

Three Elephant Power

Banjo Paterson

“Them things,” said Alfred the chauffeur, tapping the speed indicator with his fingers, “them things are all right for the police. But, Lord, you can fix ’em up if you want to. Did you ever hear about Henery, that used to drive for old John Bull—about Henery and the elephant?”

Alfred was chauffeur to a friend of mine who owned a very powerful car. Alfred was part of that car. Weirdly intelligent, of poor physique, he might have been any age from fifteen to eighty. His education had been somewhat hurried, but there was no doubt as to his mechanical ability. He took to a car like a young duck to water. He talked motor, thought motor, and would have accepted—I won’t say with enthusiasm, for Alfred’s motto was ‘Nil admirari’—but without hesitation, an offer to drive in the greatest race in the world. He could drive really well, too; as for belief in himself, after six months’ apprenticeship in a garage he was prepared to vivisection a six-cylinder engine with the confidence of a diplomaed bachelor of engineering.

Barring a tendency to flash driving, and a delight in persecuting slow cars by driving just in front of them and letting them come up and enjoy his dust, and then shooting away again, he was a respectable member of society. When his boss was in the car he cloaked the natural ferocity of his instincts; but this day, with only myself on board, and a clear run of a hundred and twenty miles up to the station before him, he let her loose, confident that if any trouble occurred I would be held morally responsible.

As we flew past a somnolent bush pub, Alfred, whistling softly, leant forward and turned on a little more oil.

“You never heard about Henery and the elephant?” he said. “It was dead funny. Henery was a bushwacker, but clean mad on motorin’. He was wood and water joey at some squatter’s place until he seen a motor-car go past one day, the first that ever they had in the districk.

“‘That’s my game,’ says Henery; ‘no more wood and water joey for me.’

“So he comes to town and gets a job off Miles that had that garage at the back of Allison’s. An old cove that they called John Bull—I don’t know his right name, he was a fat old cove—he used to come there to hire cars, and Henery used to drive him. And this old John Bull he had lots of stuff, so at last he reckons he’s going to get a car for himself, and he promises Henery a job to drive it. A queer cove this Henery was—half mad, I think, but the best hand with a car ever I see.”

While he had been talking we topped a hill, and opened up a new stretch of blue-grey granite-

like road. Down at the foot of the hill was a teamster's waggon in camp; the horses in their harness munching at their nose-bags, while the teamster and a mate were boiling a billy a little off to the side of the road. There was a turn in the road just below the waggon which looked a bit sharp, so of course Alfred bore down on it like a whirlwind. The big stupid team-horses huddled together and pushed each other awkwardly as we passed. A dog that had been sleeping in the shade of the waggon sprang out right in front of the car, and was exterminated without ever knowing what struck him.

There was just room to clear the tail of the waggon and negotiate the turn. Alfred, with the calm decision of a Napoleon, swung round the bend to find that the teamster's hack, fast asleep, was tied to the tail of the waggon. Nothing but a lightning-like twist of the steering-wheel prevented our scooping the old animal up, and taking him on board as a passenger. As it was, we carried off most of his tail as a trophy on the brass of the lamp. The old steed, thus rudely awakened, lashed out good and hard, but by that time we were gone, and he missed the car by a quarter of a mile.

During this strenuous episode Alfred never relaxed his professional stolidity, and, when we were clear, went on with his story in the tone of a man who found life wanting in animation.

"Well, at fust, the old man would only buy one of these little eight-horse rubby-dubbys that go strugglin' up 'ills with a death-rattle in its throat, and all the people in buggies passin' it. O' course that didn't suit Henery. He used to get that spiked when a car passed him, he'd nearly go mad. And one day he nearly got the sack for dodgin' about up a steep 'ill in front of one o' them big twenty-four Darracqs, full of 'owlin' toffs, and not lettin' 'em get a chance to go past till they got to the top. But at last he persuaded old John Bull to let him go to England and buy a car for him. He was to do a year in the shops, and pick up all the wrinkles, and get a car for the old man. Bit better than wood and water joeying, wasn't it?"

Our progress here was barred by our rounding a corner right on to a flock of sheep, that at once packed together into a solid mass in front of us, blocking the whole road from fence to fence.

