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Character reading behind the wheel . . .

WHEN I was a very young journalist in London there was a councillor at the then Swiss Legation who looked like the very model of a textbook diplomat - well tailored, beautifully groomed, always with a fresh carnation in his buttonhole, armed with an immaculately rolled umbrella (to flag taxis down with), and with the additional advantage of having an immensely rich Scottish wife.

He owned a lovely house in Hampstead which was filled with beautiful paintings and objets d'art of all kinds.

As he had good reason to be grateful to my late father, he obviously decided to settle his "debt" by being extremely kind to me and by spoiling me in every way possible. He soon decided to make a Londoner out of me and to model me, as far as possible, after his fashion.

His name was Walter de Bourg, which was a somewhat free adaptation of his real Swiss

name, Vonburg (in one word).

One day in 1937 he telephoned and informed me that he was being transferred, as consul to Munich, and as he was not going to take all three of his cars, his Morris Oxford (a huge black six cylinder limousine) was mine to pick up at Moon's Garage in Baker Street.

I asked for two hours to think it over, as I did not then have a driving licence, but when the people I stayed with told me that when one is offered a car as a present one accepts, I then became the owner of my first car.

A Swiss mechanic, a Mr Odermatt, ran a small mews garage near Paddington Station and it was he who taught me to drive and to give hand signals and he also saw me safely through my driving test.

Not long after my passing the

driving test - in Hackney of all places - the Foreign Press Association arranged an outing to Blenheim Palace. Private motorists were encouraged to take, and fill, their cars and for the non-motorists among the crowd of foreign correspondents a coach was hired.

I invited a Latvian colleague and his wife to come with us, but a few miles from Oxford an incredible, nerve-shattering noise under the bonnet made me stop. I later learnt that a big end had gone. At the same time one of the tyres went flat and the radiator started to pour out all its hot, rusty water.

We were able to stop the FPA coach (which we had earlier overtaken) and to send our Latvian friends away in it, at the same time asking the driver to stop at the nearest garage and to send us a breakdown van. After a change of tyres, we were towed straight into the Morris Cowley works at the other end of Oxford. There we were told that they were willing to patch up the engine and radiator to enable us to return to London, but that this particular model Oxford had anyway never been a very successful one and that I had better get rid of it as quickly as possible.

My wife and I then bought sandwiches from one of those street stalls and sat down on the shores of the Isis to contemplate our motoring future. Had I gone to the trouble of taking a driving test, of concluding an insurance

agreement and of purchasing a road licence all in vain? Of course not.

We reached London towards midnight and that car ran through the night as smoothly as I imagined a Rolls Royce runs.

Two days afterwards I bought a much smaller car, trading in the Oxford for £10. Since then we have had Austins, Fiats, a Hillman Minx, two Jaguars, a Humber Super Snipe, a Citroen, several Renault Dauphines and from about 1956 onwards we remained faithful to a certain German make.

In my 43 motoring years I have probably driven about 650,000 kilometers, both in Britain and all over the Continent. But even now I would still prefer to drive through Hyde Park Corner or Piccadilly Circus in the rush hour to driving through down-town Zürich when it is relatively quiet. The average British motorist is so much more considerate and disciplined, so much more polite and prudent, so much less reckless and selfish than the average Swiss motorist tends to be.

In Britain the pedestrian is absolutely safe on a crossing, whereas in Switzerland he literally often risks his life. One could well say: "Show me how you drive and I'll tell you where you come from".

Has motoring got anything to do with certain streaks in the national character?

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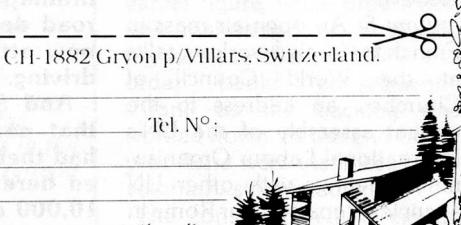
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