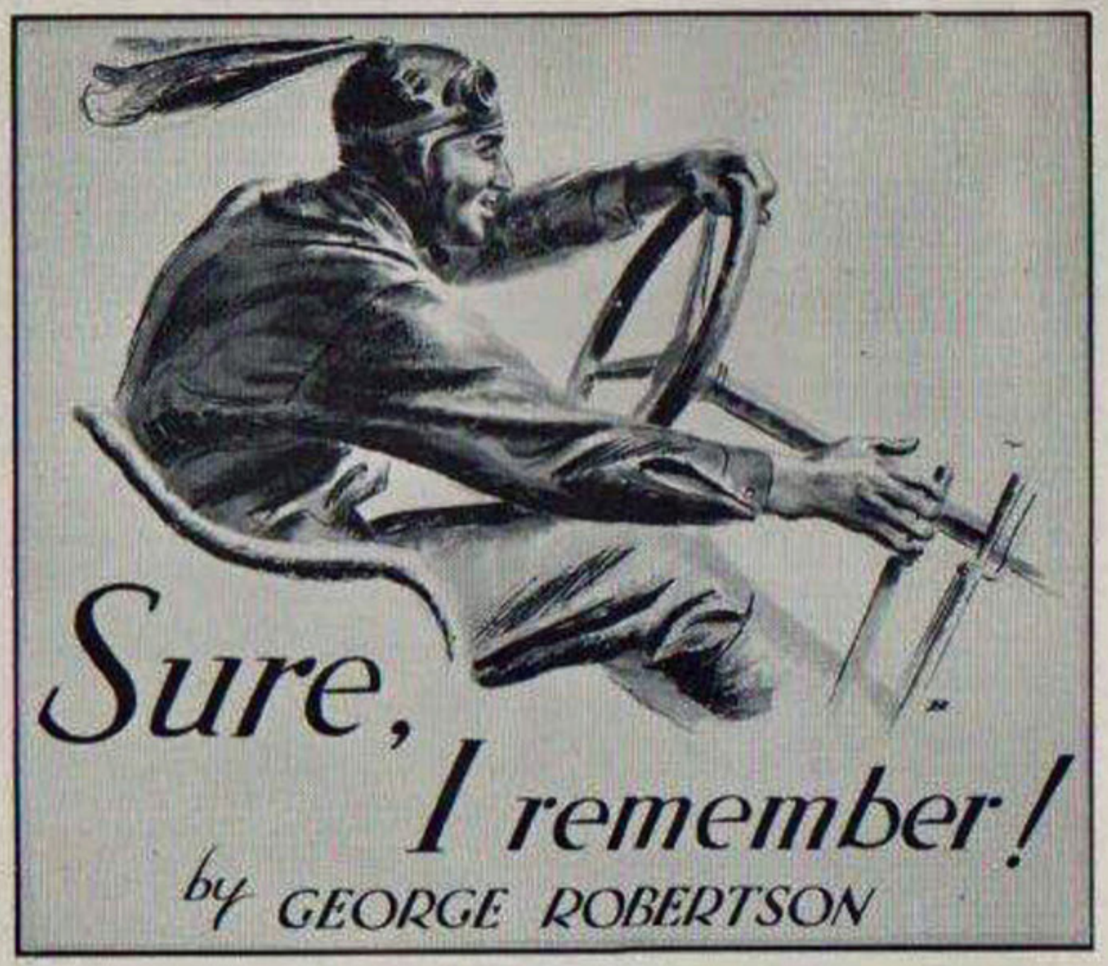


ODDS AND ENDS IN A RACING CAREER

Sketches by Peter Helck

It was about 4 A.M. on a Friday, the thirteenth, that I left my house in Brooklyn to pick up the big Benz for Vanderbilt Cup practice. My wife had, for the first time, asked me to put off that day's practice, as she had a funny feeling about it. I laughed it off, for if all race drivers were to be governed by these so-called funny feelings, competition would be very limited and the race promotors would tear their hair.

On reaching our Long Island racing headquarters, Glen Ethridge, as fine a racing mechanic as was ever born, and I checked and rechecked the car before practice. When the car crew and ourselves had everything shipshape, Glen and I reported to the grandstand for practice and found a news man assigned to me as riding mechanic, for his morning thrill and to get material for his story.

A good-sized man, all dressed up in a long black overcoat with upturned collar, and completely equipped with goggles and a derby hat forced down over his ears, crawled into the mechanic's seat. In the fresh morning air, his breath was rather on the heavy side. I instructed him in the use of the mechanic's controls and impressed upon him the mechanic's job of looking to the rear for overtaking cars. He mumbled something and that was that.

