To those unsung heroes who clung grimly to the mechanicians' seats, who, without hesitancy but with utter confidence, placed their lives in the hands of their drivers, and whose names were seldom mentioned, except in the casualty list, these reveries are affectionately inscribed.

Having developed a taste for speedy driving as a result of initial experiences with motorcycles and cars, particularly those of Brasier, Renault and Panhard makes, in track races at Brighton Beach and Empire City (Yonkers), as well as a road race in Cuba and speed trials on Ormond Beach, I looked about for a mount to drive in the first Vanderbilt Cup Race on Long Island in 1904. As there were no elimination races that year, the problem of securing a place on the American team was not so difficult as in 1905 and 1906 - if one had a car.

As no strictly racing car was in sight, I pondered the possibilities of using a converted touring car.

The subject was broached to Charley Duerr, at that time New York agent for the Royal Tourist, whose salesroom was located at Broadway and 58th Street, where now stands a great temple of modern transportation, the General Motors Building. As a result, a chassis was sent from this company's factory at Cleveland, Ohio to New York and the job of changing it begun. This work was planned and executed under the experienced eye of "Al" Poole, a graduate of the famous English Daim-

ler factory who later acted as my mechanician[1] in the Gordon-Bennett and Vanderbilt Cup Races.

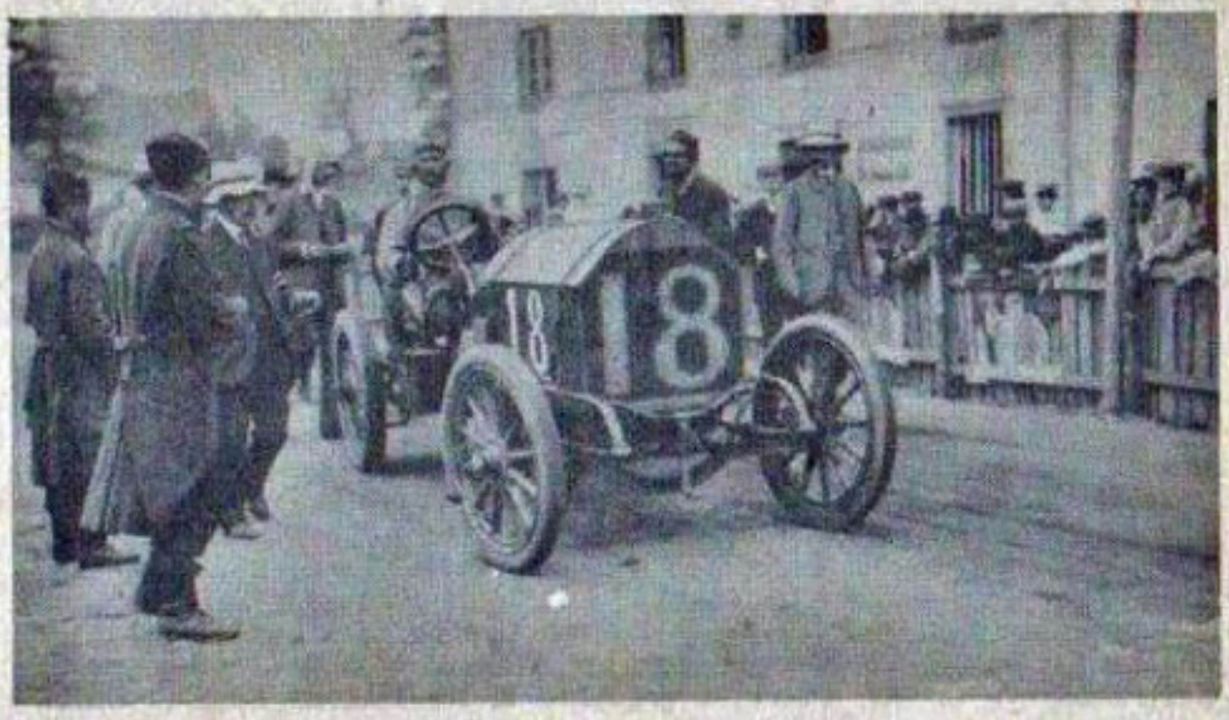
The work of changing over the chassis included making and fitting a new carburetor, and installing an improved ignition system with four separate "trembler" coils. A new "coiled tube" radiator and water tank were also installed, as well as an extra-large gasoline tank and racing seats. Unfortunately, the gear ratio in the rear axle was low and could not be raised; on this account the engine speed for any given road speed was very high for this type of car. Consequently at, say, 50 miles per hour, the speed of the engine was something scandalous, and, as the Vanderbilt Cup Race subsequently proved, this lively "revving" greatly assisted in disintegrating the power plant.

