) to waiting hands back of the pits, then sought out Mrs. Levegh. I suppose my grim face told the story, for I did not have to speak. She nodded slowly. "I know, Fitch. It was Levegh. He is dead. I know he is dead." She repeated this over and over in a low, numbed

voice, her eyes not seeing me, her ears closed to my voice as I tried to tell her that we couldn't be sure, that he might have been thrown clear. But she continued to repeat the words: "He is dead. Levegh is dead."

By now, a gendarme had found Levegh's body and draped it with a banner torn from the embankment as the track was cleared of debris. But still the Mercedes continued to burn. Neubauer had returned to his post by the pit wall, and I confirmed with him what I had assumed to be the rule: that the Le Mans regulations would not allow me to drive another car. Only reserves could be substituted.

With this firmly established, I went to the pressroom to phone Elizabeth. Getting through to Switzerland immediately, I told her, "There's been an accident involving our car. I wasn't in it, no matter what you may hear to the contrary, and I won't be doing any more driving here today, so don't worry."

I was glad to have made that call, for reports of the accident on the Armed Forces radio said I was in the car. And although they were later corrected it could have been very frightening for Elizabeth.

I was stunned to overhear a reporter friend phoning his newspaper in Paris, saying that the death toll had reached 63, and was still rising. He had received his information directly from the French Prefect of Police at the emergency receiving station, so I knew it was accurate. This was no accident; it was a holocaust!

In the pits I met my bearded friend, Denis Jenkinson, and we immediately fell into a heated argument. I told him I thought the race should go on, but that Mercedes should withdraw. I offered several reasons: respect for the dead, to prevent stirring up the old German-French emotional antagonism, and because it was in Mercedes' specific interests to declare by retirement their firm's basic humanity and traditional role in the sport.

Jenks didn't agree. Alternately the medieval man and the

hard realist, he maintained that people die one way or another by the thousands every day and that it would be sheer sentimentality for Mercedes to withdraw simply because a great number died at this particular time from a single cause. In principle, he insisted, one death was the same as a hundred.

"Listen," I told him, "perhaps *we* know this is so, but it will be just so much gibberish to reporters. They'll say: Ruthless Germans Race On to Victory over Dead Bodies of French.' And that will help no one."

Neubauer was intent on the race, so I found Uhlenhaut, informing him of the terrible number of fatalities. He called Stuttgart, but the Mercedes directors could not be assembled immediately to make their decision. So he left the information to be relayed.

Later, around 10 **P.M.,** I again approached Uhlenhaut and urged him to make a second phone call to Stuttgart, in view of the still-climbing death toll. He did so, returning to say that they favored withdrawal.

Neubauer made the official announcement. "It is finished," he told the press. "There are too many dead."

At 2 **A.M.,** some seven and a half hours after the accident, the remaining pair of silver SLRs were called into the pits. (At that time the Fangio-Moss Mercedes was leading the race, two full laps ahead of Hawthorn's Jaguar, and Kling was in fourth. Mike's Jaguar went on to win.)

For all of us with Mercedes-Benz, the disastrous 1955 sports car race at Le Mans was over.

5-

Three days later in Paris, the funeral of Pierre Levegh was held. The newspapers and the throngs of curiosity seekers had turned the unhappy affair into a side show, and our group (Moss, Collins and I), already depressed, could not leave soon enough.

Mrs. Levegh was at the end of a long receiving line, and

when my turn came to speak to her I could only mumble something about my high regard for her husband. She looked at me, seemingly resigned now, a faint smile on her pale face. "Oh, Fitch," she said, her voice clear in the crowd-murmur, "he was *so* happy . . ."

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Monza, the Tourist Trophy and the Terrible Targa

As ALL of France went into mourning for its dead, the tragedy at Le Mans sent a shock wave through the world of motor racing, resulting in the cancellation of many important seasonal events, as well as a careful re-evaluation of safety measures. But the last Grand Prix event of the year, the GP of Monza in Italy, was run as scheduled in September, with a full turnout from all of the major factory teams. To the newly lengthened course—now six miles long, a rugged combination of high-banked speedway and road circuit—came Mercedes, Ferrari, Maserati, Vanwall, Gordini and Lancia (having recently joined with Ferrari).

On the Mercedes Formula 1 team, I served in a reserve capacity, to be called only if their other regulars were indisposed by accident or sudden illness. I had practiced in the victorious GP Mercedes in Germany, but had no opportunity to drive this model in an actual Grand Prix. Therefore, when Stirling Moss offered to let me enter his privately owned Formula 1 Maserati in this event I immediately obtained an okay from Neubauer.

Our third boy, Stephen, had been born in mid-July at our home in Lugano, and this time I had been at Elizabeth's side

for several weeks, getting to know the latest addition to our family; therefore, I could head for Italy with freer conscience. (Besides, it was only a 50-mile drive across the border to Monza.)

The machine I was to handle had none of the latest Maserati factory modifications, and was at least a full season behind the others in development. But Stirling wanted to keep what amounted to his "one-car *equipe*" in operation and available for his use, while giving his crew of long standing, Alf Francis and Tony Robinson, the chance to exercise their trade and earn a bit of money. But by now the Moss Maserati was about at the end of its racing tether. In addition, the engine had burned a piston at Aintree and a groove had been cut in the cylinder liner. Repairs had been hurriedly improvised in order to get the car ready for Monza. When I arrived at the autodrome on Friday the Maser had been painted with a blue-and-white stripe—in recognition of the Yank.

Practice on Saturday indicated that we would be lucky to finish; the engine was "roughing up" and it trailed a haze of blue oil smoke, presumably the "blow-by" from the grooved cylinder.

I got off to an inauspicious start in the 20-car field when the flag came down, being forced to slow as a Ferrari faltered ahead of me, and by the third lap, blue smoke was boiling from the left side of the engine and an oil film blurred my goggles. At top speed the smoke was literally streaming back from the bonnet and my candid prediction was an early retirement.

I was racing nobody; it was simply a matter of me against the car. I had been in almost the same position two years before in the HWM when its engine had finally seized, and I began to think that GP racing at Monza was not for Fitch! But on I drove, seemingly alone on the circuit, the cars ahead and behind being completely out of sight. The shocks were weakening, for I could barely hold the Maser on the fast left bend on the back straight; each time around it would threaten to skate sideways off the road, forcing me to feather the

throttle as the car sidled up to the edge of the grass shoulder at 150 mph. I could see four silver Mercedes coming rapidly into sight behind me in the mirror, and I moved over to let them go by. They howled past me on the high banking: 1-2-3-4. Fangio-Moss-Kling-Taruffi. And they took me with them!

The close-running pack of German cars was responsible for a sort of invisible tunnel of moving air created by their swift passage and, to my delight, my Maser suddenly picked up speed as I tucked in behind. They "towed" me around for a complete lap at a truly exhilarating rate, only to accelerate briskly away, leaving me ignominiously on the fast straight. After this taste of real competitive speed I was even more dissatisfied with my situation.

Numerous cars had dropped out under the punishment inflicted by the rough bankings and high speeds (including the Moss and Kling Mercedes) and I found that I was now among the first 10. As I passed our pit I gave the thumbs-up signal to an obviously dejected Moss standing with his two-man crew. By now, just past the halfway point, all three Gordinis were out, as well as several other private entries.

I made a stop for oil (my second of the afternoon), gulped down a delicious cup of cool water and—to a rising cheer from the crowd—took off again with the engine now raggedly sputtering. The spectators, pulling for the underdog, were sympathetic (and perhaps somewhat amused) by our stubborn efforts against the apparent odds. Their backing and enthusiasm made me more determined than ever to see it through. On the last lap, with the finish line in sight, the engine was misfiring to the extent that I was practically crawling along. With the Maser emitting thick clouds of smoke, I rolled under the checkered flag four laps behind Fangio and ninth over-all—in a finishing field of nine! But I was pleased to have nursed the crippled machine home, and I waved happily back to the crowd as they shouted across from the stands.

And in the pits, before Alf or Tony could say a word, I leaned over in the cockpit, playing it straight, and asked:

"Well, boys, did we *win?*" Which broke them up completely, ending an incredible afternoon.

2.

Hard on the heels of the Italian Grand Prix came the Tourist Trophy—just six days later in Ireland, near Belfast. Since this was the first full-dress sports car race since Le Mans, and since it marked the event's Golden Jubilee (the first TT having been run on the Isle of Man in 1905), the cream of international talent was on hand. From America came Carroll Shelby and Masten Gregory in a Porsche Spyder; from England the Aston Martin and Jaguar (with Collins, Parnell and Salvadori for Aston, and Hawthorn and Titterington in the single D-Jag); from Italy, Ferrari (Castellotti, Taruffi, Maglioli) and Maserati (Behra and Musso); and from Germany our Mercedes team: Fangio, Moss, Kling, myself, Simon and the twenty-six-year-old German addition Wolfgang von Trips, who had been chosen by Neubauer after distinguishing himself in Sweden on a 300 SL a month before. (Von Trips had also driven a Porsche very well in Germany during past seasons.) I was to be teamed with von Trips in one of the three silver SLRs.

In Northern Ireland there is a saying: "If you don't like the weather—wait a minute," which is literally true. Our practice sessions were held on a rain-shine-rain basis, over the treacherous 8-mile Dundrod circuit in this, the rainiest, foggiest part of Ireland. I had considered the run extremely dangerous in 1953 (when I'd competed here in a Frazer-Nash) and found no reason to change that opinion. And with cars as powerful as the SLR anything could happen along this blind, narrow road whose turns were nearly always obscured by high banks or thick hedges.