Down the Parkway we went at our customary speed, easing off on the bad curves and running wide open on the good stretches. It took my amateur mechanic some little time for his fright to wear off and to finally get his derby tight on his head. He finally ventured a look or two to the rear but he didn't enjoy that job very much.

We approached the turn off the Parkway and I motioned him to hold tight to the seat handle. As we went into the turn at a fast clip, something happened and happened fast. My half-dozing mechanic suddenly came to life, saw the turn and probably terrified at the speed, grabbed me. In the second I had lost control of the car, the right front wheel had gone over a three-foot bank on the outside. The car rolled over so fast I couldn't get down into the "cellar". I was caught under it as it rolled on me and then off, smashing my back, ribs and right elbow and lacerating my head and face.

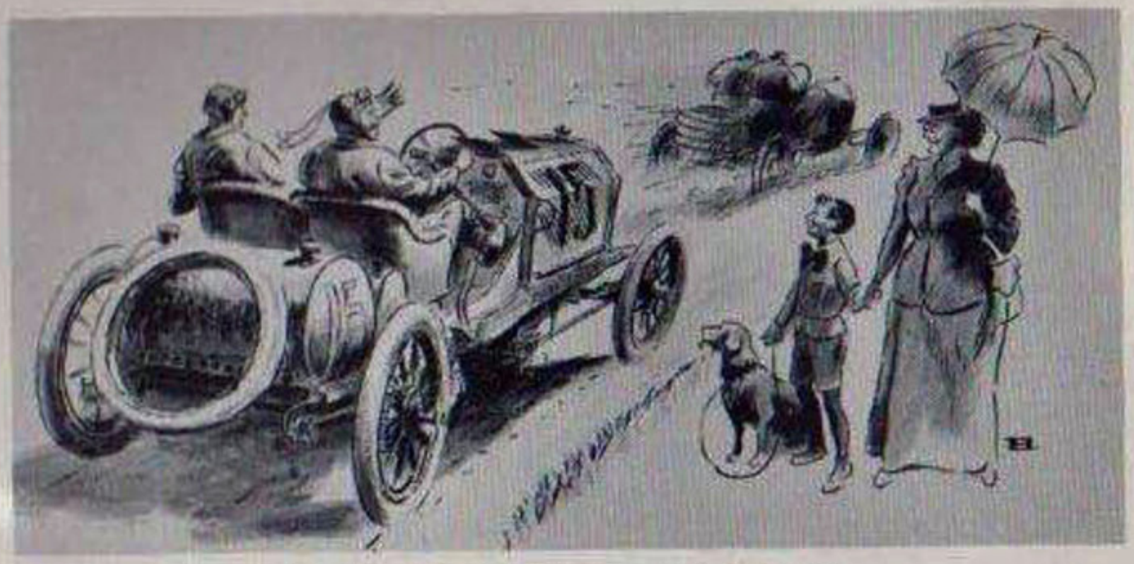
As I got to my feet, groggy and about to pass out, I saw my adorable mechanic standing on his feet and his derby hat was not even dented.

Friday the thirteenth, an under-the-weather news man as mechanic, a roll-over and then the hospital, all this seemed to add up to that "funny feeling" my wife mentioned before I left home. It was my swan song to racing.

Racing days, for all of us, had humor and tragedy; successes and disappointments. Men who should have won races were licked by ill-luck, sometimes as they were about to finish in the lead. Other men, with no hope of winning, were pushed up into the lead by Lady Luck. Despite the tragedies and disappointments, we all found time to laugh, remain real sportsmen and enjoy our jobs.

I remember going South on a train with Bill Pickens, the very versatile manager of Barney Oldfield. Bill had been laying it on rather heavily about Barney being the world's greatest race driver and he and I had some hot discussions about that claim for I felt that there was no

The Vanderbilt Apperson. *See Page 28.*



The Briarcliff Panhard. See Page 31

"world's greatest driver", because of the many types of races and competition.

We stopped one noon at a small village in the South for the locomotive to pick up water and Bill and I got out to stretch our legs. Bill told me as we walked that he would bet Barney was known even in that small village as the world's greatest race driver. He called over a nondescript colored man and asked him who was the world's greatest race driver. The answer came quickly, "Barney Oldfield". Bill turned and just beamed at me. Just as he did, I looked across the road, and pasted on an old barn, was a twenty-four sheet poster, showing Barney in a big flaming and smoking car, with letters in big type proclaiming that Barney, as the "world's greatest racing driver", would appear in a near-by city for an exhibition to thrill the public. If that colored boy hadn't been able to read, Bill Pickens would never have beamed upon me.

Incidents which might have produced disappointments sometimes occurred. I remember a few which stand out, as they might have been the difference between success and failure.

