

*Randal Wadsworth*

"Are you try in' to tell me my men don't know a Jaguar when they see one?"

"Yessir, that's exactly what I'm trying to tell you."

It was the spring of 1957. Pulled over by two cruisers, the Owner of a red two-seater had been obliged to take one trooper aboard and follow the other to the somewhat twee Tudor cottage that housed the State Police outside of Worcester, Mass., where he learned that he was suspected of stealing a Jaguar from Framingham the night before. No one seemed to be impressed by registration papers, a European customs book, and factory documents that all called the Owner's car an Austin-Healey.

"One more word outta you, Punk, and you're in the holding pen. See that bench over there? Sidown and shut up while we look into this."

The Punk sat down, and—his capacity for escapism being then what it is to this day—was soon lost in nostalgic reverie, calling up vignettes from the shared experience of the car and its Owner.

For example, there was their First escape from central London, where they had been introduced. Stuck in hot June traffic, both about to boil over, they were helped to the Vauxhall Bridge by not one, but two Bobbies, who helped them to a wrong-way shortcut down a one-way street. Or the attendant in an Italian parking garage who noticed a slight irregularity in the car's exhaust note and spent the next ten minutes synchronizing its twin carbs to perfection with nothing more than a screwdriver and a pair of very good ears.

But their best adventures had all occurred in France, which was not at all what the Owner had anticipated. A friend who had done the Grand Tour was full of such rules as, "Don't honk at the slow-moving Frenchman on a moped ahead of you. That means you've seen him, so he reckons you won't run him down. If you want him to move over, rev your motor." Other travelers and his own readings in French fiction had led him to expect innumerable run-ins with pettifogging little functionaries. And of course there's the crack in *Pygmalion* that the French don't so much mind what you do so long as you pronounce it correctly. Would the Owner's American French make him an object of derision?

Still, for a first-time visitor, the Owner had one great advantage. His girl-friend of the period had arranged for him to start his sojourn with a visit to the family in Beaune with whom she had spent the previous summer on a college exchange plan. Told that the father, a partner in the cellars of Louis Latour, was especially fond of Benson and Hedges cigarettes, the Owner had provided himself with two cartons, along with some English chocolates for Madame.

Armed in this fashion, the Owner presented himself at Dover, fully expecting to take a ferry to Calais, from which port he had carefully mapped the route to Beaune. He should have

realized that you go to France on the ferry you have, not on the ferry you might want or wish to have. The next boat was for Boulogne, where the customs shed did not disappoint. It was swimming in functionaries who seemed to take perverse delight in holding people up. Only the third or fourth car back, the Healey waited more than a half hour for its turn.

And turn is the right word, for the pair of agents working this particular queue were a double act, straight out of vaudeville or Laurel and Hardy. They walked in step, leaning left and right in unison. Their gestures were invariably either identical or fully complementary, their faces turning sometimes toward each other, sometimes toward their audience. They finished each other's sentences. And, much to his surprise, they flattered the owner by addressing him in French.

Stan: "Do you have your customs book for the car?"

The Owner handed it over.

Oilie: "May we check the serial number?"

The Owner popped the bonnet latch.

Stan, who knew just where to look, said, "BN2L232725."

Oilie, reading from the customs form, said, "Okay."

Stan, who clearly knew his stuff, dropped the aluminum bonnet lid back into place. He didn't press it home at the center, which would have caused the corners of its front edge buckle upward.

Stan, now again side by side with Oilie, who had handed back the customs book:

"Anything to declare?"

Oilie: "Alcohol? Cigarettes?"

"Cigarettes, yes. Two cartons."

Stan and Oilie, four eyebrows raised, the corners of two mouths and two chins dropped, four palms turned outward in the very picture of Gallic astonishment:

"Two Cartons? You're allowed two packs."

The Owner explained that the weeds were for his host in Beaune, whom he named.

Stan: "That explains itself."

Oilie: "Benson and Hedges, eh?"

Now more in the manner of Abbott and Costello, falling over each other in their haste to get it out, the two explained that the owner's host was in charge of exports to England from Latour. He himself on trips to London, and the English reps on trips to Beaune, were responsible for bootleg Benson and Hedges in quantities that shamed the Owner's two cartons. A little tobacco tax lost, wine sales encouraged: the Republic could only gain in the process.

Two bodies inclined at the same angle toward the car. Two right hands each touched the index finger to the corner of the right eye. The backs of two left hands motioned the Owner toward the way out. These guys, who had spent a good quarter hour on the previous car, never even opened the Healey's boot. Welcome to France.

"Hey, Punk!"

The Owner/Punk snapped back to the present.

"The trunk's locked. We need your key."

If it had occurred to the Owner/Punk to ask for a warrant, he wouldn't have dared. He gave up the key.

Some contrast. A few clicks south of Boulogne, toward sundown of that first day, BN2L232725 came upon a road block supervised by Gendarmes, the national police. The three officers on the Owner's side of the barrier were a study in fashionable intimidation. Paired with their menacing black motorcycles, they could have been extras from Cocteau's *Orphee*. All in black, they sported puttees and the flared riding breeches of the cavalry era. Helmets slung on the handlebars of their bikes, each sported the signature cylindrical, short-billed *kepi*, cocked in each case at a rakish angle. Over the left shoulder, slung with studied nonchalance, each sported the signature short cape. And, slung no less casually over the right shoulder, each sported a stylish little submachine gun. The Owner was impressed.

