The road was narrow, the conditions lethal, and as I sat at the starting line I knew I'd have to drive faster than I had ever done before to win the race and the bet. Then the flag dropped, the Bugatti surged forward, and as my speed increased the bridge loomed ahead

By Count Zichy

My daredevil drive - with £20,000 at stake

I contemplated the sparkling new azure Bugatti T35B 2.3-litre compressor, or 'Targa Florio' as it was known, with delight, pride and awe mixed with trepidation as it was winched off the transporter lorry by my head mechanic, Steve, and a pair of apprentices. It had arrived from Molsheim by rail two days previously and the day before I had driven it in two and a half practice runs over the course – one getting-to-know-you flip and another at about half speed, 3000 revs or 110 kph. On the third run I was flagged down and, despite my violent protests, the French chef d'equipe loaned by the factory had whisked away the car to change the transmission ratio. Even feeling my way cautiously, the ferocious power of the eight-cylinder engine had impressed me more than I cared to admit. Frankly, it had scared the daylight out of me.

And now the big moment was approaching inexorably. In just under an hour I would be sliding into the driving seat. Had it been a ghastly mistake to acquire the fastest off-the-peg racing car money could buy, to participate in an event the mind-boggling improbability of which even Ettore Bugatti's genius could not have foreseen? As a lad, I had watched with awe his splendid cars racing and winning on the tracks for which they were destined: Montlhéry, Brooklands, Monza, the Avus . . . But these now suddenly appeared a piece of cake compared with what I was about to undertake – namely to drive the T35B flat-out on a lousy Balkan country road. It was not only a gross form of *lése majesté* but also unquestionably suicidal.

* * *

The location of the event I am about to relate, was Hungary in the year 1928. That attractive country had remained a backwater of Europe through the middle ages. My illustrious great-uncle, the Austrian Chancellor, Prince Metternich, had remarked sourly: 'Asia begins at the Hauptstrasse-Landstrasse' – to wit, the eastern suburbs of Vienna. Sited at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Asia, Hungarians struggled for nine centuries with east-west/north-south invasions and, in the process, paid scant attention to the few, mainly Roman built, roads spanning their homeland. In fact the worse the roads, the more damage could be inflicted on invaders, who could only advance slowly allowing time to organise resistance.

On that barbaric road system, the first 'Safari Rally'-type motoring events were held in the twenties. No other form of event could be held since *all* roads – the 'good', the bad and the downright lousy – were 'safari' type. The events were as much fun then as they are today, with the added hazard that steering, brakes, suspension, and tyres were relatively primitive by comparison. The equivalent of a 'ton' was 100 kilometres: 62.1 mph, which was considered fast. 'Ton-up', say 120 kilometres, was *bloody* fast. Only the most powerful sports cars reached this speed and only when driven by maniacs since the roads were so-so at 60, dicey at 80 and lethal at 100 – *kilometres*, not miles.

An annual event was a rally organised by a North-Eastern car club in which one of the features was a 10 kilometres (6½ miles) speed trial with a one kilometre flying start. This took place on a so-called 'straight' stretch of road, more like an 'avenue' actually, because the verge was lined at twenty yards intervals on both sides, with apple trees which went 'swish' as one passed them. One learned to gauge one's speed quite accurately by the frequency and rhythm of the 'swishes'. Hugging the verge were five feet wide by four feet deep drainage ditches, a convenient size for getting trapped in after skidding off a muddy road on a bend with a blow-out and ending up with the car, wheels spinning in the air, atop of one like an overzealous blonde. Upturned cars in ditches were a familiar part of the landscape in those days.

The overall width of the avenue was five yards with an eight feet wide centre strip or hardcore *'pave'*. This consisted of loose chippings dumped on the ancient foundations and spread around with shovels until it appeared level – well, more or less. It was then left to the hapless traffic to pound and roll it into some kind of surface. If this caused a rollercoaster effect to cars travelling at forty which grew worse the faster one drove, it was hard cheese but couldn't be helped. Anyway, who cared? And who would want to drive faster than forty?