Al Poole and I were teamed together as drivers of the Simplex in a twenty-four hour race at Brighton Beach. Frank Lescault and I had set up a twenty-four hour record in the Simplex at Brighton Beach the year before and the Simplex crowd was very anxious to win this one. Al and I were running in the lead, miles ahead, during the late afternoon before the finish. Al had just relieved me and we both agreed that he would maintain a safe, even pace, as I had been doing, in order not to take any chance of losing the race.

I went over to the grandstand and was only there a few moments when the crowd began to shout and yell. I hustled to the starter's box to find that the Simplex was running wide open and passing all competition. I ran across the track to find the reason for the sudden spurt by Al, for I knew that he was as anxious to win as I was. To my surprise I found that Herman Broesel, one of the officers of the Simplex Company, felt that the crowd deserved some fast action from Simplex and had signalled Al to change his pace and run wide open, in order to prove that Simplex was king of the race.

We had a rather heated discussion, to put it mildly, as far as I was concerned, and I had the signals changed at once so that Al could resume the agreed pace. Herman tried to pull Company rank on me without any success on his part for it ended up by my ordering him out of our camp and having him escorted by a guard to the grandstand area for the remainder of the race.

If Herman, in his enthusiasm, had forced Al into an accident or a breakdown during his increased pace, Simplex would have lost the race it so badly wanted to win.

Another time, at Le Mans, France, I had a similar experience. The Duesenberg team was entered in the French Grand Prix, a major road classic. Jimmy Murphy, Joe Boyer and Andre Dubonnet were our drivers. Augie Duesenberg was in charge of the mechanical operations and I was team manager. We had it planned that Joe Boyer was to do the fast driving and to try to run the tires off of the competing cars. Jimmy was to run a slightly slower but steady race, while Dubonnet was to be a runner-up and wait for his chance as the race progressed.

After the start of the race, things were going along rather well under our schedule. Joe was running very fast and the competitors were being forced to run faster than, I think, they had planned. Jimmy was riding in a good position and holding it, while Dubonnet was running not too far back in the field.

As the race got past the half-way mark, I began to push Jimmy along a trifle faster in his pace until he finally took the lead. Things then began to happen fast and furiously, due to the hard pace Joe had forced upon the other entries. Cars came into the pits for tire and gas replacements, with boiling radiators and pounding motors, needing everything but new motors. Joe Boyer had shot his bolt and was out of the race. Dubonnet was having trouble but Jimmy was rolling along just as the doctor ordered, with nothing much in sight to interfere with his four-minute lead.

I left the pits for a short time, and when I returned I was surprised to learn that Augie had decided that Jimmy should increase his lead, in case anything should happen to him on the last few laps, and had signalled Jimmy to "beat it". Jimmy saw the signal and, smart driver that he was, figured that his lead was being taken from him and beat it he did. I caught him after he had run a lap and signalled him to cut down to his slower pace. And then like the Simplex incident, I had to order Augie, one of the owners of the cars, out of his own pit for the remainder of the race.

The final result was that Jimmy won the race, the first and last time any American car and American driver ever won a major European classic and it might not have happened if Augie had persisted in his orders.

The winning of the race by Jimmy Murphy, in a Duesenberg, was a bitter dose for Ballot to take. Ballot was certain of his team winning, so much so that he had a platform built outside of the Automobile Club of Le Mans building on which he was going to place his winning car. When we returned to our camp, I was told by a French newspaperman that a banquet was to be held at the Automobile Club and that we should attend, since we won the race. This was a very informal invitation, as we had received no word from the Club officials. However, we went, the three drivers and mechanics, Augie and myself, only to find that the banquet was

already in progress and Ballot was being toasted in champagne; although his car only ran second.

We waited around for a few minutes, figuring that we had gotten in late and that since we were there, the winner would then be toasted. No, it didn't work out that way - we seemed to have been forgotten. I entered an emphatic protest with the French newsmen there about the rotten sportsmanship displayed and we returned to our quarters, where we toasted each other in champagne. This incident was the last of many we experienced from the time the cars arrived in port until we finally won. But it does show that racing has its interesting moments, good and bad.

