

Cynthia's Chauffeur

By LOUIS TRACY
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(Continued)

Cynthia stole a glance at Mrs. Devar's round figure and laughed. She did not help it, though she blushed furiously at what she deemed an involuntary evidence of her power.

"Oh, it sounds funny, I have no doubt," said the other, placidly good tempered, "but I really meant it at the moment. You have met Count Edouard Marigny, haven't you?"

"Yes, in Paris last month. In fact—"

Cynthia hesitated. She had rarely mentioned from the excitement of the racing and was not choosing her words quite happily. Mrs. Devar still suggested the sentence.

"In fact, it was he who recommended me to Mr. Vaurenen as your chauffeur. Yes, my dear Monsieur Marigny and I are old friends. He and my son are inseparable when Captain Devar is in Paris. Well, as I was saying, the Count offered to take me up to his ballroom, L'Étoile, and I was ready to go but the weather became stormy and an ascent from the Vélodrome impossible, or highly dangerous, at any rate."

Mrs. Devar cultivated the high pitched voice that she regarded as the hall-mark of good breeding, and in that silent rush down hill, Medenham could not avoid hearing each syllable. It was entirely pleasing to listen to Cynthia's praise of his car, and he was wroth with the other woman for wrenching the girl's thoughts away so promptly from a topic dear to his heart. Therein he erred, for the gods were being kind to him. Little recking how valuable the information he had just been given, he slackened his speed somewhat, and looked back at the seat.

"We are nearing Reigate now," he remarked with half turned head. "The town begins on the other side of the tunnel. Which do you wish to stop at first?"

"It seems to be that I have barely ended lunch," said Cynthia. "Shall we cut out our old-world Reigate inn, Mrs. Devar, and take tea at Crawley or Handcross?"

"By all means. How well you know the names of the towns and villages. Yet you have never before visited this part of England!"

"We Americans are nothing if not thorough," answered the girl. "I would not be happy if I failed to look up our route on the map. More than that, I note the name of each river we cross and try to identify every range of hills. You must test me and count my mistakes."

Mrs. Devar spread her hands in a gesture copied from her French acquaintances.

"My dear, I am the most ignorant person geographically. She watched his deft manipulation of levers and brakes, and fancied that his hands dwelt on the steering wheel with a caress.

"You have a real lovely automobile, Fitzroy," she said, "and I have a sort of notion that you are devoted to it. May I ask—is it your own car?"

"Cynthia laughed merrily, but made no reply.

Medenham bent over the levers and the car danced on through Reigate. Mrs. Devar impressed him as a despicable type of tuft-hunter. His acquaintance with the species was not extensive; he had read of elderly dowagers who asked out their slender means by introducing the daughters of rich Americans to English society and the thing was not in itself wholly indefensible; but he felt sure that Cynthia Vaurenen needed no such social sponsor, while the mere bracketing of Count Edouard Marigny with "Jimmy" Devar caused him to regard this unknown Frenchman with a suspicion that was already active enough so far as Mrs. Devar was concerned. And the Marchioness of Belfort, too! A decrepit old

cadger with an infallible system for roulette!

Perhaps his mood communicated itself to the accelerator. At any rate, the Mercury seemed to sympathize, and it was a lucky hazard that kept the glorious stretch of road between Reigate and Crawley free of police traps on that memorable Wednesday. The car simply leaped out of Surrey into Essex, the undulating parklands on both sides of the smooth highway appearing to float past in stately procession, and there was a fine gleam in Cynthia's blue eyes when the first check to a splendid run came in the outskirts of Crawley.

She leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Tea here, please," she said. Then she added, as if it were an after thought: "If you promise to let her rip in that style after we reach the open country again, I shall sit on the front seat."

The words were almost whispered into his ear. Certainly they were not meant to enlighten Mr. Devar, and Medenham, turning, found his face very near the girl's.

"No bribe!" he answered, and not until both were settled back in their seats did they realize that either had done anything unusual.

Medenham, however, took his cup of tea in a chauffeur, helping himself to bread and butter from a plate deposited on the bonnet by a waiting maid.

When the ladies reappeared from the interior of a roadside restaurant he was in his place, ready to start. He did not offer to put them in the car, adjust the wraps, and close the door. If Miss Vaurenen liked to keep her promise, that was her affair, but no action on his part would hint of prior knowledge that she intended to ride in front.

Nevertheless, he could not repress a smile when he heard Mrs. Devar's distinctly chilly, "Oh, not at all!" in response to Cynthia's polite apology for deserting her until they neared Brighton.