Prior to the first practice session, the Mercedes convoy of private cars threaded its way out from Belfast to the circuit. There, while we waited for a chance to drive the course, Herr Neubauer inspected the refueling equipment and otherwise

characteristically engaged in interminable consultations with innumerable assistants. I finally approached the big man and asked when we could have a car—any kind of car—to take a look at the eight miles of road we were soon to race over. He shook his head at my suggestion of using a private vehicle to accomplish this. "You drivers go too fast in normal traffic and make accident!" he told me. But an hour later he agreed to let us tour in four private cars, sternly warning us to go slowly.

I had nearly completed the first twisting lap when I came upon a light truck sitting in the middle of the road, its front considerably damaged. Fifty yards beyond, a Mercedes sedan was straddling a high dirt bank, where it had come to rest on the brink of a lo-foot drop into a field below. Andre Simon was sadly contemplating his unhappy situation when Neubauer arrived on the scene. The wrecked Mercedes just *happened* to be Neubauer's personal car—and the big man went red with rage at the sight. Poor Simon protested that he had made the best of a bad situation when he had come upon the truck in the center of the road, but his was a small voice against the thundering Neubauer. Herr Alfred turned to me and recalled, "I have said to you, 'Racing drivers make accident!' " Finally the road was cleared and practice got under way.

I settled comfortably into the seat of our SLR with the knowledge that in just a few moments the brutal hammering over the bumpy road at high speed would render this seat distinctly uncomfortable. This remarkable racing car, so controllable at normal speeds with its light, accurate steering and superb suspension and brakes, would soon become a headstrong devil, almost a self-willed creature demanding a maximum of physical and mental effort to keep it on the rough, high-crowned road.

But the two days of practice went well, and my lap times (though behind Fangio, Moss and Kling) were somewhat better than von Trips' and Simon's. The latter was teamed with Stirling and was having some trouble with his vision, a

recurring effect of an old injury. And this gave me an idea. Stirling had won this Dundrod race twice in the past and knew the road perfectly. But more than that, he knew the nature and character of this race, its timing and over-all strategy and the feel of the course wet or dry. Why not team with Moss, offering my complete accord to any plan he might devise in order to insure the best chance of winning? (My fastest practice lap was still considerably slower than Stirling's, but I felt I would be able to improve my performance in the race itself as I became more accustomed to the circuit.)

I approached Moss on the subject. "Fangio can't help you because he has his own car and Kling is driving with him. It seems I'm next fastest and therefore the logical choice to co-drive with you—and, in addition, I'll agree to any plan you have regarding strategy. For Mercedes purposes *and* our own, it looks like the best combination."

Moss liked the idea, telling me he wanted to do nearly all of the driving himself, that he particularly wanted to beat Fangio in the British Isles, and that I would drive just enough to give him a needed break in the tiring battle. I agreed to this, and he later returned to assure me it was officially arranged; we would team in his SLR, with Simon and von Trips in the third Mercedes.

"One thing, John," he said, "I've asked for different gear ratios for our car. Fifth gear is the same, but all the others are much higher, so you'll have to use first at the hairpin. It's a pity you'll have no chance to try the car before the race, but that's impossible now."

It had rained a bit that morning—just enough to make the road slick, and I didn't envy Stirling his first few laps. At the end of the pits the road suddenly becomes a bottleneck, allowing only two cars abreast, and in the heavy traffic of the getaway it can be a touchy spot. Upon the conclusion of "God Save the King," the 50-plus drivers sprinted for their waiting cars. Our car was tenth down the line, and Stirling hopped into it, getting away just behind Mike Hawthorn in the works D-type Jaguar. Von Trips was sixth away, with Fangio

(who seldom made fast Le Mans starts) seventh off the mark. Peter Walker's Aston Martin refused to fire, but finally got away at the end of the howling pack.

As always, suspense was tremendous in the pits as we waited out the long minutes of that first lap to see which car would emerge the leader. We could only imagine the drama unfolding on the narrow road as the packed mass of machines jockeyed for position, eager to take advantage of every opportunity, yet wary of "overdoing things" with full fuel loads. I was quite confident of the famous Moss ability; his judgment and race craft were equal to the moment, and whether he appeared first or last around the turn I was optimistic about the result seven hours from now. I was driving with the best in the business. (Even Fangio did not surpass this amazing young Englishman in sports cars.)

Then a white helmet showed over the hedge bordering the final curve before the pit straight, and a silver Mercedes burst into view: Moss! A moment later Hawthorn flashed by in the D-Jag, then came Ferrari, Maserati, Ferrari, Mercedes and Aston Martin. The remainder of the large field seemed to take a very long time to pass, and Moss was again in sight on the second lap, leading Hawthorn by a yet-wider margin. Von Trips was now third behind the Jaguar.

On lap 3: disaster! A seven-car pile-up, in which two drivers (Smith and Mayers) died, slowed traffic under the yellow flag. Mayers had lost control of his small Cooper-Climax, which disintegrated on the blind Cochranstown corner upon striking a stone gate and the bank. Six others could not avoid the wreckage. It was an ominous beginning for such a dangerous race, adding to a season already darkened by the tragedy at Le Mans.

A private-entry D-Jaguar, driven by Berry, had blown a tire on the back road. As he was attempting to reach the pits on the flat, Berry's wheel jammed under the thrashing tread and the car shot over a bank and out of the running. Berry walked sadly back to his pit.

Now Fangio had moved solidly into third and was fighting

hub-to-hub with Mike's Jag for second, making a successful bid to pass on the fastest part of the rolling, weaving straight. As at Le Mans, they exchanged positions several times over the next hour, keeping the crowd at fever pitch. But Moss was still leading them both, going beautifully in the silver SLR. Finally Neubauer gave Fangio the EZ signal, and he immediately dropped back, allowing Hawthorn to retain second.

In the following hour Moss increased his lead to a minute and a half over Mike's straining D-Jag. Fangio was still third, with von Trips fourth ahead of Collins' Aston Martin. Then Stirling rolled in unexpectedly, with the entire right-rear section of the car battered and twisted. He had touched a bank, bursting the tire, and the whipping tread had ripped the body metal as Moss fought to keep the Mercedes from leaving the road. During the long pit stop, as the damaged section was cut away, it was decided to give Stirling an early rest, and I was called to take over the car. Titterington had replaced Hawthorn, and just as I pulled out of our pit he sailed past into first place with the green D. Under a darkening sky, I accelerated hard behind the Jaguar through the first bend after the pits (taken at 145), but his flying start carried him swiftly on through a series of fast, blind turns.

Straining to become accustomed to the unfamiliar gear ratios of the Moss SLR, and still not certain that the car was sound after its brush with the bank, I decided I should fully accept the minor role to which I had agreed and drive with the utmost conservatism, leaving the fireworks to Stirling. Titterington, the young Irishman in the Jaguar to whom this circuit was home ground, took full advantage of this and added to his lead with every lap. At the end of three laps the rain began, the slippery surface changing the characteristics of the Mercedes and slowing me still more—as I was not going to risk leaving the road in unfamiliar circumstances and cancel out the fine drive put up by Moss. In another 15 minutes, with six laps behind me, I was called into the pit by Neubauer, and Moss leaped into the Mercedes with his char-

acteristic bounce, setting out after the Hawthorn-Tittering-ton Jag.

My contribution to the race had been brief and unspectacular, but I hoped that I had done my part in the unusual conditions. Stirling seemed well rested after his half-hour break, and was already closing the 2-minute gap on the leader. Though I felt somewhat out of the picture in this co-driver role, I was nevertheless convinced that our strategy had been wise, and that Stirling would still win.

And win he did, catching the Jag within the next two hours, and stretching his hard-fought lead to the flag. (And this, despite a bungled, Marx-Brothers pit stop in which gas was spilled and Stirling wedged his foot in a bucket of water!) The Fangio-Kling car was second with the von Trips-Simon car in for third. Another Mercedes sweep!

The Moss-Fitch combination had proved to be a fortuitous one, for Simon's eye trouble had practically eliminated him and the resulting pressure on von Trips had exhausted the young German, obliging Kling to take over their car while Fangio finished his. (The Gregory-Shelby Porsche finished ninth, for a splendid class win ahead of all the factory machines.) It had been a sad day for Mike Hawthorn, who crossed the finish line on foot just as Stirling flashed under the checker. With only two laps to go, and leading Fangio, Mike's engine had failed under seven hours of pressure, and his great fight was over.

3-

One month after the Tourist Trophy, in mid-October, came the last big race of the season counting toward the World Championship for Sports Cars, the Targa Florio, in Sicily. It was to be a grim struggle between Mercedes (who now had 16 points for the season) and Ferrari (who led with 19). In order to win the crown, Mercedes had to take both first *and* second away from Ferrari.

This race had been extended from its normal eight laps

to 13 for 1955, adding up to 580 miles (since each lap covered some 45 miles of road). This meant a total of 10,000 curves in the rugged 9½-hour event! Here was indeed a race to equal the Mille Miglia and the *Carrera Panamericana* for severity and strain, and to win it Daimler-Benz made a very impressive all-out effort. Three full weeks before the start they were on hand with eight sports cars, eight trucks, 15 private cars and 45 mechanics!

Ferrari, on the other hand, lacked this German intensity. They only brought six mechanics and three cars, one of which was used solely for practice. (And then there was the casual Frenchman who showed up towing his sports car behind a Renault. He had no mechanic and no co-driver—but he *was* accompanied by a pair of beautiful assistants—female by coincidence.)

This race is often referred to as "The Terrible Targa"—due to its snaking, tortuous character. There is only one real straight in all of its 45 miles, and in spots the road narrows to a single hazardous lane. Crowd control along the rocky, mountainous circuit is virtually nonexistent, even during the race itself—and since the route is not closed for practice the drivers must attempt to learn it at the risk of running into herds of goats lazily crossing the road under the indifferent supervision of a typically carefree Sicilian.

