

CHAPTER XV

1929.—BENTLEY'S HAT TRICK AT LE MANS

THE Twenty-Four-Hour Race at Le Mans being the month after the Double-Twelve made things very difficult for all concerned in both. My own Alvis, one of two entered for the Rudge-Whitworth Cup as a result of the two cars qualifying the previous year, was a new type straight-eight with front drive, the car having been driven in the recent English race by Cushman, who was my partner in France. Since Harvey was seriously ill, the second car was driven by Cyril Paul and Dykes.

Neither machine had been really ready for the Double-Twelve, part of the trouble being that the design originally included roller bearing big-ends, which had been discarded, and the crank pins, therefore, had not too much surface for either plain duralumin or white-metalled rods, on top of which the oil by-pass valve had developed defects in the Double-Twelve.

The time did not allow careful modification and test; chances had to be taken, and chance is a tricky bird at any time. Le Mans rules, in addition, now required four-seater bodies even for the smaller cars, with corresponding ballast for three ghostly passengers, the total weight carried being unduly heavy, though the Alvis bodies were really light for the work.

On the run over we were worried by clouds of smoke from the cars' tail pipes when accelerating up to about

2,000 r.p.m., at which speed the exhaust was, if anything, too clear, but there was no doubt that the cars as a whole, and the engines in particular, were a great improvement on the 1928 machines. In fact, Cushman and I thought that the team had a really good chance.

We had one small and one big difficulty. The small one was soon over, though exciting enough in all truth while it lasted, and concerned the extraordinary little cigars Tattersall would smoke, the "douane" at Dieppe being quite convinced that these were "fireworks" after seeing Tat light one, and consequently not only contraband but "dangerous explosives"!

The second, a much more serious affair, was created by a smallpox scare, which led to unvaccinated persons being barred from France. That meant that all the "équipes" had to be vaccinated before leaving, which might not have been so bad had we not employed Dr. J. D. Benjafield, bacteriologist. Benjy's enthusiasm for a job well done led him to use a special vaccine calculated to raise large blisters on nitralloy steel, and to prostrate any ordinary human! Practically everyone, therefore, had a dud left arm and was feeling anything but chirpy on landing, while at Le Mans Benjy had to hold sick bay parades daily, inspecting craters of the Messines variety in people's arms with an equanimity and a bedside manner unrivalled in all Harley Street. Unfortunately the regulations were withdrawn before we arrived, which added sting to the whole thing, and, worse still, we found that Benjy had not operated on himself at all, having inner knowledge that the orders would be cancelled by the time we went abroad; a piece of ingenuity rightly met by keeping him at wheel-changing practice in the sun of the Hôtel Moderne back yard whenever a Bentley could be spared!

One of the first French cars to turn up was an exceedingly disreputable Tracta, so disreputable that its owner, Vasena, could only avoid constant jokes at its expense by claiming to have won it in a raffle, while more fun was created because the chambermaid at the Hôtel de Paris could not pronounce "Cushman", so called Mrs. Cushman "Madame Douze", after the number of her room.

Unfortunately our fun soon ended, for the first practice morning was calamitous, our car running a big-end at 5,000 r.p.m., the result being naturally a whole heap of incidental damage, to say nothing of the mess inside oil pipes and the crank case generally. Those rounds we did complete, however, more than bore out previous promise, the machines proving really fast and far more stable.

Now running a big-end in a high-speed engine practically scraps the engine, but the enthusiasm of Tattersall, Cook, and Irving was such that the whole power unit was taken adrift, cleaned out, repaired where possible, and a new big-end fitted, the process, unfortunately, revealing the fact that oil had not been reaching any of the other big-ends in sufficient quantity, a thing so alarming that an inquest was essential. Its result was about as annoying as anything I have ever known, for it seems the oil pressure release valve stuck on its seat when the engine was first started, the result being the clouds of smoke we had noticed, and a high oil pressure on the gauge. However, cold oil usually gives a high pressure, so the gauge reading attracted no particular attention. As it happened, that pressure strained the gauge, making it read high. When the engine was accelerated, the release valve suddenly opened, this time to stick *open*, practically cutting out the supply to the crankshaft, which did not show on the gauge because of the false pressure recorded.