He was also annoyed, for, even though he was at the head of the line, it appeared from the work underway that he'd be there some time. Worse, the head car in the opposing queue, a Volkswagen Beetle with German tags, had its bright lights on, pointed blindingly right at the Healey.

The Owner turned on his lights, flicked on the high beams, and angled the car right at the offender. No response. Not by chance, the Healey was fitted with a Lucas Flame Thrower spotlight, its range about half a mile. The Owner flashed it several times. This had no effect on the VW, but it did attract the fuzz.

As the muzzle of his weapon swung across the coaming of the Healey's cockpit, the Gendarme said in French, "Did I just see you flash your spotlight?" Answered in the affirmative, he drew out a ticket form. Pointing to the numbered line that read '*We pas employer les feux d'eclairage eblouissants*' he asked, "*Comprenez?*" Answered in the affirmative, but leaving nothing to chance, he turned the ticket to the English side, checked "Do not use blinding lights," and started to write up the fine. But when the Owner directed his attention to the VW across the way, he muttered, "*Alors, un sale boche,*" tore up the ticket, and strode off to nail the hapless German.

At about this point in his nostalgia trip, the Owner/Punk was brought back to the present by a commotion at the sergeant's desk, where a young woman carrying a greasy paper bag had attracted a crowd. And no wonder, for the bag contained fried donuts, the good old fashioned kind

that Albert Pyle no doubt approves. Mugs materialized, and the troopers and their helpers dug in.

The Owner had started from Long Island before six on nothing but some stale coffee in a cousin's kitchen. It was now after nine, and he was hungry as well as scared. Aware that suspects don't rate handouts, he tried not to think about food, but to no avail. A gastronomic recollection rose unbidden to the surface.

It began with an instance of what the French call *l'auto stop*. Near Le Havre, on the way to meet a traveling companion, the Owner had been flagged down by two soldiers in combat gear, each with a large duffel bag. Intrigued, the Owner stopped, and in short order one duffel bag was in the boot, the other was jammed into the rear of the cockpit, and the troops were stacked in the passenger seat. The two, who were from adjoining farms, were going home on a three-day leave before shipping out for the war in Algeria.

The ride lasted only long enough for a spirited assault by the Frenchmen on the imbecility of American motor racing, which they imagined all took place on boring ovals. The Owner scarcely had time to fill them in on the current sports car racing scene—Lime Rock, Torrey Pines, Laguna Seca—before their arrival; and of course he could not get around the absence, at that time, of any *grand prix* racing in North America. The soldiers were tactful enough, though, to concede that the Healey was pretty neat—they called it a *jolie bagnole*—and each enjoyed a spin at the wheel around the neighborhood once they had survived the rapturous greeting by their two families.

Invited to a Sunday feast for the warrior sons, the Owner demurred, for he was on his way to pick up a traveling companion, whose ship was due the Saturday morning. The families would hear nothing of it. Did the Owner think they would plan a banquet that couldn't handle an extra pair? Not wanting to give offense—and rationalization being the order of the day—the Owner accepted, sure that his friend would raise no objection.

When the Americans arrived around noon on Sunday, there were maybe fifty guests clustered around a whole pig roasting on a spit over hardwood coals. The womenfolk were busy ferrying all manner of dishes to two substantial trestle tables nearby. For the next half hour or so, the Healey was kept busy with short demonstration spins, until the pig was wrestled onto its own table for carving and the *gourmandizing* could begin.

First came fish soup and seafood pie, idiomatic enough since the Channel was only about ten miles distant. Then came the roast pig, supplemented if one chose from a steaming cauldron of pork with apples, cream, and *calvados*, the apple brandy of the region. In case one should not be wholly *pigged-out*, there were on offer hams cured in several different ways, each touted as indispensable to the full experience of Normandy. There were salads, of course, and, to finish, strawberries and a selection of pies, tarts, cakes, and little misshapen farmhouse cheeses of the *camembert* family. This was all helped on its way with copious draughts of wine, both white and red, consumed with relish by all of drinking age—say, five and up.

Finally, it was time to toast the departing heroes. The two fathers led off, followed by a raft of relatives. And each toast required another shot *of calvados*, served by several of the guests from their own unlabeled bottles. Challenged to comment on differences among the competing stills, the Americans were soon unable to discriminate, or even scarcely to remain upright. They joined the growing group, mostly male, looking for a convenient tree, building, or haystack to lean against for a little snooze.

Awakened later by one of their hosts, the somnolent pair were told, "Around here we have an expression for when you conk out like that. We say you've fallen among the apples"—which seemed apt enough, given the role *of calvados* in their nap.

At this point in his reverie, hungry and tired from his long early-morning drive, the Owner/Punk was about to fall among the local apples, when he was jerked to his feet and shoved toward the Sergeant's desk.

Pushing the car's documents across the desk, the Sergeant said, "Take your Headley or whatever it is and clear outta here. You've wasted enough of our time."

Back outside, the Owner noticed that the troopers had thought of everything: in checking for the serial number, they had managed to bend the Healey's aluminum bonnet lid, another good reason for wishing to be a long way from Worcester.

The Owner drove off in a mood that, forty-eight years down the road, looks a lot like incipient pathological francophilia.

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