The garage in which this reconstruction was carried out was located in 60th Street near Broadway; it had been a stable with an elevator operated by hand power. This site is now monopolized by a most ornate structure, a U.S. Post Office sub-station. So passeth the old order!

Practice for this race was limited, as the car was not ready until a few days before the date of the event. We did not feel the need of much practice, however, as we were familiar with the course, and in any event the maximum speed of this car was hardly high enough to be a matter of great concern, even when negotiating the curves.

On one of the rare occasions when we did practice, I recall experiencing a severe attack of disillusionment. We were "rolling" on the Jericho turnpike near Floral Park, at what, to us, was an exceptionally rapid rate of translation, and on the middle of the course. We were going

1. Mechanician, anglicized from "mecanicien", should not be confused with "mechanic", although this latter term is popularly used to designate the race driver's assistant. Without casting any aspersions, I might point out that the mechanicians in cup races had a range of knowledge and experience in the construction, maintenance, and functioning of cars and engines, as well as familiarity with the details of racing, not possessed by so-called mechanics.



Thither we hied; the approach was neither leisurely nor with malice aforethought. The malice was reserved for the factory man who used soft steel for the universal joint pin, and the aforethough for the problem of utilizing the meager impedimenta in the blacksmith's shop to replace a precision component, made by skilled mechanics under ideal working conditions, and with million-dollar equipment.[4] We found the shop, which had been operated for generations by the Callison family. It was, and still is, a landmark, although now surrounded by modern apartments, planned for gracious living, with master bedrooms, radios, and other deviltries of present-day civilization.

The replacement pin was turned from a piece of ordinary "rod iron", and in our hurry to get back in the race, we had the new pin cut off in the lathe before it had been finished quite down to size. The result was that it would not enter the eyes in the universal joint yoke. For a moment it looked as if we might have to discard the new pin, and machine a second. Fortunately, at this juncture we spied a 10-ton hydraulic press used for forcing steel tires on the wheels of farm wagons. After the pin had been slightly tapered on one end on an emery wheel, it was placed in the joint-eye and quickly forced into place in this press. We immediately returned to the car, replaced the propeller shaft assembly, and then drove at a fast pace to try to make up for the two hours lost in reconstruction. This proved too much for the engine, which "failed"[5] about 12 miles from the wagon shop.

An interesting coincidence in this race was that when we stopped to repair the universal joint, we found Bernin's Renault also stalled a few yards ahead, and when our engine broke later, we again halted almost beside the same Renault.

When it was found impossible to continue in the race - even were another blacksmith's shop available - I left the car in charge of my riding mate, Alfred Poole, and called his attention to a goodly supply of chocolate planted under the seat cushions as emergency rations. As the day wore on and no relief in the form of victuals or a towing outfit hove in sight,[6] eventually assimilated the chocolate, and late that afternoon had the alleged racing car expedited to the city at the ignominious end of a manila hawser.

After leaving Al Poole, I rode to the Grandstand in a friend's car to report to Charley Duerr, and found him rather despondent. Taking me aside, he intimated that I drove entirely too fast, and that, if I had gone SLOWER, I would have won hands down, as the fast pace had resulted in wrecking the engine. He sagely concluded, "There is moderation in all things!!"

