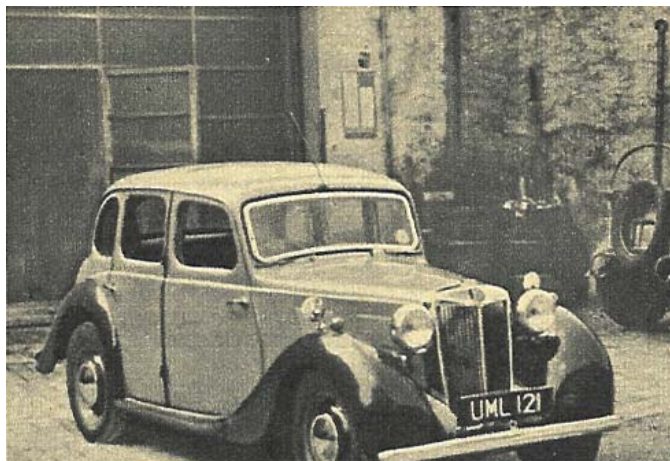


OVERSEAS ENCOUNTER

by L. A. Ayton

HOW TO HAVE AN ACCIDENT



The M.G. after its mishap (top), which was serious enough to require a new chassis frame; and after repair in Bulle, as good as new

BETTY and I were motoring gently after a shower, on our way from Fribourg to Geneva and France. Three days of rain in the mountains had evaporated our enthusiasm for Switzerland as quickly as our francs, and we were heading south in search of sunshine on the Côte d'Azur. Michael, aged eight, was in the back of the M.G., intent on collecting Swiss engine numbers from the railway near by, and we had not long passed through a little Swiss market town, Bulle, looking very pleasant in spite of the wetness.

Then things happened. My chain of thoughts ran:

What's he doing; he's going to hit us; he's hit us. "He" was a large pre-war Chevrolet with Swiss plates which suddenly, appeared down-hill on a bend in a four-wheel skid, sliding crabwise at us. I tried to take to the hills, but got only as far as the hedge when the "Chev" arrived. To our fascinated horror it seemed to take hours to reach us, but it did, and the driver and I were eventually about four feet apart, gazing balefully at each other across mangled machinery and serenaded by his horn, which had jammed.

We all got out rather slowly, but despite the mess in front the coachwork was still sound and no glass was broken—thank you, Mr. Triplex—except the driving mirror. Betty had banged it with her head. We had minor bruises and cuts, but fortunately nothing serious. Michael's first reaction was to grab one of the many strawberries scattered all over the road, which had been shot out of the other car.

Then the fun began. First on the scene was a Citroen hire car, returning to a garage. The driver was a most capable Frenchman who helped us to separate ourselves and get the Chevrolet out of the middle of the road. While we were doing this another large car appeared quickly round the same bend, braked at the same spot and skidded into the hedge in front of us.

No one took much notice of him. We'd got our own party on and, after all, he hadn't been invited to join, so we left him to it as there was no apparent damage to his car. Then a Morris with G.B. plates and a kindly crew



(IF YOU MUST) WHEN ABROAD

stopped, and Betty said she was never so glad to hear English spoken. They offered her comfort in the shape of tea, and as she and Michael seemed all right I went back to Bulle in another Citroen which offered help, to fix up with the police and the garage.

This second Citroen had a French owner on his holidays, accompanied by a very lovely lady. We stopped at the first Hotel de Ville we saw and presented ourselves to a large gendarme. Although the crash was off his beat, he took down all particulars and promised to do the necessary telephoning. Then he took me aside and asked if my French friend was involved in the accident. I confirmed that he was not, so with cheerful handshakes all round he was allowed to depart. As he drove off the gendarme dug me in the ribs with his elbow, pointed to the lovely blonde, and chuckled, "I'd like to have an accident with her." Privately, I agreed, but—not a word to Betty about this (thank you again, Mr. Triplex).

This particular Hotel de Ville most conveniently incorporated a café, where my gendarme friend pushed a couple of stiff prune juices into me and insisted on getting someone to bathe my knee while we waited for the breakdown van.

Robert, the hire car driver, turned up first with the Citroen, so we went back to the accident. The family seemed to be all right, and the local gendarme, even larger, was in charge, surrounded by quite a crowd. By now the strawberries had been pretty thoroughly trampled and must have been a horrifying sight to passers-by seeing the crumpled cars. Although I had missed some of the party, I soon gathered that the other driver had either admitted being to blame or that the weight of evidence was conclusively in my favour, for all seemed to be going well.

"Non Comprong—Anglais!"