There were a few mild curves in either direction along the way, but nothing serious and at 90 kph or so there was no need to decelerate. However, at the half-way mark was a stream spanned by a viciously arched – to allow for extensive spring flooding – humpback bridge, narrowed to barely ten feet clearance between low stone parapets on either side and followed sixty yards further on by a sharpish bend to the left. Even in a large touring car it was advisable to reduce speed or the passengers in the rear seat were bounced into the air. Some had even been known to have missed the car on their way down and landed on their – er – in the road.

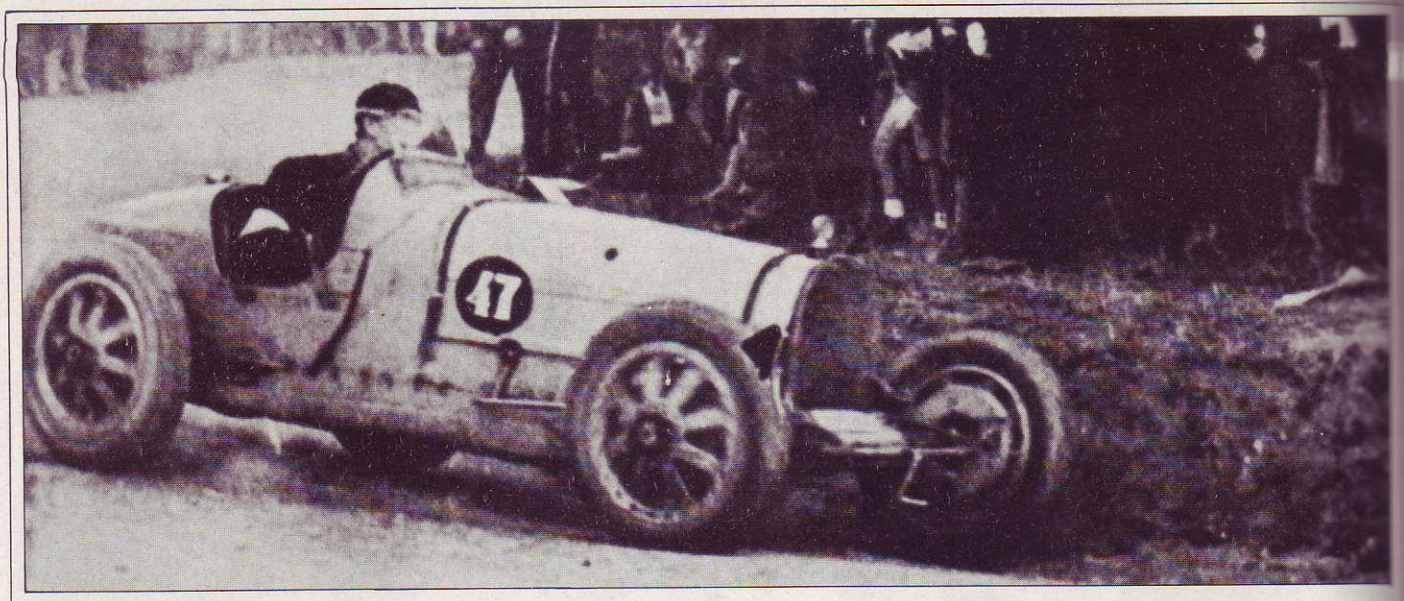
The hard centre, flanked by five foot wide cambered 'soft shoulders' – four inches of dust (or mud, according to season), was wide enough to accommodate one carriage, coach or cart. There were jagged four-inch high kerbs where the centre, elevated by centuries of topping up, ended and the dust shoulder began. One came off it with a bump, but when returning to the *pavé*, the tyres got trapped beside the kerb and had to be coaxed onto the centre – a delicate manoeuvre at speed during which one battled with the berserk steering wheel. The dust kicked up on such occasions was impenetrable and woe betide any vehicle which happened to be in the path of a car with its totally blinded driver emerging from the cloud. Fortunately, such occasions were rare, as at that time there were not more than a couple of thousand cars in the entire land; and anyway, four of them were mine.

Such was the course. The Romans who built it would have condemned it for a chariot race and only a lunatic would try racing Bugattis on it. And until then, no-one had tried.