I flew to Palermo, where I was to meet the team, happy to be seeing the old town again (I'd landed there once during the war). It is a very colorful city, cupped picturesquely between high mountains, with a charm and character all its own. We stayed at a fabulous hotel in town—more like a marble palace, really—but our racing headquarters was located near the circuit, some two dozen miles beyond Palermo, in a large farmhouse by the sea.

The course was a great "performance leveler." That is, due to the many twists and turns, brute horsepower and high speeds did not weigh heavily. Typical of performance there, I was able to get around only eight minutes faster in the full-race SLR than in the much slower 190 SL sports car fully

equipped for touring. (Forty-nine minutes as compared to 57.) And in *any* car it was decidedly "dodgy." In one blind downhill left bend I narrowly avoided a big Lancia truck that appeared around a curve in the exact middle of the road—as was the custom. Kling almost hit a donkey in his SLR, and several practice cars were wrecked, though no serious injuries resulted. Collins carried away a kilometer stone in avoiding what he called "a hay burner" (burro), and Titterington slid broadside into a stone bridge. In both cases the SLRs were laid up for days under repair, drastically curtailing the practice.

Moss, however, was determined to repeat his Tourist Trophy victory and actually managed to get in 48 full practice laps, while some of us had to content ourselves with considerably less. I completed just 10 laps—and only half of these were in an SLR. It was tricky all the way, as many of the corners were covered with a thin layer of loose gravel and rock, washed down by the rains; at speed, these became real danger points, as I was personally to discover before the race was done.

For the Targa this year I was teamed with the personable Irishman, Desmond Titterington. Moss was driving with a fellow Britisher, Pete Collins, and Fangio was sharing his SLR with Kling. (Titterington and Collins had just been added to the team—based on their superb performances in the Tourist Trophy—proving that Herr Neubauer didn't miss any bets.)

Mercedes' preparation for the Targa upheld their reputation. Each car carried an auxiliary hinged metal windscreen (which the driver could see over and around) in case the Plexiglas screen should be shattered by a flying rock. Also, as protection against loose stones, the headlights were shielded by spring-loaded metal panels which popped out of sight at the touch of a button. These were in addition to the wire mesh covers. Now, *this* was preparation!

The weather had been very poor. Heavy rains prior to race day had practically wiped out parts of the circuit, and we

were warned to be especially careful. Our main competition was naturally expected to come from Ferrari (as Jaguar had decided not to enter) with the young Italian firebrand Eugenio Castellotti our prime threat in one of the 3.5 models he shared with Manzon. (Maglioli and Sighinolfi handled the second 3.5.) Also, the affable Texan Carroll Shelby was on hand with a privately entered Ferrari. The combination of Musso-Rossi shared one of six 3-liter Maseratis, and a full dozen 2-liter cars of that marque were entered, all with factory co-operation. With the usual number of smaller cars (Osca, Fiat, etc.), it was a strong field.

When practice finally ended, Moss was unofficially credited with fastest time, while Castellotti and Fangio came next. Collins had almost matched Stirling in the number of laps practiced, with 40 behind him by race day.

At 7 **A.M.** on the morning of October 16, 1955, the 47 competitors assembled at the starting line. The venerable creator of the Targa, seventy-two-year-old Chevalier Florio, flagged off the first of the smaller-engined machines and, at 30-second intervals, the rest of the field got under way, the biggest cars being last off the line.

Titterington was due to drive our car the first four laps, then Td take over for the next four, and he would finish. At the end of that first wild tour, Moss stormed by in the lead, having passed the entire pack and broken all records with a lap of 44 minutes—better than 60 mph on this narrow, twisting, blind road! Castellotti was second, Fangio third and Desmond fourth—ahead of Musso, Shelby and Maglioli.

For the first three laps these lead positions remained constant. Then the flying Moss, having broken his own incredible record on lap 3 (with 43'7")> left the road on a fast curve. After a spectacular slide into a field below, Stirling found himself straddling a huge rock without any traction for the rear wheels. But the engine seemed fine, so with the help of some energetic spectators he got back on all four wheels and bumped across the field looking for a suitable place to climb the bank and regain the road. He found this, and after a

dozen runs, literally "bulldozed" his way back on the course, and roared off—having lost only six minutes in the process! His SLR was well dented and out of line, but still capable of top performance, as was soon to be proven. When he pitted to hand over to Collins he was fourth (seven minutes back) with Castellotti leading Fangio by a full minute; our Mercedes was then third.

One Ferrari pulled up in the exact center of the pit road and was immediately surrounded by mechanics, who dropped a funnel in the tank and began pouring in fuel, while the officials yelled at them to clear the way. A troop of gesturing Sicilian police descended on the scene, and in the subsequent melee the angry Italian mechanics resisted being pushed. They pushed back, expressing their indignation in no uncertain terms. Neubauer joined them, his voice louder than all the others, and violent oaths were exchanged in several languages before the Ferrari was refueled and sent on its way again.

Next, to add fuel to the fire, one of the race officials flagged a Maserati out of the pits directly into Fangio's path. He was able to avoid a crash, being Fangio, but this fresh incident threw Neubauer into a towering fit of rage. Resembling a wounded elephant, he stomped up and down the pit area, waving his arms and bellowing out his displeasure. At moments such as this he was an awe-inspiring figure, and I have seen him scatter a crowd with one thunderous cry. (At Nurburgring, in '55, he lost patience with a group of aggressive photographers, beating them over the head with a large flag.) The Sicilian officials, to a man, retreated in silence—waiting for the storm to pass.

Kling replaced Fangio; Manzon replaced Castellotti, and I replaced Titterington, who was now back to fourth. Collins had caught him and was hot after the second-place Ferrari.

The SLR slid treacherously on several tight corners, but I was holding our position in response to Neubauer's "Regular" signal, neither gaining on the leaders, nor losing to those behind me. Then, coming into an uphill right-hand

bend, the tail of the car lost traction on the gravel scattered across the road by cars that had clipped the inside of the turn. The SLR suddenly slid wide, out of control, and the left rear walloped a stone wall, jouncing me high in the air and back onto the road. It felt as if the entire rear end of the Mercedes had been demolished, but I cautiously opened the throttle again to assess the damage, hoping I could at least limp back to our pit. To my vast surprise, I discovered that the car responded perfectly to steering and throttle, and I was able to increase speed, soon resuming full effort in the dented but undaunted SLR. When I turned the car back to Desmond it was running as well as ever.

Peter Collins was the next member of our team to join the "off-the-road club" here at the Targa. By now he had accomplished the impossible; he was leading the race, having passed Kling into first spot. But as he was passing a production Jaguar on one of the winding ascents, the Jag bobbled and Peter went head-on through a stone retaining wall. The stones broke completely away, leaving the twice-wrecked Mercedes balanced over the brink with the front wheels spinning in the air. But such was the strength of these fantastic cars that Peter simply reversed back on the road and drove off, despite the twisted body metal scraping the wheels. He only required a brief pit stop to have the fenders bent away from the tires and he was at full speed again!

Manzon burst a tire against a rock and the delay to change wheels cost Ferrari their chance for second—and Mercedes went on to win the points needed to cinch the sports car title.

After 9 hours, 43 minutes and a few seconds, the Moss-Collins team had won brilliantly (at an average of just under 60 mph). Fangio and Kling were second, with Castellotti and Manzon third. We were fourth, ahead of the Maseratis and the other Ferraris. Some 47 cars had started; only 20 finished the 13-lap event. Shelby's co-driver had crashed after the big Texan had moved the Ferrari into fifth; Musso had broken his transmission; Maglioli had lost a wheel on lap 11.

Even Fangio's SLR showed signs of battle: The right-front fender and wheel rim were slightly bent.

The fact that all three Mercedes team cars finished in spite of the severe beating they had taken was a great tribute to the engineering skill of Daimler-Benz. The durability of the SLR was unbelievable. As demonstrated here at the Targa, it would stand up to incredible abuse and continue to operate perfectly. This highly developed sports-racing machine was built like a tank, yet was as responsive as a jungle cat—a truly fabulous accomplishment in the field of automotive design.

By gaining first and second at the Targa, Mercedes ended the 1955 season with three world titles: for Formula 1, Sports Cars and *Grand Turismo*—z. feat never before achieved in racing history. And as a member of that team, with Fangio, Moss, Kling, Collins, Titterington and the others, I felt a certain pride in this unusual three-way victory.

Following this race in Sicily the announcement was made: Mercedes-Benz was retiring; the sleek silver cars were no longer to compete on the circuits of the world. They had done what they set out to do, and the Daimler-Benz organization was wise enough to quit at the height of well-earned glory—a glory darkened only by Le Mans. Engineering, testing, careful preparation, expert team management, hard, intelligent driving and luck (never forget luck!)—all had played their respective parts in a great victory.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

With Corvette at Sebring

IN LATE December of '55 I wrote a letter to Ed Cole, then Chief Engineer of Chevrolet, in which I expressed my genuine interest regarding Corvette's competitive future, telling him I would like to work with him as a sports car consultant, with emphasis on developing the Corvette as a potential world-beater. His reply was encouraging—and he asked me if I would consider driving a stock Corvette at Daytona Beach in February. I agreed, and subsequently covered the Flying Mile there at 145 mph, setting a new production car record.

By then it had been decided that Corvette would compete at Sebring in March, and that I would lead the team. At long last a Detroit sports car would be pitted against an international field in Florida's famous 12-hour contest.

From the very outset of our preparations for Sebring, two things were apparent: Corvettes, as they were being delivered from the factory for all-round touring (for which they are eminently suited), were not, however, equipped or prepared for the specialized rigors of a big-league endurance race—and we had practically no time in which to make them so. Yet that was our task, and it had to be accomplished between the 18th of February and race day, March 24, 1956. Looking back on it now, I wonder how it was done—and I also wonder whether so much "improving of the breed" was ever accom-

plished in so short a time. More might have been done, of course, but the results can be summed up best by saying we got less than we hoped, but something more than we deserved.

