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Author: Fleming, Ian [Ian Lancaster] (1908-1964)

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Automobilia

By IAN FLEMING

'Dig that T-bird!' I had cut it a bit fine round Queen Victoria's skirts and my wing mirror had almost dashed the Leica from the GI's hand. If the tourists don't snap the Queen, at about 10 a.m. on most mornings they can at least get a picture of me and my Ford Thunderbird with Buckingham Palace in the background.

I suspect that all motorists are vain about their cars. I certainly am, and have been ever since the khaki Standard with the enamelled Union Jack on its nose which founded my *écurie* in the Twenties. Today the chorus of 'Smashing!', 'Cor!' and 'Rrauu!' which greets my passage is the perfume of Araby.

* * *

One man who is even more childishly vain than myself is Noël Coward. Last year, in Jamaica, he took delivery of a sky-blue Chevrolet Belair Convertible which he immediately drove round to show off to me. We went for a long ride to *épater la bourgeoisie*. Our passage along the coast road was as triumphal as, a year before, Princess Margaret's had been. As we swept through a tiny village, a Negro lounge, galvanised by the glorious vision, threw his hands up to heaven and cried, 'Cheesus-Kerist!'

'How did he know?' said Coward.

Our pride was to have a fall. We stopped for petrol.

'Fill her up,' said Coward.

There was a prolonged pause, followed by some quiet tinkering and jabbering from behind the car.

'What's going on, Coley?'

'They can't find the hole,' said Leslie Cole from the rear seat.

Coley got out. There was more and louder argumentation. A crowd gathered. I got out and, while Coward stared loftily, patiently at the sky, went over the car front and back with a tooth-comb. There was no hole. I told Coward so.

'Don't be silly, dear boy. The Americans are very clever at making motor-cars. They wouldn't forget a thing like that. In fact, they probably started with the hole and then built the car round it.'

'Come and look for yourself.'

'I wouldn't think of demeaning myself before the natives.'

'Well, have you got an instruction book?'

'How should I know? Don't ask silly questions.'

The crowd gazed earnestly at us, trying to fathom whether we were ignorant or playing some white man's game. I found the trick catch of the glove compartment and took out the instruction book. The secret was on the last page. You had to unscrew the stop-light. The filler cap was behind it.

'Anyone could have told you that,' commented Coward airily.

I looked at him coldly. 'It's interesting,' I said. 'When you sweat with embarrassment the sweat runs down your face and drops off your first chin on to your second.'

'Don't be childish.'

* * *

I am not only vain about my Thunderbird, but proud of it. It is by far the best car I have ever possessed, although, on looking back through my motley stud book, I admit that there is no string of Bentleys and Jaguars and Aston Martins with which to compare it.

After the khaki Standard, I went to a khaki Morris Oxford which was demolished between Munich and Kufstein. I had passed a notice saying '*Achtung Rollbahn!*' and was keeping my eyes peeled for a steamroller when, just before I crossed a small bridge over a stream, I heard a yell in my ear and had time to see a terrified peasant leap off a gravity-propelled trolley laden with cement blocks when it hit broadside and hurled the car, with me in it, upside down into the stream.

I changed to the worst car I have ever had, a 16/80 open Lagonda. I fell in love with the whine of its gears and its outside brake. But it would barely do seventy, which made me ashamed of its sporty appearance.

I transferred to a supercharged Graham Paige Convertible Coupé, an excellent car which I stupidly gave to the ambulance service when war broke out.

Half-way through the war I had, for a time, a battered but handy little Opel. One night at the height of the blitz I was dining with Sefton Delmer in his top-floor flat in Lincoln's Inn. A direct hit blew out the lower three floors and left us swilling champagne and waiting for the top floor to fall into the chasm. The fireman who finally hauled us out and down his ladder was so indignant at our tipsy insouciance that I made him a present of the crumpled remains of the Opel.

After the war I had an umpteenth-hand beetle-shaped Renault and a pre-war Hillman Minx before buying my first expensive car—a 2½-litre Riley, which ran well for a year before developing really expensive troubles for which I only obtained some compensation through a personal appeal to Lord Nuffield.

I transferred to one of the first of the Sapphires, a fast, comfortable car, but one which made me feel too elderly when it was going slowly and too nervous when it was going fast. I decided to revert to an open car and, on the advice of a friend, bought a Daimler Convertible. Very soon I couldn't stand the ugliness of its rump and, when the winter came and I found the engine ran so coolly that the heater wouldn't heat, I got fed up with post-war English cars.

* * *

It was then that a fairly handsome ship came home and I decided to buy myself a luxurious present. I first toyed with the idea of a Lancia Gran Turismo, a really beautiful piece of machinery, but it was small and rather too busy—like driving an angry washing machine—and it cost over £3,000, which seemed ridiculous. I happened to see a Thunderbird in the street and fell head over heels in love. I rang up Lincoln's. Apparently there was no difficulty in buying any make of American car out of the small import quota which we accept in part exchange for our big motor-car exports to the States. The salesman brought along a fire-engine-red model with white upholstery which I drove nervously round Battersea Park.