Nevertheless, the record set up the previous year by the grand old man of Hungarian rallying, Swiss-born Walter Delmar, was a sensational 118.3 kph driving a 4½-litre Steyr Sport, a sort of Austrian Bentley. It had been designed for East European roads and had the advantage of a long wheelbase to ride the undulating surface, and enormous tyres to bridge the potholes. Delmar's speed was consered the 'ultimate' on that course; to reach it he had to exceed 125 kph at times. Quite unbeatable.

But fools rush in, and I had decided to pit my beginner's enthusiasm against Delmar's professional experience. I had learned to drive on lousy roads and participated in my first rally at the age of sixteen in a souped-up Fiat 501 Sport. My next cars were Bugattis which I had driven in rallies, scrambles, hill climbs, and on snowbound Carpathian mountain passes. Altogether, I had about twelve rallies under my belt, but had never been placed higher than third.

I won't digress long explaining what the hell I was doing in that part of the world at that particular time, except to mention that my



Above: The Bugatti in which I won the race and the £20,000 bet, under similar conditions. Below: A 1927 photograph of me by Munkacsi. A reprint from the original negative fetched £350 at an auction last year. Unfortunately all my old scrapbooks were destroyed when my Mayfair flat was bombed out back in 1942.

father was Hungarian and the founder of the Hungarian Royal Automobile Club. My mother was English, I was born in her house in Eastbourne, Sussex, because she, not without reason, distrusted Hungarian doctors and plumbing (in that order). Thus my 'formative' years as a somewhat mixed-up hybrid were spent shuttling between Hungary where I had inherited some estates and some of the world's best nightclubs were located, and London/Paris/Rome, where I was undergoing some highly enjoyable 'advanced education'. At the age of nineteen I had acquired some modest notoriety as an international hell-raiser.

In 1928 it was decided to organise the first-ever Hungarian championship with points accumulated over six races from June to November. It would be a mini-version of the World Championship and, of course, nothing like it had ever occurred in Eastern Europe before. Goaded by an ambitious blonde and speculation in the Budapest gossip columns as to whether I would or would not have the sheer bloody nerve to challenge Delmar, I decided that *I* was going to be the first driver to win the championship and topple the 'old man' from his long reign.

My new car arrived barely in time for this, the first of the championship events and now there it stood grinning at me – looking diabolical – one of the first two bona fide racing cars in Hungary, with me wishing fervently I'd had more time for practice instead of just a cursory canter at half cock. Even I had begun to suspect that perhaps – well, just *maybe* – I wasn't ready for the T35B yet.

I knew the course well because I had driven my previous 2-litre Bugatti in the previous year's rally, reaching the commendable speed of 93.2 kph, and the year before, my Fiat 501 at 67.5. Fantastic!

Apart from wishing to de-throne Delmar, there was another reason for my determination to win the East European 'crown'. It now came sauntering towards me – tall, blonde, 'fairytale' Prince Anton Esterhazy, second son of that fabulously wealthy dynasty. He had this splendidly aristocratic manner and wore a permanently puzzled expression as if wondering if the existence of whoever he happened to be talking to was strictly necessary or could very well be dispensed with. Thus he always gave the impression as if he were talking to himself. At 23, he was four years older than I, but we enjoyed an amiable 'yah-boo' relationship, drank each other under the table at parties in Budapest, Paris and Monte Carlo, seduced each other's girlfriends and competed in show-jumping events and motor rallies. Until now neither of us had set the world on fire. However, my decision to enter the list was further influenced by a rather boozy conversation at Maxim's when he informed me that he intended to win the 'crown' for which purpose he had already acquired a T35C 2-litre compressor Bugatti which was even now on its way to Budapest. That clinched it. I sobered up – well, almost – and had taken off for Molsheim like a bat out of hell. And now the Moment of Truth was on us.

The cars were being manoeuvred into starting order by the marshals according to cylinder capacity. There was some small fry up front: Amilcars, Salmsons, Renaults, the odd Talbot; then Anton (2-litre), myself (2.3-litre), John Szeny (4-litre) pro-driver for the factory on an Austro-Daimler, and finally champ Delmar's 5-litre works Steyr racing model, sent specially from the factory to preserve the Seyr monopoly in that part of the world. Its top speed was secret but it was just possible that it might break the existing record – it had been built, prepared and tuned specially for the six championship events. The damn thing looked impressive – about twice the size of the Bugattis.