Somewhat, the car underwent a subtle change when the girl took her seat by his side. From a machine quivering with life and power it became a triumphant chariot. By sheer perfection of mechanical energy it had bridged the gulf that lay between the millionaire's daughter and the hired man, since there could be no question that Cynthia Vaurenen placed Viscount Medenham in no other category. Indeed, his occasional lapses from the demeanor of a lower social grade might well have earned him her marked disfavor, and as there was no shred of personal vanity in his character, he gave all the credit to the sentient creature of steel and iron that was so ready to respond to his touch.

Swayed by an unconscious telepathy, the girl almost interpreted his unspoken thought. She watched his deft manipulation of levers and brakes, and fancied that his hands dwelt on the steering wheel with a caress.

"You have a real lovely automobile, Fitzroy," she said, "and I have a sort of notion that you are devoted to it. May I ask—is it your own car?"

He was on the point of saying something different, but managed to twist the second half of the sentence in time. What would Miss Vaurenen have thought had he continued: "I sent my chauffeur to England, and on receipt of his report, I had this car shipped within a week?"

There are problems too deep for speculation when a man is guiding a ton of palpitating metal along a hedge-lined road at forty miles an hour. This was one.

Cynthia, knowing nothing of any "new American engine" would rather die than confess her ignorance. Moreover, she was pondering a problem of her own. If it was not his master's car, he might be open to a bargain.

"Simmonds is an old friend of yours, I suppose?" she said.

"Yes, I have known him some years. We were in South Africa together."

"In the war, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"How dreadful! Have you ever killed anybody?"

"Not with petrol, I am happy to state."

There was an eloquent pause. Cynthia examined his reply, and discovered that it covered a good deal of ground. Perhaps, too, it conveyed the least little bit of a snub. Hence, her tone stiffened perceptibly.

"I mentioned Simmonds," she explained, "because I think my father might arrange—to the satisfaction of all parties, of course—that you should carry through this present tour, while Simmonds would come into our service when we return to London."

Medenham laughed. In his way, the compliment was graceful, and well meant, but the utter absurdity of his position was now thrust upon him with overwhelming force.

"I am very much obliged to you, Miss Vaurenen," he said, venturing to look once more into those alluring eyes, so shy, so daring, so divinely wise and so childishly candid. "If circumstances permitted, there is nothing I would like better than to take you through this Paradise of a June England; but it is quite impossible. Simmonds must bring his car to Bristol, as I positively cannot be absent from town longer than three days."

Cynthia did not pout. She nodded appreciation of the weighty if undescribed business that called Fitzroy and his Mercury back to London, but in her heart she mused at the strangeness of things, and wondered if this smiling hand produced many chauffeurs who landed it in such phrases.

Up and down Handcross Hill they whirled, treating that respectable eminence as if it were a snow bump in the path of a flying toboggan. Medenham had rounded the South Downs as a boy, and he was able to point out Chiscombury Ring, the Devil's Dyke, Ditching Beacon, and the rest of the round shouldered giants that guard the Weald. In the mellow light of a superlatively fine afternoon the red and green—decked too with ribbons of white roads and tufts of rose laden hedgerows.

Cynthia forgot many times, and he hardly ever remembered, that he was a chauffeur, and the ladies, too, were disregarded until the sun sparkled in their eyes as they emerged from the great gap which the Devil forbore to us when he planned to swamp a land of churches by cutting the famous dyke.

Then the girl awoke from a day dream, and the car was stopped on the pretense that this marvelous landscape, must be viewed in silence and at rest. She rejoined Mrs. Devar, and began instantly to expatiate on the beauty of Sussex, so Medenham ran slowly down the hill through Parham and Preston into Brighton.

And there, sitting in the wide porch of the Hotel Metropole, was a slim, handsome Frenchman who sprang up with all the vivacity of his race when the Mercury drew up at the steps, dusty after its long run, but circumspect as though it had just quitted the garage.

"Mrs. Devar, Miss Vaurenen! what a delightful surprise!" cried the stranger with an accompaniment of wide smiles and hat flourishing. "Who would have thought of meeting you here? Never, done, I was moping in solitude when suddenly the sky opens and you appear."

"Dens ex machina, in fact, Monsieur Marigny," said Cynthia, shaking hands with this overjoyed gentleman.

Mrs. Devar, not understanding cackled loudly.

"We've had a lovely run from town, Count Edouard," she gushed, "and it is just too awfully nice of you to be in Brighton. Now, don't say you have made all sorts of engagements for the evening."

"Such as they are they go by the board, dear lady," said the gallant Count, who had good teeth, and showed them in a succession of grins.

"Tea tomorrow morning, Fitzroy," said Cynthia, turning on the steps as she was about to enter the hotel. He lifted his cap.

"The car will be ready, Miss Vaurenen," said he.