I soon learned that the crash-program development of an American racing car team in a sun-bleached shed set in the scrub pines of Florida would be far different from my experience with Briggs Cunningham's small but slick organization or with the Teutonic efficiency of the Mercedes-Benz team. Yet I was happy to be able to bring some of the experience that rubbed off both these organizations, and to apply it earnestly in my own initial venture as team manager.

The role of team manager is a unique one. He may or may not be a driver himself, usually not; but he is ultimately responsible for the entire effort of a racing team—from the tuning of the cars to the reserving of hotel accommodations for his people; from the selection of the drivers to the selection of spark plugs; from the securing of paper cups to the occasional, unhappy task of making funeral arrangements. Above all, he is supposed to be the strategist.

In the beginning we had only one Corvette. This poor orphan was a cobbled-together 1955 body over a 1956 chassis, with a few "experiments" in between. It was as unstock as a hot rod. But it was all we had for a practice car. We went to work... and almost immediately I began to discover how much had to be done in the coming five weeks.

Of course, the Sebring race is intended to be—and is—a rugged endurance test. From 10 in the morning until 10 at night an average speed of well over 80 mph must be maintained to win or be among the leaders. Nearly 200 laps of this 5.2-mile course—1000 blistering, pounding miles over the narrow black-top roads and broad concrete runways—must be covered in 12 hours. Each car must be driven at speeds varying from 30 to 150 mph every four minutes. Brakes may be used hard nine times per lap; 27 or more gear shifts would be made every five miles. Usually only two drivers do all the work. On the average, as I had discovered over the years, only about 50 per cent of the cars which begin the grind are

able to finish. The others fall victim to Sebring's punishing ordeal.

On my first run in the practice car I discovered a number of faults, big and small; for a start the direction-signal lever got in the way of my hands in the corners, wind buffeting was severe at speed and, what was really important, the car was not handling like the solid, predictable, controllable racing machine that it would *have* to be if it was to stay on the same track with the competition. Changes would have to be made; but changes in the Sebring cars meant that equivalent changes would have to be made available for every Corvette that Chevrolet manufactures, for our principal effort and our real assignment was to establish the Corvette as a sound production-type—that is, stock—sports car. Whatever would be done to our team cars to make them contenders at Sebring would also have to be done in production at the factory. I think it is safe to say that as an immediate result of our development work in that crowded little shack in Florida, every Corvette coming off the production line today is a substantially better car than it would have been. This is what is meant by "improving the breed."

As the early days went by, and as we pounded our test car through exercises that simulated the wrenching strains of the road race, the expected troubles began—also some unexpected ones. We developed oil leaks, we loosened engine mounts, we threw fan belts, we struggled with handling problems. We had the wrong oil in the rear end, but we had to burn out several of them before we found the solution. March 24 seemed just around the corner, yet we had only begun to learn how to turn Corvettes into the taut, tough competition machines that they would have to be.

Soon we received the four cars that would actually be run in the race. Three were strictly production-type entries; the fourth had a 307-cubic-inch engine (265 was stock) and would be run as a modified Corvette in another class. Our three stock Corvettes qualified for Class C; the bigger-engined machine ran in Class B.

In addition to getting cars, we were also getting people-lots of them and mostly new to racing. Each passing day brought more of our team to Sebring. There were mechanics, drivers, visiting brass from Detroit—all of them requiring food, lodging, transportation. A look at my notes kept during those days gives some idea of why a team manager needs three heads.

A sample:

> Call Pine Crest Hotel re reservations... their suites have 4 beds each... we don't want. We have 14 people sure, plus 8 drivers = 22. Ray Crawford withdrew his Kurtis entry. We are only ones in Class B Okay to buy uniforms? Yes. Sport shirts and pants. (Keep purchase slips)... Find out what our pit locations will be____Muffler necessary on modified car? No. T-birds may be withdrawing from race... select chief mechanic for each car.... Friday **P.M.** night driving test of lights —get wide beam aux. lights.... Run #1 and #2 Saturday & Sunday....Roll bag for tools....Hood straps....Throttles stick....

So it went. Plenty of confusion, yet out of the confusion things were beginning to take shape. Most of our testing on the course was still being done with the old orphan car, but our four blue-and-white racing Corvettes were now shoehorned into the small shed and each had a crew of mechanics working on it all day and late each night.

On February 23 we had real trouble. One of our mechanic-drivers was testing a car on the airport runway and ran off the end, through a fence. A post smashed the windscreen on the car and the driver was badly cut up.

My notes for the day read:

> Doesn't appear serious but he's had a lot of morphine. No chest injuries. He says brakes failed, and there are no skid marks. Tried brakes and they appear good. Flying him to hospital in Palm Beach just to be safe. Car in for repairs tonight. May be able to run it again tomorrow.

Race day was one month away. We couldn't afford any more accidents or delays.

From the log:

> Feb. 26th... start 10 A.M. Brake test. Rear springs were relocated, up in front & down in rear. Stopped wheel hop but caused sliding and pronounced over-steer—car significantly harder to drive. Changed to original spring position with extra leaf reversed on top. Still hopped. Car not yet secure enough for road course. Continued test of alloy drum brakes with 1¾"-wide lining because parts for wider linings and iron drums not available. Stopped test when oil pressure disappeared. 5 P.M.

By the first of March some of the other entries were beginning to arrive in town. We could hear the ripping exhaust note of D-Jags practicing on the course while we struggled with our elementary problems in the garage. It illustrated a point: Corvettes were totally new at this business; Jags were old hands. Corvettes had no racing history on which to draw conclusions; Jags (and many other makes) have a racing history that's been compiled by experts for years. For example, the D-Jag was having trouble with jumping out of second gear. This had happened to them before. But when it happens they know it is a parts failure, not a basic fault in design. When we had a breakdown with a Corvette, however, we didn't know what to blame: design fault, parts failure, wrong lubrication or possibly misuse. Our Corvettes were in deep water and learning to swim at the last minutes.

From the log:

> March 3. Test car torn down. No test. Brake parts have not arrived. Decision was to have been made on type of brake to use by Mar. 4. Now impossible. Have tried various ways to stop wheel hop: Center torque arm to differential, spring damps on leaves—no real progress. Houdaille shocks have arrived but too small and not reworked for racing.

March 5:

> Start testing 5:45 P.M. Brakes pull left. 5200 rpm on straight. Throttle jumps off rod. Front & rear-wheel control bad on

bumps. Front should be tighter. Only one lap in good light but do 3:50. [Note: A 3-minute, 50-second lap equals about 80 mph.] Delayed by overheating—why now overheating? Car is faster now. Changes include Corvette cam, larger tires. Dark. Overshoot corners. Cannot see. Delayed again by overheating. Finish at 7 P.M.

March 6:

Car not ready till 6:30 P.M. Had sprung leak in gas tank. Ran 5 laps—3 at 3:50 before dark. Brake proportion off. Too much on rear and overshoot corners. Hop very bad on bumps. Rear tires too hard at 55 ... hot. Reduce to 52 tomorrow. 5200 rpm on straight with 3.7 gear and big tires. Rear end burned out... ring & pinion. Why?

Only a little over two weeks to go now. It seemed ridiculous to be trying to solve such basic problems when our drivers should have been practicing now with trouble-free cars, yet we all knew that these were indeed the "first faltering steps" in a crude, even impudent, beginning. But our morale was high. We knew that we were rookies among veterans, but the Corvettes had come to race, and race we would—somehow. The Chevrolet engineers who were sparing no effort to give us what we asked for, and the factory, having a lot to lose, never suggested we hedge on our chances and "coast" through the 12 hours for a sure class result which the advertising department could always do something with.

March 7:

Start 4:30 P.M. In again at 5:15. Hot running. 220. No tach. Both electric and mechanical tach NG. Hop terrible. Check shocks and find small Houdaille soft. Change it and out again at 5.50. Run 670 tires on 5½-inch rim. The car handles! Real car for first time! 3:49 laps easy. Reduce tire pressure from 50 to 45 but no difference. Change to 710 tire. Bite good in slow and fast curves. Lost time due to dark and higher gearing given by large tires but still did 3:49 laps. Now we have a basically sound handling car. If no time for further refinement we have a respectable road-racing car—and no excuses necessary.

March 8:

> Start 5:45 **P.M.** Did two laps and overheated. (?) Mech. and elec. tach NG. Car handles very well. Can now brake on rough road section. Only complete lap, 3:47. Install double fan belts. Out again at 6:30. Only one complete lap 3:48 and blow radiator hose. (?) Engine stumbling and flat. Suspect timing late.

We were struggling to find the right combination of everything with the practice car. Each lesson learned with the orphan was then transferred to the four race cars. And every time we made a change in the race cars we had to tell Detroit. Each piece of equipment we decided was desirable for the Sebring race had to be made available as an optional extra in the Corvette catalogues or we couldn't compete in the production sports car class. Magnesium wheels, special brake drums, heavier sway bars, oversize gas tanks, shorter steering column, special shocks—all had to be okayed by Chevrolet engineering and made available to any sportsman who might want to equip his Corvette in the same way. The telephone bill between Sebring and Detroit was considerable!

March 10:

> Two weeks to go. Out and running at 4 **P.M.** (Late starts due to car simply not ready sooner.) Then a real cloudburst until 6:30. I ran on road only because lakes and shallows on airport runways made car crazy. Drift sideways on straights with no steering control whatever. Aqua-planing. Disappeared under water several times! Solid water over hood and dumping into cockpit. (Water is heavy!) Fiberglas body is tight—drill drain holes in floor. Air warm and not unpleasant. In fact, it's fun having cheap thrills at low speed. Hitting solid water at high speed could cause trouble. Can now confirm engine will not drown-out. Short steering shaft nice, but it is now certain that steering ratio is too slow. Cannot move wheel fast enough and have to go too far.