I took the Peerless Gordon-Bennett car to Daytona Beach in February 1905 for speed trials, and, strange to say, had another epidemic of the universal joint ailment, only in this case it was chronic, as four or five replacements had to be made. While in Daytona I saw a good deal of A. L. Riker, then Chief Engineer of the Locomobile Company, and my resourcefulness in improvising ways and means for quick repairs probably was responsible for his invitation to drive the Locomobile in the Gordon-Bennett Cup Race of that year in France in July, and also in the Vanderbilt Cup Race, later in the year, on Long Island.

The 1905 Locomobile required a "full crew", as it was equipped with a two-man clutch and a two-man cranking mechanism. Moreover,

4. Vide any car manufacturer's "literature" of that period.

5. Polite euphemism meaning "crashed", or broken beyond repair.

6. Nautical expression meaning to appear in the offing.

while the clutch could be engaged and disengaged by the driver alone, it would slip when full engine power was applied unless the spring pressure was supplemented by a four-foot lever manipulated by Al Poole. Needless to add, this dual function would be almost impossible without assiduous rehearsal and perfect co-ordination between the driver and his assistant. Failure in this respect might have disastrous consequences, as witness the occasion on the Jericho Turnpike, when this car was following Willie K. Vanderbilt in his "90" Mercedes, for the purpose of determining whether the "Loco" had sufficient speed to qualify for entrance in the American Gordon-Bennett team. On this occasion we were traveling about 70 miles an hour when our car skidded on a wet patch of oiled surface. At this moment the throttle was wide open, the clutch being held into full engagement by the auxiliary lever, manned (and how) by Alfred James Poole. In order to minimize the skid I pressed the clutch pedal to disengage, and had the impression that it pushed rather hard, not realizing at the moment that Al, with both hands, was holding with his lever against my efforts. He dared not let go; to do so would have resulted in his being thrown off, as the car was careening violently in a five-ring skid. When calm was restored, our mount was off the road but still on four wheels. Examination proved that Al Poole, like Gunga Din, was a better man than I, as, like Atlas with his lever, he had prevented me from disengaging the clutch, my frantic efforts resulting only in twisting the rock-shaft!

For the Gordon-Bennett Cup Race in 1905, we went to France in the end of June with a touring car to use for practice, as the racing car was not ready at that time. When the racer did arrive, I drove it, with Al Poole assisting, from Havre to Clermont-Ferrand, where the race headquarters were located. On the way we broke the second speed gear, also the gear-shifting mechanism, about sixty kilometers from Havre, and from this point to our destination, the gear shifting was all done by Al Poole with a pliers. In addition, he was obliged to hold the transmission in high gear all the time it was so engaged. After we arrived in Clermont-Ferrand, we had the shifting mechanism repaired, but, inasmuch as we did not have any spare gears, we were compelled to enter the race with only low and high, our transmission having only three speeds forward.

En route from Havre to Clermont-Ferrand we experienced some inconvenience on account of our limited acquaintance with the French language. At this period there were no "gas pumps" in France, "the vital fluid" being sold in "bidons", "plombes", and "capsules", the "bidons" holding about five liters each. When we stopped the first time on our journey, for "revictualment" or "gas", the blue-smocked attendant saluted, calling "Essence Messieurs?" to which I countered in impeccable French, "Oui." His next sally was, "Combien de litres, Messieurs?" My response, instantaneous, pointed and brusque, was "Quarante-cinq," this being the only expression I knew relating to numbers. The native, now probably feeling assured that my French was not to be sneezed at, gurgled, "Ah! Oui Messieurs, quarante-cinq - Bon!", and proceeded to open the requisite number of "bidons" to fill the order - and the tank. About this time Alfred Poole, who spoke French as only a Briton can, interposed with, "I say, Joe, we don't need forty-five liters; that's what you asked for."

I quieted him with the remark, "Wait and see," and sure enough, after forty-five liters were poured in, the level in the tank stood about two inches from the top. To this I called Al's attention, but he only mumbled something about "a guess".