He got down and scowled, yes, actually scowled at a porter who was hauling too strongly at the straps and buckles of the dust-covered trunks.

"Damage the car's paint, and I'll raise bigger blisters on yours," was what he said to the man. But his thoughts were on Count Edouard Marigny, and, like the people's discussion of the Derby, they took the form of question and answer.

"When is a coincidence not a coincidence?" he asked himself. "When it is prearranged," was the answer.

"Just take a squint at them valves, will you?—ever seen anything like 'em before? Of course you haven't. Don't look like valves, eh? Can you break 'em, can you warp 'em, can you pit 'em. None of your shoulders or kinks to choke it up—is there?—and the same with the exhaust. Would you ever have a mushroom valve again after you've once cast your peepers over this arrangement? Now, if I took up acrotting—if I wanted to fly the Channel—"

He stopped abruptly, having seen his master standing in the open doorway.

"By gad, Dale," cried Medenham, "I have never heard your tongue wagging in that fashion before."

Dale was flustered.

"Beg pardon, my lord, but I was only—" he began.

"Only using the cut-out, I fancy. Come here, I want you a minute."

The other chauffeurs suddenly discovered that they had great business elsewhere. They vanished. Dale thought it necessary to explain.

"One of them chaps has a new French car, my lord, and he was blowing so loudly about it that I had to take him down a peg or two."

Medenham grew interested. Like every keen motorist, he could "talk shop" at all times.

"What sort of car?"

"A 59 Du Vallon, my lord. It is the first of its class in England, and I rather think his governor is running it for show."

"Indeed, who is he?"

"A count. Somebody or other, my lord. I did hear his name—"

"Not Count Edouard Marigny?" said Medenham, with a sharp emphasis that startled Dale.

"That's him, my lord, I hope I haven't done anything wrong."

Medenham, early in life, had formed the habit of not expressing his feelings when really vexed, and it stood him in good stead now. Dale's blunder was almost irreparable, yet he could not find it in his heart to blame the man for being an enthusiast.

"You have put me in a degree of a fix," he said at last. "This Frenchman is acquainted with Miss Vaurenen. He knows she is here, and will probably see her off in the morning. If his chauffeur recognizes the car he will be sure to speak of it. That gives the whole show away."

"I am very sorry, my lord—"

"Dash it all, there you are again. But it is largely my own fault. I ought to have warned you, though I little expected this sort of a mix-up. In future, Dale, while this trip lasts, you must forget my title. Look here, I have brought you your winnings over Eyot—can't you rig up some sort of a yarn that I am a sporting friend of yours, and that you were just trying to be funny when you addressed me as 'my lord'?"

"You have an opportunity, tell that Count Marigny's man that your job is taken temporarily by a driver named Fitzroy. By the way, it is the chauffeur a Frenchman, too."

"No, my lord—"

Dale caught Medenham's eye, a very odd eye at that instant. "No, sir. He's just a fitter from the London agency."

"Well, we must trust to luck. He may not remember me in my chauffeur's kit, which is beastly uncomfortable, by the way. I must bet you a summer rig. Here is your money—five to one I look. Don't lose sight of those two fellows, and spend the half sovereign on them. If you can fill that chap with beer tonight he may have a head in the morning that will keep him in bed too late to cause any mischief. When we meet in Bournemouth and Bristol say nothing to anybody about either car or me."

"I mentioned Simmonds," she explained, "because I think my father might arrange—to the satisfaction of all parties, of course—that you should carry through this present tour, while Simmonds would come into our service when we return to London."

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It was a perfect June evening, the fitting sequel to a day of unbroken sunshine. A marvelous amber light hovered beyond the level of the sea to the west; an exquisite blue suffused the horizon from south to east, deepening from sapphire to ultra-marine as it blended with the soft shadows of a summer's night. He found himself comparing the sky's southeasterly tint with the azure depths of Cynthia Vaurenen's eyes, but he shook off that fantasy quickly, crossed the roadway and promenade, and propping himself against the railings, turned a resolute back on romance.

He did not gain a great deal by this maneuver, since his next active thought was centred in a species of quest for the particular window among all those storey rows through which Cynthia Vaurenen might even then be gazing at the shining ocean.

He looked at his watch. Half-past nine.

"I am behaving like a blithering idiot," he told himself. "Miss Vaurenen and her friends are either on the pier listening to the band, or sitting over their coffee in the glass cage behind there. I'll wire Simmonds in the morning to hurry up."

A man descended the steps of the hotel and walked straight across King's Road. A light gray overcoat, thrown wide on his shoulders gave a lavish display of frilled shirt, and a gray Homburg hat was set rakishly on one side of his head. In the half light Medenham at once discerned the regular, waxen-skinned features of Count Marigny, and during the next few seconds it really seemed as if the Frenchman were making directly for him. But another man, short, rotund, very erect of figure, and strutting in gait, came from the interior of a "shelter" that stood a little to the right of Medenham's position on the rails.