March 11:

> Sunday. Road wet, puddles bad. 3:58 lap with 3.7 gear. Left rear shock came loose. Right rear tire scraping body hard (?)

Blowing oil due to overfill. Differential case was marked 4.11 from factory but somebody goofed.

By now our testing was becoming really strenuous and we were going through our supply of spare parts at quite a rate. Chevrolet engineering had supplied everything they could that we thought we'd need, even sending spare engines from Detroit to Florida by air express, yet there was a daily scramble to find this or that part for the cars. We were fortunate in one respect. Unlike our fancy foreign competition, we could call the local Chevrolet dealer and get many of the things we wanted. As a matter of fact, we also borrowed two of his mechanics to help us during the last hectic days. If Ferrari had needed an extra mechanic they would have had to fly him over from Italy!

March 13:

Changed coil and distributor. 3 laps—best 3:46. Once transmission refused 3rd gear but later went in okay. (?) Water 200°, oil 290°, oil pressure 40. Beginning to have serious carburetion troubles.

March 14:

Factory-prepared carbs better. Minimum burble coming off curves. Test larger master cylinder for less pedal travel and heavier clutch. Both okay.

March 16:

Test car has become too ragged to give accurate experience and is torn down. Means no running on last weekend before race. Very bad. Had hoped to have pit stop practice today, test lights, etc. So far behind in work that this will be impossible.

The race cars themselves were, during this time, in various stages of assembly in the process of installing the optional equipment. If they were to be finished on time, they could not be spared even for pit stop practice.

March 17:

One week to go. Run about 5 laps to test carbs on hot day (thin air). We go rich then lean but both are worse. I do one

> 3:53 lap but with bad cutting out. Carbs returned to original and I get halfway down airport straight and smell heat, slow and engine is blown. Sounds like broken piston. (?) Now we must change engines.

Sometimes when I went to bed at night, I reviewed the day's work and wondered what my old tutor, Neubauer of Mercedes, would say if he could see the desperate chaos of our efforts. I supposed he might not race at all under such conditions. But history is tolerant of beginners—they are worth risks. Besides, we had no reputation to lose, only a chance to gain one. Yet I also imagined that Neubauer would admire the persistence of our crew—a weary group by now, after endlessly taking things apart and putting them together again a little differently, always hoping that the next combination would be the right one.

The last days before the race were spent largely on carburetion troubles and engine tuning. It was then too late to make any important changes in the cars and still have them accepted as production models. The die had been cast. We would have to run with what we had.

What we had was a fast but unproved car: No. 1, to run in Class B; plus three stock-engined cars: Nos. 5, 6 and 7, each with its own combination of options, to run in Class C. The time had come to plan our final strategy. While the garage hummed with the whine of drills and the crackle of the welder's torch, I picked up a pencil and started to figure.

First, we wanted to make a show of speed with at least one of our four cars, and the No. 1 (prototype) car was the best bet. I decided that this one should be driven hard from the beginning of the race, even risking breakdown, in order to give our supporters, many of whom guessed our teething troubles, something exciting to say about Corvette. Walt Hansgen and I would share the driving. We would aim to do 3:45 laps. (In 12 hours we would complete 187 laps-enough to have won the race in 1955, incidentally.)

Cars No. 5, 6, and 7 looked alike but had individual per-

formance characteristics. No. 5 was the fastest of all, being equipped with the high-performance Duntov camshaft and a 4.11 gear. It would use all three gears, 6000 rpm, and shoot for 3:50 laps, at which rate it would complete 184 in 12 hours —if it went the distance.

Cars No. 6 and 7 to be driven without the use of first gear (to insure the survival of the drive train, which I considered to be our weakest area) and would lap the course at 4:00 and 3:55 respectively. If No. 5 still had the use of all gears after half the race was over, Nos. 6 and 7 would then begin using first gear also. They might complete 180 laps each in 12 hours if luck would be with us. (Their combination of camshafts, rpm limits and fuel range balanced the expected distances.) Thus was our plan set. We had a fast front-runner; we had a quite fast stock car; we had two steady performers tuned to go the full distance.

Next, we met in a first and final meeting of drivers and signal board handlers, but no mechanics. (They were still putting the cars together the night before the race!) The air in the small hotel dining room was charged with the expectant atmosphere of a military briefing as I checked off my list: pit signals and acknowledgments; possible changes in the handling characteristics of the cars and the effects of oil and rubber as it built up on corners of the circuit; the expected weaknesses (and strengths) of our cars—and a dozen other details. None of our drivers knew much about this new Corvette they were being asked to drive, and they welcomed every scrap of information they could get. They knew they needed it to stay in the race with the European professionals.

I remember a blur of final details: the medical exam required of every driver, the colored identification lights we tacked onto the cars at the last minute, the check list of spare parts and tools which each car must carry (at Sebring, repairs and parts replacements may only be made with the tools and spares actually carried in the car during the race). At the last minute I also remembered that we should include a keyhole

saw in case it should become necessary to make emergency cuts in the Corvette's tough Fiberglas bodies.

Finally, somehow, it was finished. All that could be done *had* been done; all that was not done would not be done. Rehearsals were over.

We didn't get much sleep the night before the race, but we were all up early the next morning and were among the first to bring our cars to the starting line from the garage. Lined up on the concrete of the airport runway they *looked* like racing sports cars, and I was proud of them: blue and white and bigger than most of the other machines on the line. Spectators who looked at our blue-uniformed drivers, white-uniformed mechanics and smartly turned out cars could not know the thousands of man-hours of frantic preparation that had gone into this Corvette challenge—nor would they know all the important things we *hadn't* had time to do.

They would never guess we hadn't had time to practice *one* pit stop, that the loss of 30 minutes' work could have jeopardized the completion of one of our cars, that the deliberate motions of our stolid mechanics did not derive from established confidence but from near exhaustion.

Shortly before the start, a top Chevrolet engineer who had been closest to our pre-race ordeal in the garage and who had reason to know just how much the breed had been improved, leaned over the pit counter and said, "John, if we stopped right now and never raced a Corvette, we have learned enough to justify all our efforts." For me personally, this was a high spot in the whole project.

Those last minutes before the start of a race are tense ones. The gun is loaded, yet you have to wait through the national anthem and a prayer that is heavy with feeling. Finally you are alone, in the impersonal hands of the starting procedure as used at Le Mans—a small race in itself.

I was suddenly relieved and felt a little of the "pre-manager" pleasure I used to find in racing. Standing on a marked spot at the head of a straggling line of 60 drivers, hearing dulled by a buckled helmet, vision narrowed by goggles, ex-

changing vague jokes with the Ferrari driver beside me, I was as inaccessible as a tycoon on a fishing trip. I was changing roles—manager to driver—and enjoying it. The harassments of the former were giving way to the immediate and simple obligation to drive fast and keep out of trouble.

At the flag, we all sprinted across the ramp, jumping, scrambling, wrenching doors, clambering into waiting cars; we started engines and swung into the straight in a discordant blare of exhausts, tires chirping to frantic gear shifts, with a blue haze of dusty smoke swirling over all.

Telling myself to use only half throttle with the straining power of first gear, not top revs with a still-cool engine, I still got away first from my starting position at the head of the pack. I could see our No. 5 in my mirror. Our Nos. 6 and 7 weren't far behind—and I knew our Corvettes were off to a good start.

Now I must learn to drive this car which, incredibly, I hadn't driven since it was built up for the race. I knew what it *should* be, but racing cars are individuals, too. Though heavy with full gas, tools and parts, the car felt reassuringly stable as I swung wide and shifted down to turn off the airport and onto black-top roads. Mike Hawthorn, a former winner at Sebring and Le Mans, had slipped by me in his D-Jaguar, looking intent and determined, and I followed his lead. Now brake for the chicane, a sudden left-right (with a hump) and left again, which can be taken in one precisely placed motion, being careful not to drift wide over the crown on the final left—and my No. 1 behaved as if she had some history after all!

Now a faster left bend, choppy with skittery bumps and onto the sweeping right, approaching 100 mph, then a brief straight past houses and heavy on the brakes to the slowest hairpin of the circuit. Ease over an axle-straining bump while accelerating hard to a tunnel of pines flush on the edge of the road, to high speed along the warehouse straight. Then, chattering under hard brakes, downhill to the zigzag and onto the airport concrete again. Another Jaguar and

Stirling Moss in his Aston Martin slipped by as I approached the sweeping curve before the first straight. Our Corvette had no doubt already surprised a number of experienced drivers in veteran makes. Stretching out on the almost mile-long straights, our engine climbed and kept climbing willingly to 6000 rpm at the cutoff points where the brakes take their beating, absorbing hundreds of horsepower in a few seconds. Finally, off the last straight in a big U-turn and onto the pit straight and under the bridge. The first lap went well.

The second lap changed the picture.

On the first straight the exhaust beat of my engine rose rapidly. Backing off slightly, I saw the tachometer needle instantly drop 300 rpm. Only the second lap, and the clutch was slipping! The prospects of limping for 12 hours or being forced to retire at this early stage were equally dismal. In a few moments the clutch was slipping at random in any gear at any speed. With everything to gain, I decided to try the same trick that had worked at Le Mans in 1953.1 deliberately slipped the clutch at high revs in top gear until the cockpit filled with smoke, the stench of burning oil and clutch lining. Then, with the lightest load to keep the car going, I nursed the Corvette for a lap, giving the clutch a long cooling-off period. Anxiously trying a bit more throttle, I found it held except for a range of 400 revs at highest torque. We had a little luck. Could we hope for more? The answer was soon evident—and the luck was bad.

Our No. 5 car was out at the U-turn—the driver leaning over an empty wheel well. An accident? Not likely, but a broken axle wasn't, either. One thing was certain: No. 5 was out.