To my mind there are two ways of dealing with such a situation. If one's French is not too good, I think it is best to remain aloof—distant but friendly. An occasional coarse expletive is permissible, to hint at the fires behind that icy exterior, but nothing more. The rest will soon find someone who can explain the situation in English.

On the other hand, if one's French works reasonably, it is much more fun to join in. Nobody listens to you, but they are quite obviously delighted to have you there. I did so and then came my interrogation by the genial gendarme. Passports, carnet, international licence, insurance and other papers were produced, all in order, and particulars were noted on a long accident report form.

The proceedings were interrupted several times by passing locals, all of whom the gendarme seemed to know and who came across to shake him by the hand, and by cars and coaches with British, French, Swiss, Danish, Swedish and Dutch plates stopping to offer assistance. Only two cars with G.B. plates passed without stopping, the occupants obviously considering that the whole business of

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—continued—

having an accident in foreign parts was rank bad form, and, anyway, they hadn't been introduced.

After quite a long time we neared the end of the form without incident, until there remained only three questions.

"What was your father's Christian name, M'sieur?" "James," I replied. "And your mother's?" "Mary." "And now, M'sieur, what was the before-marriage name of your mother?"

The sheer unexpectedness and apparent irrelevance of this question left me dumb for a moment. Then I remembered, and told him. It didn't register. I spelled it, **B-E-D-F-O-R-D**. A delighted smile appeared. "Bedford, the same as the truck," he chortled. The audience was equally pleased. This marvellous Englishman, whose mother's name before marriage was the same as the truck, was obviously without blame.

No Gnashing

From then on I could do no wrong. The contrite gentleman who had biffed us said, "It is so difficult to understand the English. Your car is accidented, your journey is terminated, yet you smile and do not rage." I asked him what else there was to do in the circumstances, but he couldn't say. Eventually we went back in the Citroen to Bulle, leaving the car to be towed in, and installed ourselves at the excellent Hôtel des Alpes, where M. Gaillard, the cheerful *patron*, restored our faith with good wine, good food and comfortable rooms clean as a whistle.

Next day was fine, so I went to find the M.G. at the Garage Moderne; Betty set out to look for a cup of tea, and Michael found himself a girl friend in the *patron's* young daughter, and also some new engines at the railway station opposite.

No doubt about it, the car was gravely accidented. The problem of spares came up, but when I said that I knew Heinz Keller, the M.G. distributor in Zurich, and a well-known trials driver, the effect in the garage was electrifying—something like walking into a small garage in England and saying that one was a personal friend of Henry Ford.

We telephoned Zurich and I told Mr. Keller what had happened, and then my garage and his spares department

got together. With an English parts list we sorted out the spares in both French and German to make sure.

Next morning, Thursday, a very helpful insurance inspector from the other owner's side came along, and really went to town on the broken bits. Anything 'damaged he condemned with the enthusiasm of a R.E.M.E. officer who thinks Ordnance have plenty of spares, and, among other parts, we eventually ordered a new chassis, left-hand front suspension, steering mechanism, a radiator and shell, a wing, a wheel and so on. These were sent by express, a few parts were flown out from England by Nuffield Exports, and the organization and co-operation everywhere were so wonderful that it all left me a little breathless.

Escape to Nice

By the Saturday we had had enough of Bulle, which is a nice little town with very nice people—but little with which to entertain the visiting foreigner. We hired a baby Renault for a week and set out for Nice and sunshine, but before departing I asked the garage when the M.G. would be ready, as I had to leave Switzerland the following week-end to get back to Dunkirk.

They said it would be ready on the following Saturday. I must have looked a bit doubtful, for they quickly added, "Of course it will be ready. We have promised."

Our trip with the Renault was grand but uneventful, and inspired a high regard for this sturdy little car. When we got back to the Hôtel des Alpes in Bulle on the following Saturday evening, one of the garage executives was there to meet us. He wanted to know if we'd had a good time and good weather, and how the Renault was. I interrupted to know how the M.G. was. "It is ready, of course. We promised."

And so it was. The panting had been finished that afternoon, and matched perfectly. The car looked like new, and much cleaner than a fortnight earlier. Everything worked as before, apart from some stiffness in the new steering, and we were lost in admiration at the workmanship and speed of the Swiss mechanics. After all the kindness we had received we thought very highly of Bulle and its inhabitants, but we were quite relieved to get the car back into France next day in one piece.

The moral of this story, therefore, is that if you *must* have an accident abroad, have it in Switzerland, where the garages are so good and the insurance companies so helpful. Above all, don't forget your mother's before-marriage name, even if you cannot be the son of a truck

Originally printed in *The Autocar*,
September 14, 1951