'Well, old fruit,' Anton shouted at me over the noise of the engines warming up, 'which of us d'you think will win? Eh, what?'

'I'm glad you asked me that question, old bean,' I yelled back, 'my guess is neither of us. I don't think the Bugs stand a chance on this lousy road. Too light – too short – too nose-heavy. Wish I'd bought a Steyr like Delmar's – or a Barnato-type Bentley.'

'Rubbish!' (or a word to that effect) shouted Anton. 'A private bet just between you and me – what? A brace of monkeys?'

I never was a betting man but could never resist a challenge. (Lord, the scrapes *that* has got me into through the years.) So my blood boiled over and I replied: 'Oh, very well, damn you. You're on!' Actually, the bet represented about twenty thousand pounds in today's values. To Anton it was chicken-feed but in my case having to pay out would have caused an acute case of 'ouch'.

The small fry had departed and arrived at the other end. Each car had to finish the course before the next started. The times were relayed back to the start; most were under the hundred mark, one car had crashed into the parapet on the bridge and the driver removed to hospital; one souped-up Ballot had scored an excellent 117.6 kph

turn to page 78

My daredevil drive

continued from page 50

almost, but not quite, equalling Delmar's record.

Then it was Anton's turn. He crammed his long legs under the wheel, the timekeeper signalled and he flashed away with a roar into the run-up stretch. The snarl rose to a whine and receded in the distance. I found myself shivering with nerves, something I'd never experienced before. What would his time be?

Then a gasp from the chap holding the telephone in the starting booth, and he almost dropped the receiver in his excitement. He grabbed a megaphone and yelled:

'Prince Esterhazy's time: 165.4 kilometres! An absolute new course record!' There was a roar of cheering and amazement. Anton's mechanics capered about like inebriated rabbits. My blood froze – then unfroze and I did some rapid mental calculations. Anton had beaten Delmar's record by an incredible 47.1 kph! God!

I was next, and the marshal gestured an invitation at me to climb into the Bug. Steve was at the radiator waiting to swing that starting handle, his expression one of abysmal gloom. All around people were staring at me pityingly – the certain loser. I was written off, period. *Nobody* could beat Anton's fantastic time . . . How could I even remotely hope to do it when I'd never driven faster than 120 kph in my whole life, let alone 165-plus?

I settled into the Bug and adjusted my goggles. I wore a black beret which had become my hallmark – crash helmets were unheard of, so were seat belts – of course. At my nod, Steve swung the handle, the engine screamed as I advanced the spark and revved up to 5000 a few times, fighting to overcome my despondency, and muster at least some measure of determination. I engaged first gear, the timekeeper, stopwatch in hand, ticked off the last five seconds on his fingers, then the flag dropped. I took a deep breath and let the Bug leap forward on the 1 km run-up stretch. And at that precise moment my nerve returned and I resolved to beat Anton even if I kicked the bucket in the process.

I changed up rapidly, using every ounce of acceleration I could squeeze out of each gear at maximum revs and as I flashed under the banner for the timed stretch, the needle was wavering towards 5000. And the sickening realisation dawned on me – the faster I drove, the more utterly impossible it became to hold the car on the road.

The familiar 'swish-swish' integrated to a constant hurricane roar as the apple trees seemed to merge into a solid stockade. The bug started to buck on the undulating surface, then suddenly it was bounding forward like a frenzied kangaroo fleeing from a bushfire. The engine emitted a series of tortured staccato shrieks each time the rear wheels spun free above the road scrabbling vainly for grip. With each bound I was tossed into the air, my bottom rearing up like a jockey's then slamming down again with the force of a piledriver, jolting my spine. I gritted my teeth or I'd have bitten my tongue off. At each up-blast my foot was torn off the accelerator so the car jerked forward in convulsive fits and starts, engine choking and gasping for revs, unable to pick up speed. At times my only contact with the car were my hands on the wheel and I hung on grimly to prevent being catapulted bodily out of the car. But this made steering impossible so the Bug weaved left to right inches from the lethal kerb as I battled to keep it on the hard centre. One wheel off and into the dust and I'd have had a problem.