An hour later the last airport straight was blind with a cloud of white smoke, the kind an engine makes when a piston is holed or broken. Then, ahead of me in the U-turn, I saw our No. 7, not looking so much like a sports car now, with a growing column of white billowing from its exhaust. Not two of the 12 hours over and half our team was out. We hadn't expected to learn so much so fast! At this rate, the cost was

coming high. Corvettes carry the name of the largest corporation in the world and that adds up to a lot of stockholders. Some of them might have opinions about this.

The value of No. 1 in our plans had changed. It now represented 50 per cent of our remaining chance to finish the race at all. So our fancy lady, our sprinter, suddenly became a hope for the long pull. With two dead Corvettes in the pits, I drove No. 1 like a basket of eggs.

When I pulled in after my first trick of driving—two hours, 10 minutes—there were few smiling faces to greet me. The car was quickly gassed and checked and Walt Hansgen took it back into the race. Dave Allen, our assistant team manager, told me that the transmission on our No. 6 car was seizing and it was now plodding around the course using only third gear. We were two down and two stumbling. It looked as if the Chevrolet experiment was going to end in a fiasco—and I knew that failure at Sebring would probably mean the end of Chevrolet's interest in racing sports cars. This would be a sad conclusion to all our efforts.

The long day wore on. The endless roar of the cars ripped through the afternoon. The ranks of the 60 who started were thinning, yet our two remaining Corvettes hung on stubbornly—one with a slipping clutch, the other with a useless transmission. (But luckily, the car with only top gear had the lugging camshaft and pulled off the slow corners like a steam engine.) Both were running at a far slower speed than we had planned, but both *were* running. There was some consolation in knowing that some expensive racing cars with proud names were already out of the race.

By midafternoon we began to take another view of our chances. If No. 1 car could finish the race it would win a class prize. Though it was the only entry running in its class, this was still a race and we weren't so calculating as to slow to a rock-sure walking pace. Business is business, but sport is also sport. We continued as fast as we felt the car could run with reasonable security. If No. 6 car could finish the race it would win a production sports car prize. As night fell over the

race coursc, the feeling grew around our pits that there was still something at stake.

We watched the clock and we waited for "old No. 1" and "old No. 6" as they made their rounds. By now they had earned personalities all their own and we had identified them by their headlights and by the sound of their exhausts as they circled in the night. It was a paradox of the situation that, because of their injuries, it was almost impossible to overstress either of these cars. If No. 1 had *not* developed a slipping clutch it might have been stressed to the breaking point in some other way. The clutch slip was now acting as a safety valve. Similarly, No. 6 was almost incapable of overstressing engine or drive train so long as only third gear was available. (This was high in our three-speed transmission.) In the late hours, our troubles had turned to blessings. It was freak luck—but you take your luck as you find it.

One by one, other cars came limping into their pits and out of the contest. At 8 P.M. Mike Hawthorn's potent D-Jag, once the leader of the race, called it quits for want of brakes. By 9 P.M., with only an hour to go, our hopes turned almost bright in the Corvette pits. No. 1 car was now running ninth over-all in the race. Walt Hansgen was at the wheel now turning very respectable lap times and my driving was done. I could lean over the pit counter and wonder if lightning was really going to strike us after all.

At 10 o'clock, at the end of the long ordeal, they fire an aerial bomb and you know it's all over. If you've got a car running at that moment, he's got to cross the line once more and he's a finisher—and in one sense, finishers at Sebring are winners.

What had seemed a dream a few weeks ago, and what had seemed impossible in the first hours of the race, was now a reality! Two dirty, crippled Corvettes, streaked and battered from their ordeal, roared into their pits from the darkness and were treated as if they had won the race itself. Actually, we didn't know *what* we had won at that moment and it

didn't matter. Two of our four cars had come through and that was enough.

Later, we got the official verdict: winner in Class B, Corvette; winner of production sports car prize, Corvette; winner of the team prize, Corvette.

Our No. 1 car had finished ninth. No. 6 car had finished 15th. Only 24 of the 60 starters in the race were still running after 12 hours.

And so it was over. In many ways it had been a raggle-taggle crash-program effort, yet a beginning has to be made somewhere. I was reminded of the old G.I. saying, "Let's do something, even if it's wrong." Chevrolet had done something-something no other American manufacturer had dared to do before. We had stepped brashly into racing's biggest league and walked off with three prizes on the first try. It was less than we had hoped but more than we deserved.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Racing the D-Type and the Super Sport

A FEW months after Sebring, I again joined the Cunningham *equipe,* this time to handle a D-type Jaguar for Briggs. The big event that season was at Elkhart Lake, on the challenging 4-mile Road America circuit in mid-September. The Chicago region of SCCA, in charge, stated that all cars in the race must be co-driven by their owners. This meant Briggs could enter only one D—and he asked me to team with him for the 6-hour Sunday main. I would take the first two hours, he the next two, and I would finish. We faced several Ferraris and other Jaguars, as well as the interesting—but not really threatening—Hill-O'Shea Mercedes 300 SL entry. The team of Howard Hively and John Kilborn were pushing a hot 4.5 Ferrari—and looked like the combination to watch. Three other Ds were in the lists, and could prove troublesome.

Shooting for a big lead against contingencies, I stretched a comfortable margin over Kilborn in the 4.5 and the pair of Ds trailing him at the start. Our car was running very well and I had closed to within a few hundred feet of lapping Kilborn when I handed over to Briggs on the 43rd lap. In fact, we felt confident enough to check the car thoroughly, and Kilborn took over the number one position as Briggs got smoothly away in third, behind the Erickson-Bott D-type. For

the next two hours Briggs fought to maintain our position and he was still in third as he came in to let me take the wheel. Another long pit stop included minor but important adjustments, and I was off with two hours in which to catch the Hively-Kilborn Ferrari and the Erickson-Bott Jag. They were now a full lap ahead. Giving the D everything she'd take, I began to move up, passing Erickson with half an hour remaining in the race. (I was then 35 seconds behind the lead Ferrari.)

Alfred Momo signaled that I was making up three to five seconds a lap, but it was clear the rate had to increase if we were to win. I tried to find these necessary seconds in the only area possible—on braking—as the thin edge of control had long since been reached in the curves. At this brutal treatment, the brakes became more and more erratic until the left rear locked solid at the end of the straight behind the pits. I stabbed the pedal repeatedly, hoping to shock it loose —and ran far down the escape road. At reduced speed it finally unlocked, and I swung back on the course, grimly calculating the lost seconds. Now the D shook and thumped at high speed (as the left rear tire had a flat spot from the long slide, putting it out of balance).

Though I had to leave a little margin in the right-hand bends—against the possibility of a blowout—I felt we still had a chance to win and therefore pushed to the limit. Kilborn again came into sight ahead; as the last laps reeled away I crept closer, narrowing the distance between our cars.

But I couldn't quite do it. When the flag came down I was still seven seconds behind the red Ferrari as Kilborn flashed across start-finish. Yet it had been a grand fight—one I'd thoroughly enjoyed—and I was only sorry it had not lasted for another two or three laps.

2.

Thompson, Connecticut, hosted the next events, in September and October, and I took three second-place trophies

and a first there with the Cunningham D. (I was quite pleased with the outright win as I had no chance to practice for that race and had started last on the grid.) In each case when I took second it was to Walt Hansgen—and I would, at this point, like to cite Walt for his impressive accomplishments in the sport.

Walt appears, in my eyes, as one of the "possessed," a driver of rare instinct, capable of instant, correct decisions. His knack for retrieving himself from a tight situation is almost infallible. I say "almost" because Walt habitually pushes so close to the absolute ragged edge that perfection is impossible by the odds.

At this point I was becoming an "old man" in racing (and particularly in the Cunningham team) so it did not become me to obstruct what could be called Walt's ascending star—and indeed it would have been very hard work to resist him, let me assure you! Only one driver on any team can amass enough points to win a championship (Briggs' point in fielding the D-Jaguars) and since I was becoming deeply involved in personal projects and could not travel to all of the national events, I was not at all reluctant to take home a second to Walt. His victories were well deserved.

So let this be a salute to Walt Hansgen, superb pilot, lion-hearted competitor and loyal friend—and, by implication, to the many other fine drivers I have known in the sport.

3-

In my lengthy correspondence with Chevrolet over the past months I had proposed a full-scale racing program, ranging from production events with the standard Corvette to the entry of a world-beating Grand Prix team in Europe. In late December of 1956, a couple of weeks after I returned home from Nassau, I received a call from Walter Mackenzie, who served directly under Ed Cole, now Chevrolet's General Manager. "Mac" was in charge of the company's racing program, and he had written me earlier to the effect that a

"special" Corvette was in the works for Sebring '57, but that he was not permitted to reveal any details. The call in December, therefore, meant that the project was now "hot" and I took a plane for Detroit with high expectations.

My old friend, Zora Arkus-Duntov, met me at the airport and took me out to the plant. He was plainly excited and anxious for me to see the latest result of his designing-engineering efforts. When we arrived he quickly ushered me into a separate developmental wing and proudly gestured toward blueprints on the Corvette SS (for Super Sport), Detroit's first modern all-out sports-racing creation.

I was duly impressed. Here was a machine that appeared, on paper, capable of tangling with Europe's best. Power would be supplied by a 4.6-liter modified Corvette engine, producing about 315 horsepower from a V-8 block and utilizing fuel injection and aluminum cylinder heads. The chassis of the SS was also promising: a space frame of steel tubing, an outer shell of lightweight magnesium alloy. It had magnesium wheels, air-boosted Alfin-process drum brakes, independent front suspension and de Dion rear suspension (self-steering on body roll). The fuel tank was plastic to further reduce weight. In fact, the SS would be a full thousand pounds lighter than the production Corvette!

"We started only weeks ago," said Duntov, "and we have a lot of work to do yet before the car will be a reality—but I think we can do it, John. I think we can have the SS on the line for Sebring in March."