"Silly cows o' things, ain't they?" said Alfred, putting on his emergency brake, and skidding up till the car came softly to rest against the cushion-like mass—a much quicker stop than any horse-drawn vehicle could have made. A few sheep were crushed somewhat, but it is well known that a sheep is practically indestructible by violence. Whatever Alfred's faults were, he certainly could drive.

"Well," he went on, lighting a cigarette, unheeding the growls of the drovers, who were trying to get the sheep to pass the car, "well, as I was sayin', Henery went to England, and he got a car. Do you know wot he got?"

“No, I don’t.”

“E got a ninety,” said Alfred slowly, giving time for the words to soak in.

“A ninety! What do you mean?”

“E got a ninety—a ninety-horse-power racin’ engine wot was made for some American millionaire and wasn’t as fast as wot some other millionaire had, so he sold it for the price of the iron, and Henery got it, and had a body built for it, and he comes out here and tells us all it’s a twenty mongrel—you know, one of them cars that’s made part in one place and part in another, the body here and the engine there, and the radiator another place. There’s lots of cheap cars made like that.

“So Henery he says that this is a twenty mongrel—only a four-cylinder engine; and nobody drops to what she is till Henery goes out one Sunday and waits for the big Napier that Scotty used to drive—it belonged to the same bloke wot owned that big racehorse wot won all the races. So Henery and Scotty they have a fair go round the park while both their bosses is at church, and Henery beat him out o’ sight—fair lost him—and so Henery was reckoned the boss of the road. No one would take him on after that.”

A nasty creek-crossing here required Alfred’s attention. A little girl, carrying a billy-can of water, stood by the stepping stones, and smiled shyly as we passed. Alfred waved her a salute quite as though he were an ordinary human being. I felt comforted. He had his moments of relaxation evidently, and his affections like other people.

“What happened to Henry and the ninety-horse machine?” I asked. “And where does the elephant come in?”

Alfred smiled pityingly.

“Ain’t I tellin’ yer,” he said. “You wouldn’t understand if I didn’t tell yer how he got the car and all that. So here’s Henery,” he went on, “with old John Bull goin’ about in the fastest car in Australia, and old John, he’s a quiet old geezer, that wouldn’t drive faster than the regulations for anything, and that short-sighted he can’t see to the side of the road. So what does Henery do? He fixes up the speed-indicator—puts a new face on it, so that when the car is doing thirty, the indicator only shows fifteen, and twenty for forty, and so on. So out they’d go, and if Henery knew there was a big car in front of him, he’d let out to forty-five, and the pace would very near blow the whiskers off old John; and every now and again he’d look at the indicator, and it’d be showin’ twenty-two and a half, and he’d say:

“Better be careful, Henery, you’re slightly exceedin’ the speed limit; twenty miles an hour,

you know, Henery, should be fast enough for anybody, and you're doing over twenty-two.'

"Well, one day, Henery told me, he was tryin' to catch up a big car that just came out from France, and it had a half-hour start of him, and he was just fairly flyin', and there was a lot of cars on the road, and he flies past 'em so fast the old man says, 'It's very strange, Henery,' he says, 'that all the cars that are out to-day are comin' this way,' he says. You see he was passin' 'em so fast he thought they were all comin' towards him.

"And Henery sees a mate of his comin', so he lets out a notch or two, and the two cars flew by each other like chain lightnin'. They were each doin' about forty, and the old man, he says, 'There's a driver must be travellin' a hundred miles an hour,' he says. 'I never see a car go by so fast in my life,' he says. 'If I could find out who he is, I'd report him,' he says. 'Did you know the car, Henery?' But of course Henery, he doesn't know, so on they goes.

"The owner of the big French car thinks he has the fastest car in Australia, and when he sees Henery and the old man coming, he tells his driver to let her out a little; but Henery gives the ninety-horse the full of the lever, and whips up alongside in one jump. And then he keeps there just half a length ahead of him, tormentin' him like. And the owner of the French car he yells out to old John Bull, 'You're going a nice pace for an old 'un,' he says. Old John has a blink down at the indicator. 'We're doing twenty-five,' he yells out. 'Twenty-five grandmothers,' says the bloke; but Henery he put on his accelerator, and left him. It wouldn't do to let the old man get wise to it, you know."

We topped a big hill, and Alfred cut off the engine and let the car swoop, as swiftly and noiselessly as an eagle, down to the flat country below.