After one particularly vicious bounce, the toe of my left shoe became wedged under the clutch and while struggling frantically to extricate it, I suddenly found that – au contraire – by hooking it under the pedal and bracing my thigh muscles to breaking point, I could get just enough leverage to ride with the car's motion instead of being flung about like a rag doll. This released my arms for steering and, more important, I could keep my right foot firmly down on the accelerator. The rev counter climbed to 5800-plus, nearing 200 kph – and the rather hairy little country road which I had padded along quite happily at 120, turned into a lethal obstacle-strewn corridor straight to hell.

And now a new menace . . . The soft shoulders were becoming crowded with peasants and farmworkers – the natives having a field day – lining the road, surging forward, craning their necks into the path of the devil-machine, narrowing the alley until there was barely enough space to squeeze the car between the undulating wall of hysterically elated humanity. They also obliterated all the landmarks along the course, so I had no idea how far I had progressed and was driving blind.

The road curved right but I kept my foot down because I remembered that this wasn't a sharp bend. Which it hadn't been at 100 – but at nearly 200, Christ, wasn't it just! It jumped me like a hairpin but I couldn't cut the corner because that would land the offside wheels in the dust. At full throttle, skidding, bouncing, using the handbrake, I bullied the Bug around the bend, juddering broadside on, terrified of the tyres being torn off. I made it with the odd inch to spare and exhaled – and immediately tensed. There were no road signs and the bend had been a warning that the next obstacle would be the humpback bridge with the sharpish left bend behind it.

In past events I had judged my approach to the bridge by a gap in the trees on the right where a whitewashed farm gate led into a field, so I began watching for it out of the corner of my eye. Here came the really dangerous part and I knew that to survive I would have to decelerate even at the price of precious seconds lost. But – God Almighty! – the gap between the parapets loomed up dead ahead and I was going flat out with the needle glued to the limit. I had flashed past the gate without seeing it because the space was packed with spectators watching this most lethal part of the course and thirsting for blood. And there was absolutely nothing I could do – it was TOO LATE!

Missing the nearside parapet by a hair, the Bug hit the ramp like a battering ram and took off, engine shrieking as the rear wheels spun frenziedly six feet in the air. Panic-stricken and anticipating the bend, I steered left but the airborne front wheels were limp and the angle of launching carried the car straight ahead. It crash-landed with a sickening clang of springs on chassis sixty yards away on the right-hand dust shoulder at the start of the left bend – I had run out of straight.

The radiator was six inches from the trunk of an apple tree and the offside wheels rose reluctantly off the ground as the car began to topple over. And beyond loomed the drainage ditch . . .

For some reason or other, the word: 'Curtain!' flashed through my mind and I instinctively flung up my left arm to shield my face from the inevitable impact but still gripping the wheel with my right hand. And – oblivion. I may have shut my eyes, screamed, or blacked out with fright. Knowing me, I probably did all three.

Then by some utter miracle, I was back on the hard centre, four wheels on the ground,

turn to page 91

'Alright, I'll have a drink with you. So long as you promise to drive me home in the morning!'

My daredevil drive

continued from page 78

going flat out – in the right direction – steering with one hand and peeping out unbelievingly behind my left arm. I thought: 'Great God, I'm alive.' I grabbed the wheel with my left hand just in time to avoid swerving into a pocket of protruding natives – and pressed on. And suddenly it dawned on me that I had been too petrified to take my foot off the accelerator which was still jammed convulsively to the floorboard. Nor had I touched the brake. And my left toe was still locked under the clutch.

As the finish banner hove into sight a mile away, the jostling human canyon narrowed even more, but I ignored it and keeping my foot down began to breathe, thinking, 'I've done it.' Then two barefooted urchins of about ten decided to play 'chicken'!

My heart literally stopped beating as the first scampered across my path with twenty yards to spare, the Bug travelling at fifty yards per second ... The other made to follow and was halfway out when someone reached for him and yanked him back by his hair – and in that split second I brushed past the kid so close that the blast of displaced air hit my face and shoulder like the kick of a twelve bore when both barrels are fired simultaneously. I didn't react by a twitch – no time – anyway, it would have been fatal with blood everywhere.