This seemed impossible on the face of it, but Zora was the one man qualified to make such a statement, as the entire project and the responsibility for it were solely in his hands.

At a recent dinner I had again been named team manager, and I would be driving the SS, although I was directly responsible only for the three team Corvettes. While I did not relish the headaches entailed in such a position, I was nevertheless anxious for America to make good at international racing—and the SS looked like the first solid chance since the Cunninghams.

Zora and I had many late-hour conversations about the new car over the following days. We planned to have two months for testing in Florida, but this was not to be. Work on the SS progressed slowly for the lack of the racing arts in Detroit, and the car was not ready until March—with Sebring only three weeks away. Again, as in 1956, it was a "crash" program.

When the SS and its hastily assembled twin (dubbed "the Mule") arrived in Florida I was already there with my specific charge, the three team Corvettes (we had reserved a corner of one of the big hangars). Since we didn't have enough spare parts on hand for both machines, Zora decided to test only the Mule, in order not to risk putting the SS out of commission prior to the race.

When I slid into the cockpit I had no idea of how the car would perform. This machine had a heavier body than the SS, and its engine did not have the special cylinder heads (which, with other modifications, boosted total horsepower by 30).

The Mule (suggested by the name we had used on the Mercedes team for the practice car—always an abused orphan) was a most unlikely-looking sports machine. It had started life as little more than a mock-up, and GM styling had built a rough-hewn trial body on her, never dreaming she'd see an actual race course. The fire wall was made of one-inch plywood, and a great thickness of Fiberglas was clearly visible through the many gaps and omitted parts. She had no doors and no proper rear-deck cover but was well (if unintentionally) ventilated everywhere. The Mule bore an uneven P—for practice—which I had hastily painted on her dirty-white hide. In short, the car was a combination of the ugly duckling and the poor little rich girl who had never been to finishing school, but she *fleivl* Despite a pronounced roll and a feeling of too-soft suspension, and without stretching anything, I was able to break the Sebring record unofficially after three laps on my first time out with the car.

Zora had wanted to develop a limited-slip differential for

the SS, but had run out of time. Still, with all of its "bugs" and minor shortcomings, the car was a superb sports-racing machine. (In fact, it showed all the potential that the Reventlow Scarabs later realized.)

The ease with which she cornered, understeering as she rolled, and the part-throttle feathering (necessitated by the lack of a limited-slip differential) as we came out of the curves made me suspicious of comparative performance with our competition. This was in doubt because we had heretofore been alone on the circuit. So when practice started, I waited for likely prospects (Ferrari, Maserati, Jaguar) on the back straight, and accelerated against them to the end, then followed them through a few of the corners. It was great fun, and very encouraging, because the Mule compared well with every marque. (Fangio's 4.5 Maser did not practice when we did, so we were unable to match speed and handling with the eventual winner.)

Zora was always realistic, and as race day approached he said: "To win Sebring the first time out with an experimental car like ours would take more luck than it is decent to expect. There just *isn't* that much luck in the game."

But the Mule continued to astound officials and drivers alike as it boomed around the circuit. The two biggest stars of the meeting, Fangio and Moss, asked to have a try at the controls. Fangio, after two "get-acquainted" laps, turned the full circuit in the incredible time of 3 minutes, 27.4 seconds-breaking Hawthorn's official record of the previous year by over two seconds! *"Fantastico!"* exclaimed the Argentinian as he eased out of the cockpit, and clearly implied he could have gone another couple of seconds faster if he had really tried.

Moss turned the lap in 3' 28.2"—or less than a second slower than the World Champion, and Zora was all smiles. "It seems irrational," he admitted, "that our practice car should go so fast when it is still so new."

But the gleaming, metallic-blue SS itself had been driven very little—and our next job was to remove the Mule's springs and shocks, mounting them on the SS, as we had only one

correct set. In theory, the SS should have been faster than the Mule, but only the race itself would tell this story. (Practice with the incomplete SS had been limited, and did not prove anything. The brakes had not been bedded in and the engine had not been ready for full-throttle operation.)

My co-driver was Italy's "Silver Fox," fifty-year-old Piero Taruffi, and he had just flown over from Europe at my personal request (and with Zora's consent) to share the wheel. Taruffi was reliable and steady, with a lifetime of experience and many great victories behind him, and I knew he would get everything possible out of our blue debutante. Our other three Corvettes (two production, one modified) were to be driven by Thompson-Audrey, Duncan-Kilborn and O'Shea-Lovely—a line-up of which I was very proud. In all, some 65 cars were to compete on the famed Florida circuit.

On the morning of the race, under a sunny blue tropical sky, I arrived early to test the brakes on the SS and see if we couldn't cure the trouble that had plagued us the previous afternoon in practice.

When I reached the pit, Zora told me that he had tried the car and that no improvement was noted. The brakes were still operating well below racing standards—while they had been exceptional on the faithful Mule. After a minor adjustment, I took the car out for a run to see if they were any better. Down the airport straight the brakes were bad; I tried again, braking hard on the perimeter of an abandoned taxi strip, avoiding race officials who frowned on our late efforts. Now the front wheels were alternately locking. Back at the pits we suspected the power boost was not right and inspected the lines. We found that a junction was leaking and raced back to the hangar to remove the one from the Mule, feeling sure we had at last solved the problem. But no, they were no better—and we had run out of time. In just 15 minutes the cars would be flagged away, so we pushed the SS up to its number one position on the line. I practiced jumping into the cockpit twice, then found myself ringed by photographers

and curious spectators, all shooting questions at Zora and me as the final minutes ticked away.

The clear-grid order was given and I lined up across the sun-white concrete with the other drivers, warning those nearest me (O'Shea, Thompson and Hawthorn) not to stand on their brakes in front of me because mine were very erratic. Then the 10-1 countdown began over the loudspeakers.

Waiting anxiously there, on the line for the running Le Mans start, listening to the count, I felt that we had somehow been cheated, that if we had only been allowed another month the bugs would have been ironed out of the SS. Now, with its malfunctioning brakes and many non-race-tested components, I was very much afraid of failure—in fact, it was almost a certainty. But I would give the car every chance within my capabilities, and finish if possible. The huge crowd was solidly behind this "supreme effort" on the part of Chevrolet—as evidenced by their wild cheers for us during practice. They wanted to see a Detroit car in the circle of champions and the sleek-looking SS seemed to hold immense promise. At that moment, crouching there under the hot sun, I only hoped we could make a decent showing.

The flag dropped and I sprinted across the concrete, leaping easily into the cockpit. As I held the starter button down, the engine grinding over, two of our team Corvettes moved out. Then the engine took hold and we were off with the first bunch. At the end of the airport straight I had passed our two Corvettes, but was behind five red Italian Ferraris and Maseratis. They were running fast but cautiously on this initial tour, but to stay with them I had to keep on my toes, correcting the alternate jerking of the inconsistent brakes and ducking small rocks and sand tossed up by the wheels ahead of me.

At the end of the first lap I passed the stands in sixth, behind Collins (Ferrari), Moss (Maserati), Hill (Ferrari), Gregory (Ferrari) and Behra (in the 4.5 Maser). For the next two laps I was able to stick close to them, but the brakes were making this increasingly difficult, pulling first to the right,

then to the left, then suddenly locking. On lap 3 the SS wobbled unsteadily at speed; one of the front wheels was seriously out of balance. I zigzagged to measure the effect on my control and found it pronounced. Cruising the two airport straights and the U-turn, I pulled into the pits shouting "Tire!" and pointing to the front of the car. As I told Zora about the symptoms, Frank Burell discovered that one tire had two smooth flats, about a foot between, where the tread was worn down to the fabric from locking. Both the fronts were changed in a matter of seconds.

At speed again the shaking vanished, but the front end was sliding too easily (with new rubber) and the brakes were still erratic and dangerous. I settled into a stabilized sort of adjustment to the car's shortcomings, using first gear in several corners to unburden the brakes, extending the engine at maximum (though it was no longer pulling above 6000 rpm), and cornering hard—especially in the flat, fast curves where the SS came into its own.

I began to feel more confident now, certain that the car was making a respectable time. This feeling was verified by our pits as they signaled first 3:30, then 3:29—a speed matching Hawthorn's lap record of 1956!

But trouble had not deserted us. After shifting into third on the last airport straight before the U-turn to the pits, the engine abruptly cut dead. It seemed so final I instantly disengaged the clutch and let the SS coast free, in the hope that I could make the pits without having to get out and push. I came into the U-turn with ample speed to get around, and in the last few yards before the pits I re-engaged the gear, pumped the throttle and frantically jabbed the fuel-injection starter button. Nothing. I coasted silently in, and the Corvette mechanics instantly swarmed over the engine as I braked to a stop.

I discussed the car's behavior with Zora and Taruffi. "The heat in the cockpit is wicked," I told them. "In the low-speed corners a red-hot blast comes over the screen directly into my face. And in the bends the rear end seems to steer itself er-

ratically—it wants to skid. The suspension is definitely going haywire."

"What about the brakes?" asked Taruffi. "Any improvement?"

"Still lousy," I replied. "The rear brakes sometimes hang on after the pedal is released—which can be upsetting when you enter a corner directly after braking and feel the dragging rear wheels sliding out from under you!"

"The Fangio-Behra Maser is leading," Zora told me. "Collins is second, then Moss. They've got a lot of laps on us."

"Well, let's go on as long as we can."

I got the OK sign, and with a momentary sense of near vandalism, I jumped from the pit counter onto the immaculately polished blue magnesium rear deck, sliding behind the wheel and getting under way. The engine was pulling strongly again, and I soon settled into a respectable pace, passing everything in sight with ease—and getting a good deal of cooperation from the competing cars, all of whom cheerfully made room for me to pass whenever I overtook them, even in and between slow corners. I could see that this was more than the usual accommodation for a competitor; apparently they felt our blue Corvette deserved special consideration on its shaky maiden voyage into the big time.