Several hours later we again stopped at another depot for fuel, where the attendant gave us the same greeting as we received at the first stop, and the same dialogue was exchanged. However, in this instance

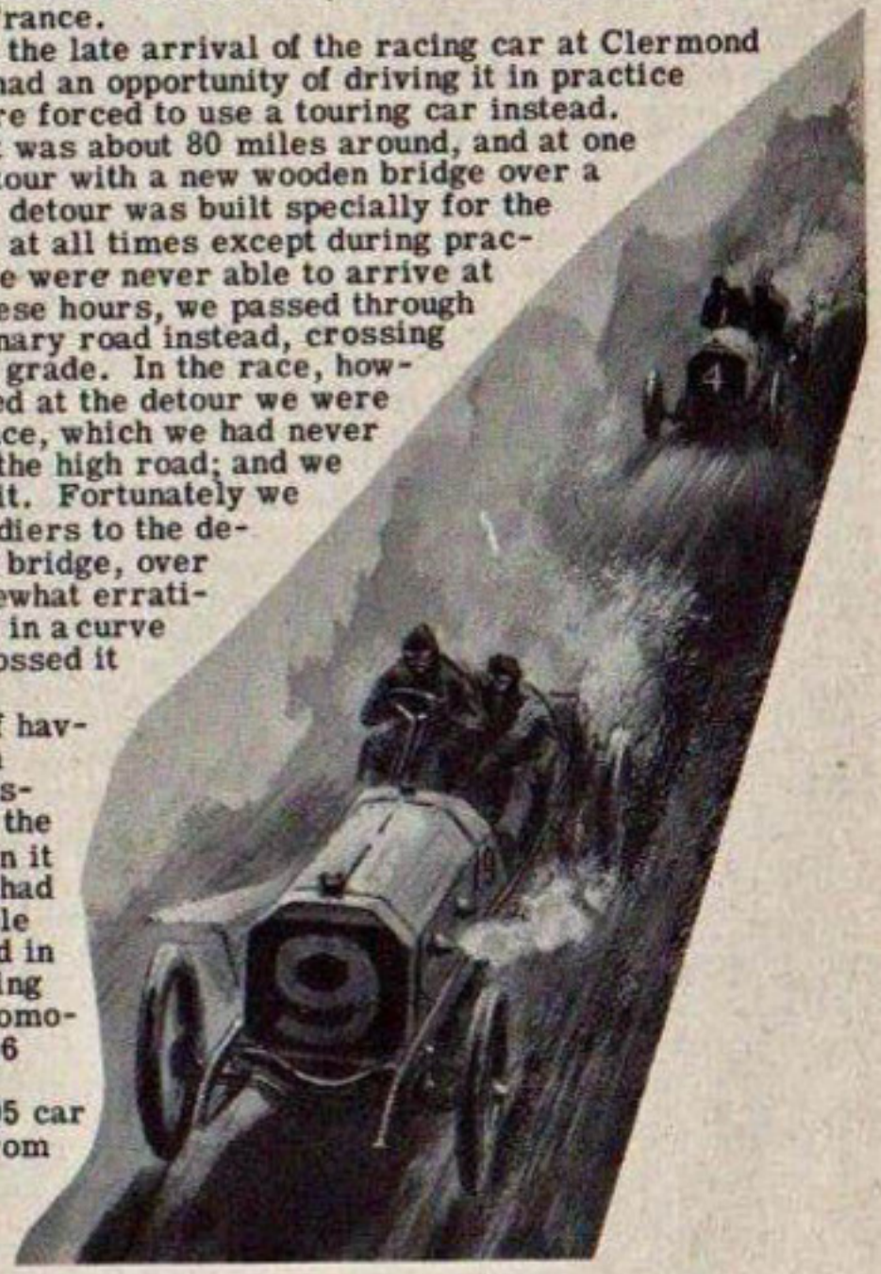
the level in the tank reached the overflow point after only thirty-five liters had been poured in. This left ten liters or two "bidons" on which the seals had been broken, and as "essence" could not be sold in France at that time in unsealed containers, it looked as if we would be expected to pay for the extra "gas". When we refused, the gendarmes were summoned. Fortunately one of these chevaliers had a slight acquaintance with English, and this, aided by many gesticulations, signs, grimaces, and Gallic shrugs, (to indicate the inferiority of the "essence") helped to effect a compromise. We proceeded on our way, after paying for the unused "essence" which was immediately appropriated by the thrifty attendant.