Anyway, number two car was dealt with in time, and while Cushman and I laboriously ran in the new big-ends of our engine, hour after hour and mile after mile, Paul and Dykes carried on with practice. Their car went well enough, save that the water temperature seemed high.

When the running-in process was at last completed, Cushman started in high hopes for a fast lap and—another big-end ran. It seemed difficult to believe, but it was so, and one look at the internal result was enough to convince both of us that to attempt to cobble up the engine would be just plain folly. What was needed was a new engine, for the other would never last an hour. It was a terrible decision to have to make, but it was better frankly not to start than to start and fail at once. The mechanics volunteered to work day and night, so keenly did they feel the situation, but it was obviously essential to concentrate on the other car—no good could be done with ours. Paul even wanted to exchange cars, an act only to be appreciated at its full merit by drivers.

So it was with only one car that we competed, Cushman and I running the pit; and, unfortunately, the overheating developed to such an extent that one cylinder head failed, water running out of the exhaust pipe.

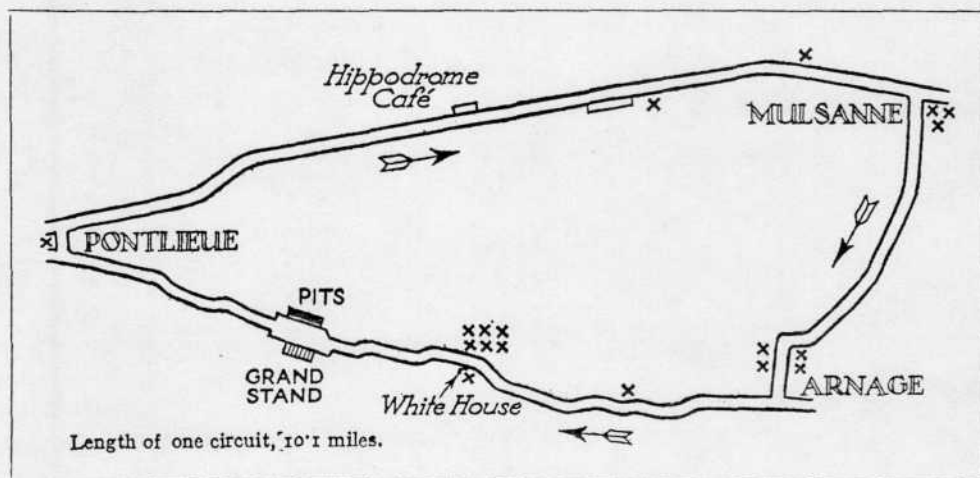
The race, as it happened, was as full of thrills as ever, twenty-five cars starting, headed by a whole flock of Bentleys. Barnato and Birkin were driving the Double-Twelve six-cylinder, Jack Dunfee and Kidston, Clement and Chassagne $4\frac{1}{2}$ -litre four-cylinders, while, as a separate team, Lord Howe and Rubin, and Benjafield and d'Erlanger drove two more $4\frac{1}{2}$ -litres. Unfortunately, the two latter cars could not be properly overhauled after previous races, Benjafield having my Double-Twelve car, and Howe one that had taken a twenty-four-hour record at Montlhéry

1929.—LE MANS

in the hands of Mrs. Bruce. Further, the reserve headlamps used in 1928 were not carried this year, though jacks were.

This year to avoid danger to spectators the course had been shortened from 10·7 to 10·1 miles at Pontlieue, where a new double corner replaced the famous hairpin and cut out the village altogether.

LE MANS CIRCUIT 1929-1931



Note alteration at Pontlieue. x = approximate place where cars have crashed on the circuit.
Corners have been exaggerated to appear as from the driving seat.

From the start the big six put up a fine performance, in company with the 4½-litres practically swamping opposition, though Brisson and Bouriat were driving hard on supercharged straight-eight Stutz, and Dick Watney, with Eyston, another Stutz unsupercharged—both cars not too well prepared as it turned out.