Then, just as I had reached 100 mph in third past the pits, the engine cut dead again! Pumping and pressing every control on the dash failed to do any good. I stopped on the wide concrete just before it led into the road section and opened the hood, then the tail section containing the tools. I tried to be analytical and deliberate, since frantic rushing would only result in wasted time.

Knowing that a broken fuel-pump drive could be one possible cause, I dutifully changed the cable, noting that it was oddly worn at each end, but intact. I tried to restart—no response. Checking the wire into the distributor revealed that it was not properly soldered into the rubber-covered clip. I cleaned the wire and wound it firmly. Again, not it. Although

the manually separated points showed a spark it was unconvincing, so I removed the coil and replaced it with a new one. This time the engine burst into life again.

All during this repair procedure, scooter-borne officials kibitzed, suggested, criticized, commiserated and advised—though it was actually their job to see that no one talked to me. But now the engine was alive again and I hurriedly dumped all loose parts into the passenger's foot well, strapped down the hood and tail section, and vaulted into the cockpit. Grabbing now for straws of hope, I reminded myself that a race is never lost until you retire—and despite the disheartening fact that we were now hopelessly far behind the leaders I took off briskly, with a chirp of tires, glad to be re-entering the fight. All delays were put out of mind as our pit signaled competitive lap times once again.

Along that first curving length of fence, spectators waved me on with such enthusiasm that at first I suspected they were trying to warn me of trouble in the immediate turn ahead; automatically I slowed, anticipating an obstruction of some sort. But all was clear; the fans were simply that delighted to see the SS back in the running. (Even race organizer Alec Ulmann took time out from his inspection duties to literally jump for joy at our reappearance!) I had seen Italians as excited over Ascari and Castellotti, and Argentinians over Fangio, but not in eight years of racing had I seen Americans as openly exuberant as this!

Loose parts jittered and danced on the floor and in the seat next to me. Thumps and loud rumbles through the corners indicated that the tires were hitting at various places in the body. And the brakes had become inexplicably featherlight; probably the heat and wear had bedded them in, producing a remarkable increase in the effective power of the vacuum boosters, and entirely transforming their characteristics.

The hump through the Esses caused more chatter and skipping from the rear wheels, and now they did not stabilize

for a few hundred feet beyond the last curve. This wheel hop made control increasingly difficult. It became more and more doubtful that we would be able to stay on the road, which seemed to narrow dangerously as control deteriorated.

The oil temp had reached 300 degrees and the water temp was over 225 as the cockpit heat continued to rise. My mouth and throat were dry as Florida's sand, and my clothes were wet with perspiration as I fought the Corvette around the circuit. Finally, after nearly leaving the road, I realized it was useless to continue like this—and rolled despondently into the pits.

"No use," I told Zora and Taruffi. "I can barely keep it on the road. The water and oil temperatures are out of hand and I'm cooked. There's no point in going on with the car in this shape."

Ed Cole was there, and he asked Taruffi to take the car out for a few laps, telling him to give it a try. Ed was characteristically reluctant to quit, and his engineering mind demanded all the experience he could get out of every component. Piero agreed, taking over the wheel.

In just two laps he was back, reporting hypersensitive brakes, loud body noises, lack of control, etc. He flashed his warm smile at me as he climbed out. "You are right. To go on is without purpose. I admire you very much, John, to have made that speed with a car in this condition."

Therefore, the Chevrolet Super Sport officially retired on lap 23—while Fangio and Behra roared on to take the victory with their fleet 4.5 Maserati. The Moss-Schell 3-liter was second. Our other three Corvettes all finished the 12-hour grind (in 12th, 15th and 16th positions)—a creditable showing after all, despite our shattered victory dreams.

The SS, for all of its teething troubles, had proven fast and * agile, capable of holding its own with Europe's best. A series of minor, one could almost say inevitable, bugs had side-lined it, but this was normally expected from a new design rushed to completion. Zora summed up our feelings when he announced to the waiting corps of pressmen: "We are not un-

happy with this car. It is a design of great potential, and we are all quite pleased with it."

For one afternoon, in the heat of battle at Sebring, the SS Corvette had shown an American promise, and taken its place in racing history.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

Full Circle

The SS Corvette didn't really disappear with Sebring '57. Despite the crippling ban imposed by Detroit on its own racing activities the SS is still alive in many fine Corvette-powered privately owned Specials now active on U. S. circuits. Lance Reventlow, the young California millionaire, utilized many features of the SS when he and his expert staff designed and built the remarkable Corvette-engined Scarabs. (These powerful machines won over the best Europe could send against them at the international races at Riverside and Nassau in 1958.) I firmly believe that eventually Detroit will return to the road-racing game; it's simply too lively and rewarding a field for them to ignore. And when they *do* come back, an even-faster version of the SS may yet rule European sports car courses.

2.

The sport has come full circle in this country. It began in the days of Barney Oldfield on a professional basis, then resumed after the last war on an amateur footing, and is now both professional and amateur again, as it should be. I'm happy to say that I had a part in launching the latest phase by organizing the first fully professional USAC (United

States Auto Club) road race in the U. S. in September of 1958. Though not without the usual problems, I think it fair to say that this event, held at the Lime Rock circuit near my home in Connecticut, was a success. Other professional races have followed, encouraging the aces of Europe to compete on our shores, as well as giving the Indianapolis and dirt-track boys a chance at sports car competition. The outlook for this challenging branch of auto racing seems to be bright—and the few problems remaining are rapidly being overcome.

3-

Despite recent reports to the contrary, road racing continues to improve the passenger car. "The racing car of today is the touring car of tomorrow" is a platitude in automotive circles that has been proven again and again over the years. Detachable wheels facilitating tire change, four-wheel brakes and independent suspension were among the many racing developments first used in expensive passenger cars and later adopted universally as costs were reduced by volume. Among the many important chassis developments evolved from racing were shock absorbers themselves—and today two important racing contributions to the average motorist's convenience and safety, fuel injection and disc brakes, are finding their way to the average production passenger car. Racing remains the severest test of machines, far outstripping the substitutes that can be devised in the research laboratory, assuring manufacturers that what succeeds in racing is really sound practice.

4-

Just how long I will continue to race is a question I am not yet ready to confront. When the appropriate time comes to retire I trust I will have the good sense to recognize it. With a growing family of three boys and a wife to consider it has become more and more difficult to race well. Over the past few years I have been careful to choose my events with a good

deal of consideration as to the relative safety of the various circuits. I now find that I do not contemplate with equanimity the prospects of racing again on the fast and intrinsically dangerous European circuits I used to take such delight in. The element of safety in motor racing, therefore, has claimed much of my recent time and attention.

Safety is perhaps the one vital factor in the future of the sport, and I'm certain that road racing can continually be made safer for driver and spectator alike. The circuit at Lime Rock, with which I have been closely associated since 1957, is a case in point. A mile and a half of scientifically engineered roadway on a lush, 320-acre wooded track, the circuit was laid out with the benefit of expert opinion. From the outset, Lime Rock was meant to be more than just another course. It could help us answer the question of just what happens to a car when it leaves the road (for any reason) and what can be done to bring it to rest in safety for its occupants. I brought this question to William Milliken, a long-time racing friend who is also the head of the Vehicle Dynamics Department of the Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory. It was decided that Lime Rock should be used as an outdoor testing ground on which to calculate the escape area proportionate to every speed and curve, to investigate the effects of various decelerating surface materials (sand, water, etc.) and to test new impact-absorbing barriers of various types. The valuable result has been a program of automotive research, with the confident expectation that the findings will be directly applicable to normal public highways, as well as to the sport itself.

Without belaboring the subject, I will add only this. A road-racing course is the ideal source of the now deficient data for three reasons: There are dependable witnesses from whom exact testimony can be secured; the usual variable of driver effort and efficiency is reduced to a minimum; and the road under study is used at or near its absolute capacity.

Slowly, but surely, road racing is getting safer. Ireland's dangerous Tourist Trophy circuit has been switched to an airport; the *Carrera Panamericana* has been abolished in

Mexico; and nothing remains of the old, gloriously improbable Mille Miglia but the name. The day of open-road city-to-city racing is at an end, and I wholeheartedly approve. This is an indication of maturity, of responsibility and an ever-increasing knowledge of the sport's special problems. Obviously, hundreds of miles through villages and cities cannot be adequately policed in any country, and the only feasible venue on which to achieve the proper degree of safety is on controlled closed circuits where dangerous hazards have been diligently eliminated.

Many drivers of the highest rank have been lost as a tragic result of what we are beginning to accept as omissions in course design, and as we gather more and more dependable information and data, such losses can be drastically reduced. America's safety record, up to now, has been a fine one and we are making fresh progress daily. Lime Rock will have a part in this progress, and I am proud, as circuit director, to be making a contribution toward that end. The danger of racing fast cars can never be *completely* removed—and motor sport will always recall, in a scene of high drama, that delicate equation of human will balanced against human fear.

5-

In looking back over the past decade since those frantic days at Watkins Glen and the early Sebrings, I have no regrets.

In order to participate in this intense, essentially male experience, I've risked everything of value including life itself, being stimulated by what can be stated simply as the pursuit of achievement in one of the great sports.

And when I finally hang up the old crash hat (how often patched and repainted!) as many of my racing companions have done—men such as Fangio, Taruffi, Farina, Villoresi, de Graffenreid and Chiron—I will have had a full life. Over the duration of my career I have had a number of unique pleasures and satisfactions: I've traveled extensively, living

with my family in Europe, gained literally hundreds of friends among wonderful people, and have had many rousing battles in some of the finest racing machines ever built.

It's been a good bargain and a good life. I only hope tomorrow will be as good as yesterday.