I dickered and wavered. Why not a Mercedes? But they are still more expensive and selfish and the highly desirable SL has only room beside the driver for a diminutive blonde with a sponge bag. Moreover, when you open those bat-like doors in the rain, the rain pours straight into the car.

I paid £3,000 for a Thunderbird. Black, with conventional gear change plus overdrive, and as few power assists as possible. In due course it appeared. My wife was indignant. The car was hideous. There was no room for taking people to the station (a point I found greatly in its favour) and, anyway, why hadn't I bought her a mink coat? To this day she hasn't relented. She has invented a new disease called 'Thunderbird neck' which she complains she gets in the passenger seat. The truth is that she has a prejudice against all American artefacts and, indeed, against artefacts of any kind.

She herself drives like Evelyn Waugh's Lady Metroland, using the pavement as if it were part of the road. Like many women, she prides herself on her 'quick reactions' and is constantly twitting me with my sluggish consideration for others in traffic. She is unmoved when I remind her that in her previous car, a grey and heavily scarred Sunbeam Talbot whose interior always looked as if it had just been used as dustcart for the circus at Olympia, she had been guilty of misdemeanours which would have landed any man in gaol. She once hit an old man in a motorised bathchair so hard in the rear that he was propelled right across Oxford Street against the traffic lights. Turning into Dover Street, she had cut a milk cart so fine that she had left her onside door-handle embedded in the rump of the horse. Unfortunately, she is unmoved by these memories, having that most valuable of all feminine attributes—the ability to see her vices as virtues.

* * *

I have now had my Thunderbird for over two years. It has done 27,000 miles without a single mechanical failure, without developing a squeak or a rattle. Its paintwork is immaculate and there is not a spot of discoloration anywhere on its rather over-lavish chrome, despite the fact that it is never garaged at night and gets a wash only twice a week. I have it serviced every quarter, but this is only a matter of the usual oil-changing, etc. The only time it ever stopped in traffic was carefully planned to give me a short, sharp reminder that, like other fine pieces of machinery, it has a temperament.

The occasion was, for the car's purposes, well chosen—exactly half-way under the Thames in the Blackwall Tunnel, with lorries howling by nose to tail a few inches away in the ill-lit gloom, and with a giant petrol tanker snoring impatiently down my neck. The din was so terrific that I hadn't even noticed that the engine had stopped when the traffic in front moved on after a halt. It was only then that I noticed the rev. counter at zero. I ground feverishly at the starter without result. The perspiration poured down my face at the thought of the ghastly walk I would have to take through the tunnel to get the breakdown van and pay the £5 fine. Then, having reminded me never again to take its services for granted, the engine stuttered and fired and we got going.

The reason why I particularly like the Thunderbird, apart from the beauty of its line and the drama of its snarling mouth and the giant, flaring nostril of its air-intake, is that everything works. Absolutely nothing goes wrong. True, it isn't a precision instrument like English sports cars, but that I count a virtue. The mechanical margin of error in its construction is wider. Everything has a solid feel. The engine—a huge adapted low-revving Mercury V-8 of 5-litre capacity—never gives the impression of stress or strain. When, on occasion, you can do a hundred without danger of going over the edge of this small island, you have not only the knowledge that you have an extra twenty m.p.h. in reserve, but the feel of it. As for acceleration, when the two extra barrels of the four-barrel carburetter come in, at around 3,000 revs., it is a real thump in the back. The brakes are good enough for fast driving, but would have to be better if you wanted to drive dangerously. The same applies to the suspension, where rigidity has been sacrificed slightly to give a comfortable ride. Petrol consumption, using overdrive for long runs, averages 17 m.p.g. Water and oil, practically nil.

There is a hard top for the winter which you take off and store during the summer when the soft top is resurrected from its completely disappeared position behind the seat. The soft top can be put up or down without effort and both tops have remained absolutely weatherproof, which, after two years, is miraculous.

One outstanding virtue is that all accessories seem to be infallible, though the speedometer, as with most American cars, is a maddening 10 per cent. optimistic. The heater really heats; the wipers, though unfortunately suction-operated, really wipe; and not a fuse has blown nor a lamp bulb died. The engine never overheats and has never failed to start immediately from cold, even after all night outside in a frost. The solidity of the manufacture is, of course, the result of designing cars for a seller's market and for a country with great extremes of heat and cold.

Cyril Connolly once said to me that, if men were honest, they would admit that their motor-cars came next after their women and children in their list of loves. I won't go all the way with him on that, but I do enjoy well-designed and attractively wrapped bits of machinery that really work—and that's what the Thunderbird is, a first-class express carriage.

[End of *Automobilia*, by Ian Fleming]