Three seconds later I flashed under the banner, unhooked my foot from the clutch with a sob of relief, and released the accelerator. My tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth, I couldn't muster enough saliva to lick my lips, I was bathed in sweat – and I coasted to the end of the run-out section, getting my shaking limbs under control. I thought: 'If this is motor racing – *never* again!'

As I braked to a stop, people crowded around waving, cheering and slapping me on the back. But then I caught sight of Anton elbowing his way through the throng. When he stood beside me, he suddenly grinned and held out his hand, symbolically collecting his winnings, I thought. And I thought: 'Oh, God, he's beaten me! That idiotic mistake at the bridge has cost me the race – *and* twenty thousand quid!' – then someone yelled: 'Your time is 187.6 kph!' (115.7 mph) And I answered rather stupidly: 'Oh. Is it?'

I never worked out what had saved me at the bridge. Nor did the motoring correspondents who argued about it for days afterwards. The spectators had yelled with horror as the Bug landed inches from the tree but the impact of the revving wheels hitting the ground kicked up such an impenetrable cloud of dust that the car and I were instantly obliterated. Even the press photos were no help: there was a shot of the Bug airborne, the next showed a cloud and the next moment it was back on the road. I believe that when the Bug landed with the rear wheels spinning at full power and the front wheels in a left-turn angle, the combined effect scooped the car away from the tree and blasted it back on to the centre – a million in one chance. But whatever it was remained a riddle and my sincere thanks to Whoever Had A Hand In It. I am also beholden to whichever course official – with uncharacteristic foresight – ordained that the outer radius of the bend past the bridge should be kept free of spectators.

My panic won the race instead of losing it because the other drivers prudently slowed down for the bridge which I had sailed over. Someone had timed 100 metres from just before the bridge to just after the bend and my time was 1.7 seconds, so – unofficially – I had broken the 200 kph barrier in Eastern Europe.

Delmar reached 170.1 kph that day and was sandwiched between Anton and myself. For the record, my time was never beaten and for the next few years some of the best drivers in Europe came to challenge it. But nobody got near those nightmare three mins and fifteen seconds of my life. Four years and several near fatal accidents later, three of which occurred at the same notorious bridge, the trial was abandonned as 'too dangerous' and the stretch of road 'unsuitable for modern speeds.' They could say that again.

That year Louis Chiron won the World Championship, Woolf Barnato won Le Mans and, after a cliff-hanger neck-and-neck finish with Anton and Delmar, I collared the Hungarian mini-crown. I muttered 'Yah-boo,' and Anton muttered something about a visit to the taxidermist as his guest.

But the ultimate accolade – or so it seemed at the time – arrived three days after the race in the form of a telegram containing five words:

'VOUS ETES FOU. ETTORE BUGATTI'

Fabulous designer-styled quartz watch.

30 micron, 24-carat gold-plated dial surround. Only £19·95 + p & p.

These elegant watches are crafted to do only three things: tell the time, the date – and look astoundingly good.

They do not make funny noises or count off laps, but they are accurate to within seconds a year. And they are guaranteed for a full year. They run on mini batteries which are widely available, and will give years of sophisticated service.

Quite the nicest gift we have seen this year for yourself or for anyone. Both the ladies' and gents' styles are available at the same price. Full money-back guarantee if not absolutely delighted.

Cut out coupon and send to: Mayfair Watch Offer, 5 Brunel Way, Slough, Berks. SL1 1XW.

To Mayfair Watch Offer, 5 Brunel Way, Slough, Berks. SL1 1XW

Please send me:

Qty.....gents quartz watch at £19.95+99p p&p & ins. (total £20.94)

Qty.....ladies quartz watch at £19.95+99p p&p & ins. (total £20.94)

I enclose cheque/postal order for £..... made payable to Mayfair Offers or debit my Access/Barclaycard/American Express account.

My card no. is _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

POST CODE _____

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY

SIGNATURE _____

Telephone ordering for credit card customers ring Slough (0753) 79248 General enquiries ring Slough (0753) 79249. 24 hour answering service. Allow 21–28 days for delivery. If you are not 100% satisfied, simply return goods undamaged within 28 days of receipt for immediate refund. Offer applies UK mainland only inc. N. Ireland. **M11**