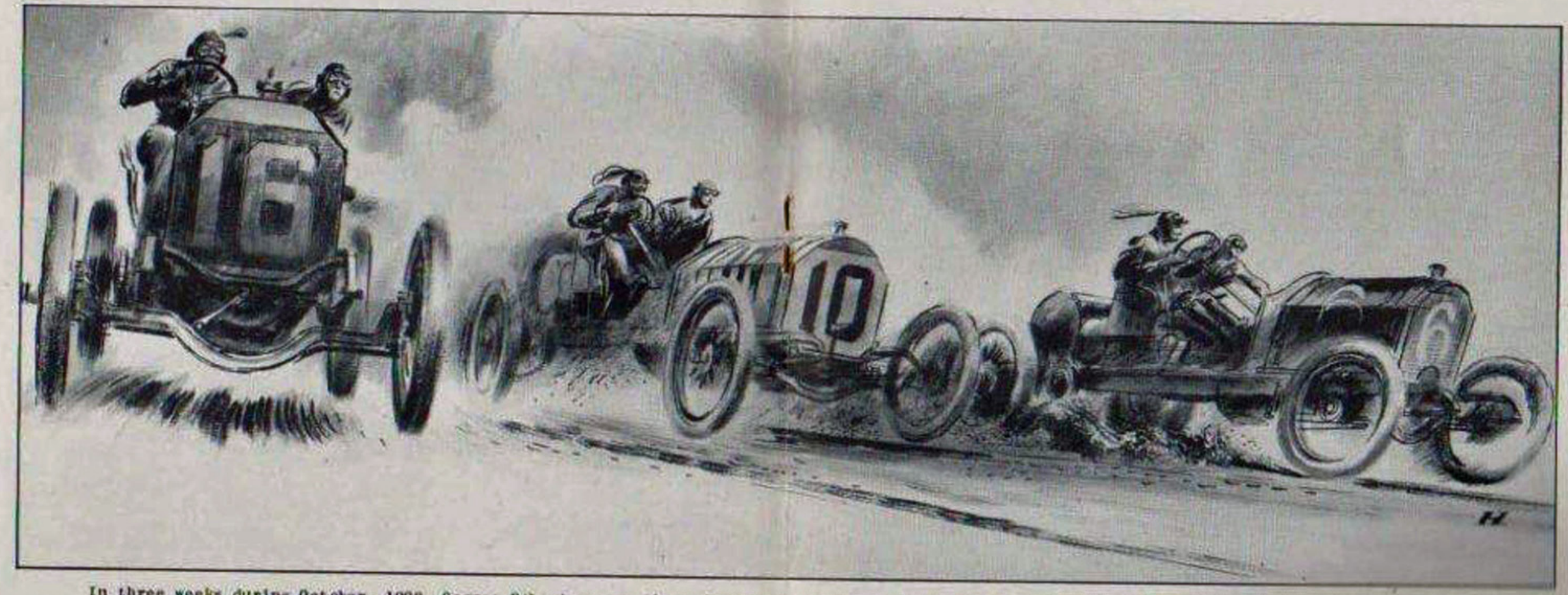
Tragedy is always close at hand when men race and it appears so suddenly. It came at Morris Park, where we were running in a twenty-four hour race. During the morning, we were running up the back stretch, with a slower car ahead of us near the rail. Smelzer, in a Lozier, was trying to pass. As we were having a little motor trouble, we took to the outside and signalled Smelzer to pass.

As we did, a slower car ahead moved to the center of the track, blocking the Lozier for a moment and slowing it down. After Smelzer finally passed he turned and shook his fist at the driver of the delaying car. In looking around, Smelzer ran into the turn before he realized it and the car ran into the outer rail which carried a large water pipe. Both Smelzer and his mechanic were killed instantly. We raced around the track to the starting line to report the accident and although the ambulance reached the spot in quick time, it was too late.

In the twenty-four hour race in which we set up a new record with the Simplex, we were just coming out of the turn into the home stretch, in the dark of the night. The lights around the track were barely visible for the smoke of the exhausts hung heavily everywhere. As we came out of the turn, the Lozier was ahead of us to the left and a Fiat was directly behind us. Suddenly, in the glare of our headlights, I saw a special policeman run across the track ahead of us and almost run into the side of the Lozier. As soon as I saw him, I tried to slow down but the going was slippery and we were going fast.

The man seemed to push himself away from the Lozier and backed into our path. We hit him with a terrible thud which threw him over our heads and into the path of the Fiat which ran over him. As he passed over us in the dark, we felt what we thought was blood sprinkling down on us. I knew the blow had damaged us severely in front and I raced to the starter's box to report that I was sure I killed a man and that I would try to encircle the track and reach the paddock for repairs. We managed to get into our camp before the motor burned out and we found that both the heavy headlights had been flattened out, the brackets broken, the radiator entirely smashed and the heavy water inlet pipes on top of the motor bent and twisted.

The efficient repair crew we had replaced the radiator, water pipes, headlights and brackets and at the same time changed all tires and filled the gas and oil tanks, all in about fifteen minutes; one of the quickest changes of its kind I ever experienced. We went back on the track and Frank Lescault and I won the race with a new record to our credit.



In three weeks during October, 1908, George Robertson won three important races. Left to right: Locomobile #16, winner of Vanderbilt Cup Race; Locomobile 40, winner of Fairmount Park Race; and Simplex 50, winner of Brighton Beach 24-hour race.