Almost immediately Howe's car developed misfiring, continued to misfire, was brought in time after time, then had one magneto changed, a long job because the drivers had had no time to practise, then broke its magneto drive shaft and retired.

Night fell, *The Autocar* tea room doled out most satisfactory meals, lights blazed all along the pits, and still the Bentleys led, their pit work, one section under Clark, the other at a different pit under Moir, far better than all rivals, Clement, Birkin and Chassagne excelling.

Somebody noticed that the exhaust pipe of Brisson's Stutz glared red, next round it was obvious, and when the big car came in, no sooner had the driver begun to refill than the whole back of the machine went up in flames, the glare showing in the sky for miles round.

From the Alvis pit the team's organized fire party were on the scene before the American pit's "personnel" could do a thing; in a minute extinguishers were spouting from every side; Brisson, badly burned, actually shut down the tank filler cap and clamped it. Ten minutes, and the much damaged Stutz was smoking sullenly at its pit, Chiron making a great effort to put things sufficiently shipshape to continue, an effort that ended in the fuel tank collapsing after a few troublesome rounds, though it deserved better luck.

This excitement over, a message came from the indomitable Mottet that his air-cooled S.A.R.A. had stopped, but that "they were not to worry because he was changing a cylinder and piston," a thing that seemed entirely humorous but which was actually done. No sooner had the fun over this died down than the headlamps of the 4½-litre Bentleys began to give trouble. Imagine what the drivers felt like, one moment travelling at over 100 in the full blaze of magnificent lamps, the next heading into pitch darkness, only illuminated once more when a sudden jerk set the lights going again. Only the six-cylinder remained immune, and never has a team prayed for dawn more fervently than on this occasion. In the case of Benjafield's

car the trouble was a broken battery inter-cell connection, which resulted in the comic spectacle of Benjy coming in with no lamps and no starting motor working, then banging the battery box hard with a huge spanner, a process that excited that unfortunate component to action, whereupon the lamps lit and the starting motor functioned.

Twelve hours after the start Birkin and Barnato were well ahead, Clement and Chassagne second, Kidston and Dunfee third. Their nearest rival was Stoffel's Chrysler, the smoke-belching two-stroke Tracta had gone, the Lagonda had blown its gasket, the Invicta broke a connecting rod, and the tank of the second Stutz—that driven by Watney and Eyston—had collapsed.

Early Sunday morning Stoffel's Chrysler ran completely out of fuel on the last lap of one spell, and was partly pushed but chiefly driven by its starting motor to the pit, there to be refilled.

By eighteen hours Bentleys held the first four places easily against all comers, Bouriart and Phillipe with the remaining Stutz alone being dangerous, the two Chryslers far behind chased by Newsome and Peacock, with their four-seater Lea-Francis. At the twenty-third hour the Bentley team had so far disposed of their rivals that the continuous exhibition of the "slower" signal alone kept them to the speed W. O. had selected, a thing that so worried Jack Dunfee as to cause him to come in, stop, and remark, "I say, W. O., do you want me to get out and push the ruddy thing?"

The finale was suitably impressive; the leading six-cylinder slowed until the other cars were in exact order at equal intervals behind, then the whole lot quietly, impudently, but impressively, came slowly over the finish line ahead, tails up, in battle order.

MOTOR RACING

The big six averaged 73·63 m.p.h., covering 1,767 miles; Kidston and Dunfee's "4½" covered 1,654 miles, Benjafield and d'Erlanger totalled 1,634 miles, while Clement and Chassagne, who had been delayed by the ballast shifting and damaging the brake operating rods, put up a total distance of 1,592 miles. Ten cars finished, Bouriat's Stutz, the two Chryslers, Peacock's Lea-Francis, and two Tractas making up the total. The big six Bentley also won the Rudge-Whitworth Cup, this being the first time the winner of the Grand Prix d'Endurance had also lifted the Cup.