"You're a long while coming to the elephant, Alfred," I said.

"Well, now, I'll tell you about the elephant," said Alfred, letting his clutch in again, and taking up the story to the accompaniment of the rhythmic throb of the engine.

"One day Henery and the old man were going out a long trip over the mountain, and down the Kangaroo Valley Road that's all cut out of the side of the 'ill. And after they's gone a mile or two, Henery sees a track in the road—the track of the biggest car he ever seen or 'eard of. An' the more he looks at it, the more he reckons he must ketch that car and see what she's made of. So he slows down passin' two yokels on the road, and he says, 'Did you see a big car along 'ere?'

"'Yes, we did,' they says.

"'How big is she?' says Henery.

“Biggest car ever we see,’ says the yokels, and they laughed that silly way these yokels always does.

“How many horse-power do you think she was?’ says Henery.

“Horse-power,’ they says; ‘elephant-power, you mean! She was three elephant-power,’ they says; and they goes ‘Haw, haw!’ and Henery drops his clutch in, and off he goes after that car.”

Alfred lit another cigarette as a preliminary to the climax.

“So they run for miles, and all the time there’s the track ahead of ’em, and Henery keeps lettin’ her out, thinkin’ that he’ll never ketch that car. They went through a town so fast, the old man he says, ‘What house was that we just passed,’ he says. At last they come to the top of the big ’ill, and there’s the tracks of the big car goin’ straight down ahead of ’em.

“D’you know that road? It’s all cut out of the side of the mountain, and there’s places where if she was to side-slip you’d go down ’undreds of thousands of feet. And there’s sharp turns, too; but the surface is good, so Henery he lets her out, and down they go, whizzin’ round the turns and skatin’ out near the edge, and the old cove sittin’ there enjoyin’ it, never knowin’ the danger. And comin’ to one turn Henery gives a toot on the ’orn, and then he heard somethin’ go ‘toot, toot’ right away down the mountain.

“Bout a mile ahead it seemed to be, and Henery reckoned he’d go another four miles before he’d ketch it, so he chances them turns more than ever. And she was pretty hot, too; but he kept her at it, and he hadn’t gone a full mile till he come round a turn about forty miles an hour, and before he could stop he run right into it, and wot do you think it was?”

I hadn’t the faintest idea.

“A circus. One of them travellin’ circuses, goin’ down the coast; and one of the elephants had sore feet, so they put him in a big waggon, and another elephant pulled in front and one pushed behind. Three elephant-power it was, right enough. That was the waggon wot made the big track. Well, it was all done so sudden. Before Henery could stop, he runs the radiator—very near boiling she was—up against the elephant’s tail, and prints the pattern of the latest honeycomb radiator on the elephant as clear as if you done it with a stencil.

“The elephant, he lets a roar out of him like one of them bulls bellerin’, and he puts out his nose and ketches Henery round the neck, and yanks him out of the car, and chucks him right clean over the cliff, ’bout a thousand feet. But he never done nothin’ to the old bloke.”

“Good gracious!”

“Well, it finished Henery, killed him stone dead, of course, and the old man he was terrible cut up over losin’ such a steady, trustworthy man. ‘Never get another like him,’ he says.”

We were nearly at our journey’s end, and we turned through a gate into the home paddocks. Some young stock, both horses and cattle, came frisking and cantering after the car, and the rough bush track took all Alfred’s attention. We crossed a creek, the water swishing from the wheels, and began the long pull up to the homestead. Over the clamour of the little-used second speed, Alfred concluded his narrative.

“The old bloke advertised,” he said, “for another driver, a steady, reliable man to drive a twenty horse-power, four-cylinder touring car. Every driver in Sydney put in for it. Nothing like a fast car to fetch ’em, you know. And Scotty got it. Him wot used to drive the Napier I was tellin’ you about.”

“And what did the old man say when he found he’d been running a racing car?”

“He don’t know now. Scotty never told ’im. Why should he? He’s drivin’ about the country now, the boss of the roads, but he won’t chance her near a circus. Thinks he might bump the same elephant. And that elephant, every time he smells a car passin’ in the road, he goes near mad with fright. If he ever sees that car again, do you think he’d know it?”

Not being used to elephants, I could not offer an opinion.

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