We stopped at the Hotel de Lyon in Clermont-Ferrand, where a group of international newspaper men were gathered to report on the race. Here the story of my adventure in purchasing "essence" was a current topic, and as my appearance, including moustache, cap and goggles, was somewhat like that of Baron De Caters who drove one of the German Mercedes, I was dubbed "Baron Quarante-cinq, conducteur de la voiture Americain." Under this title I received many letters - fan, and otherwise - before I left France.

On account of the late arrival of the racing car at Clermond-Ferrand, we never had an opportunity of driving it in practice on the course; so were forced to use a touring car instead. The Auvergne circuit was about 80 miles around, and at one place there was a detour with a new wooden bridge over a railroad track. This detour was built specially for the race, and was closed at all times except during practice hours, and, as we were never able to arrive at this detour during these hours, we passed through this zone on the ordinary road instead, crossing the railroad track at grade. In the race, however, when we arrived at the detour we were confronted with a fence, which we had never seen before, across the high road; and we almost crashed into it. Fortunately we were directed by soldiers to the detour with the wooden bridge, over which we drove somewhat erratically, as it was built in a curve and we had never crossed it before!

On account of having only low and high gears in the transmission, we were far to the rear in the race when it was stopped, but we had learned some valuable lessons which served in good stead in designing and building the Locomobile cars for the 1906 Vanderbilt Race.

After the 1905 car had been returned from



Sketches by
Peter Helck

France, it was received at the factory in Bridgeport, completely overhauled and put in condition for the elimination and final races for the Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island in that year.

It ran well in the elimination race, coming in second to a Pope Toledo driven by Bert Dingley.

A cracked cylinder the day before the 1905 final almost prevented the Locomobile from running in this race. However, with a full force working all night, new cylinders were mounted, the work being finished barely in time to enable us to get the car to the starting line only a few minutes before the race began. The car ran well in this race, without mechanical trouble, and finished third, which was the best performance of an American car in an international contest up to that date.

Two cars were built by the Locomobile Company to compete in the 1905 Race for the Vanderbilt Cup, one being held in reserve, and I was selected to drive for the company, ably assisted by Al Poole in the mechanician's seat.

In the elimination race which we won, we experienced some difficulty with a leak in the radiator. This was temporarily sealed by chewing gum made up of increments in plastic form donated by Al Poole and several obliging spectators on the course near Mineola, who graciously contributed their quotas and rested their jaws.

One of my most impressive experiences, and one that is still vivid in my memory, occurred just after the engine of the 1906 car was finished, and given into the custody of Al Poole and me. I recall I was so enthusiastic at the time that I recited Kipling to Al:

"Uplift am I when first in store
The new-made beastie stood;
Were we cast down, who breathed the word
Declarin' all things good?"

The scene comes back to me as if it were only yesterday - the newly arrived engine glistening on its test bed; in the foreground Alfred Poole with eyes and ears alert; close by, its proud father, A. L. Riker; next to him his assistant Albert Schulz, the godfather; and in the background at a respectful distance, Russell the shop superintendent and his machinists who built the engine, and who, mute, listened to the thunderous crescendo of the exhaust from those immense cylinders.

Another incident, somewhat amusing in retrospect, I confess, happened on the morning of the 1906 race, when our headquarters were at Lakeville, close to Willie K. Vanderbilt's place. I had left instructions with the chief mechanic the night before to have the car raised on wooden supports with all hub caps removed, so I might inspect the fastenings holding the wheel bearings in place to see if they were properly secured.

When Al Poole and I arrived about 4:30 A.M. to take the car to the starting line, it was not on the stands, and when I enquired the reason for this, I was assured by Al Riker the chief engineer of the Locomobile Company and designer of the car, that he had already checked the wheel mountings and found them in good order. Nevertheless I insisted that the car be raised and the wheel bearings exposed so that I might satisfy myself on this score! Accordingly, my wishes were complied with, even though Al Riker probably thought I was rather too meticulous in this respect.