"Hello, Marigny," said he jauntily.

The Count looked back towards the hotel. His ruddy acquaintance clanked. The effort squeezed an eyeglass out of his right eye.

"At pas pour, mon vieux," cried he in very colloquial French. "My mother sent a note to say that the fair Cynthia has retired to her room to write letters. I have been waiting here ten minutes."

Now, it chanced that Medenham's wide-spread touring in France had rubbed up his knowledge of the language. It is ever the car that needs training more than the tongue, and in all likelihood he would not have caught the exact meaning of the words were it not for the hap of recent familiarity with the accents of all sorts and conditions of the French speaking folk.

"Jimmy Devar," he breathed, and his amazement lost him Marigny's muttered answer.

But he heard Devar's confident outburst as the two walked off together in the direction of the West Pier.

"You are growing positively nervous, my dear Edouard. And why? The affair arranges itself admirably. I shall be always on hand, ready to turn up exactly at the right moment. What the deuce, this is the luck of a lifetime. . . ."

The squeaky, high-pitched voice—a masculine variant of Mrs. Devar's ultra-fashionable intonation—died away midst the chatter and laughter of other pedestrians. Medenham's first impulse was to follow and listen, since Devar had yielded to the common delusion of imagining that none except his companion on the scene would that night understood a foreign language. But he swept the notion aside ere it had well presented itself as a means of solving an astounding puzzle.

"No, dash it all, I'm not a private detective," he muttered angrily.

"Why should I interfere? Confound Simmonds, and I— that railway van! I have a good mind to hand the car over to Dale in the morning and return to town by the first train."

If he really meant what he said he ought to have gone back to his hotel, played billiards for an hour, and sought his bedroom with an easy conscience. He was debating the point when the conceit intruded itself that Cynthia's pretty head was at that moment bent over a writing table in a certain well lighted corner apartment of the second floor, so he compromised with his half-formed intent, whisked round to face the sea again, and lighted another cigarette from the glowing end of its predecessor. Some part of his unaccountable irritation took wings with the cloud of smoke.

"Blessed if I can tell why I should worry," he commended. "Never saw the girl before today. . . . shall never see her again if I put Dale in charge— Her father must be a special sort of fool, though, to trust her to the care of that Devar woman. . . . What was it that rotter said?— 'The affair arranges itself admirably.' And he would be 'always on hand.' What is arranging it, my Devar? . . . And why should Jimmy Devar be ready, if need be, to turn up exactly at the right moment? I suppose the answer to the first bit of the acoustic simple enough, Cynthia Vaurenen is to become the Countess Marigny, and the Devar gang stands in on the cash proceeds. Oh, a nice scheme! This Frenchman is posted as to the tour. By the most curious of coincidences, he will reappear at Bournemouth, or Bristol, or in the Wye Valley. What more natural than a day's run in company? . . . Ah, I've got it. Jimmy is to come along when Marigny thinks that Cynthia will take a seat in the 59 Du Vallon for a change—just to try the new French car. . . . By gad, I shall have a word to say there. . . . Steady, now George Augustus! Won't you, keep a tight hand on the reins. Why in thunder should you concern yourself with the wretched business, anyhow?"

It was a marvelously still night beneath him, on the asphalted path, nearly level with the stone-strawed beach, passed a young couple. The man's voice came up to him.

"Oh, Charlie dear, I shall never be first then. . . ."

A black arm was suddenly silhouetted across the shoulders of a white blouse, whose wearer received a reassuring hug.

"Let's reckon up," said the owner of the arm—July, August, September—three months, sweet-heart. . . ."

Medenham had never given a thought to marrying until his father hinted at the notion during dinner the previous evening, and he had laughed at it, being absolutely heart-whole. There was something irresistibly comical then about the Earl's bland theory that Fairholme House needed a sprightly countess, yet now, twenty-four hours later, he could extract no shred of humor from the idyl of a draper's assistant. It seemed to be a perfectly natural thing that these lovers should be making. Of what else should they whisper on this mid-summer's night, when the glowing already bore the promise of dawn, and the glory of the sea and sky spread quiet harmonies through the still, out air?

(To be continued)

British Control of all British Firms

At the British Association of the Chambers of Commerce, in London, a few days ago, a proposition advanced by Sheffield delegates, was adopted. It asks the government to enact a law requiring British control of all companies and firms, producing, manufacturing or trading in the United Kingdom, in India or in the Colonies, such control to exist both in ownership and management.

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