The three Frayer-Miller 1906 air-cooled cars enjoyed the reputation of being extremely fast, especially the one driven by "transmission" Belden, and on that account I was eager to meet this well-known driver, but never had an opportunity to do so, until about a year after the 1906 race. It came about in this fashion. I went to Engel's Chop House in West 36th Street one evening for dinner, and sat at a table opposite a

man absorbed in his newspaper. As I reached the dessert period, my vis-a-vis looked over his paper, remarking, "Is your name Tracy?" To this I replied without reservation, "Yes", upon which he told me that his name was Belden.

We spent almost two hours reminiscing, and he recited how he came to be selected to drive one of the Frayer-Miller cars. It seems he had been Pittsburgh agent for this company during 1905, and had then acquired quite a local reputation as a fast driver, due to the numerous occasions on which he had to appear in the police courts to answer charges of driving at a "furious" rate. When the racing car was ready, he went to the factory in Columbus, Ohio, and drove it out to the suburbs, where he might test its speed and be relatively free from traffic interference. He then found the car was so speedy that he feared to drive it fast enough to engage high gear, but he was so well pleased with its performance that he decided to have it sent to Long Island, where he could drive at full speed on the course.

In due time his team was installed in a farmhouse and he began practice in the early morning hours. He had been on the course several times and his technique had improved, so that he was able to amble fast enough, not only to romp into "high", but also to accelerate in this gear to the limit of the car's speed. He was "rolling" in this manner on the Jericho Turnpike, on a bright morning about a week before the race, and was so impressed with the pace that he became convinced his car was the fastest vehicle ever constructed, and that higher terrestrial speed of locomotion was virtually impossible by any other car. In this frame of mind he concluded that, barring accident, the race was his.

While still indulging in this train of thought, he was rudely disturbed by having the Pope-Toledo, with Lytle driving, overtake and pass him as if he were stationary. Before he could collect his thoughts, however, the Locomobile next shot by him and then passed the Pope-Toledo as if it were at a standstill. This was too much for Belden, so he turned off the course at the next crossroad and went dejectedly back to his camp, trying to figure how such things could come to pass.

Interest has often been expressed as to the present whereabouts of the men who drove cars and made records and history in these early cup races. According to the writer's knowledge, most of them, including Walter Christie, Foxhall Keene, Herbert Lytle, Nazzaro, Lancia, Belden, Jenatzy, Albert Clement and Edgar Apperson have entered the Valley of the Shadow, while Bert Dingley, now Vice President of the Marmon Herrington Company, Wally Owen, George Robertson, and Montague Roberts are still in harness.

Although I did not take part in any contests after the 1906 Vanderbilt Race, nevertheless I maintained a lively interest in the sport and a keen affection for the Locomobile car I drove in that event. Consequently I was overjoyed to witness this same car driven to victory by my old friend George Robertson in the 1908 race for the Vanderbilt cup - the first time this famous trophy was won by an American car.

Since 1908, I have made many pilgrimages to pay my respects to this car, and after it was bought by the late Mr. Joseph Sessions of Bristol, Connecticut, about twenty years ago, I called on him many times to see it. On one of these occasions, Peter Helck, who with his son Jerry, accompanied me, was obviously smitten with the beauty of this fine piece of mechanism, so much so that Mr. Sessions assured him if he ever thought of parting with the "Loco", Peter would be given the first opportunity of acquiring it. After Mr. Sessions' passing, about four years ago, this promise was faithfully kept by Mrs. Sessions, and despite the most insistent pressure from other sources, Peter became the owner. As a fitting climax, I had the great

pleasure of piloting it from Bristol to Boston Corners, where it is now enshrined, and where I frequently see and admire it, thanks to Peter's friendship and kindness.

L'Envoi:

"Ralph De Olfi, speed king, lord of the beaten miles
Who risked his life for the plaudits of men
And the praise of a woman's smiles,
Crouched at the wheel - of burnished steel -
brass hilted, rubber shod,
He sped in the shroud of a thunder cloud,
and stepped on the "gas" by god!"

Sic transit gloria mundi.

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