

DISASTER IS MY BUSINESS

by Howard "Dutch" Darrin

But worst of all I would have lost the opportunity of working with a number of great geniuses in the auto industry of France, like Louis Renault, André Citroën, Ettore Bugatti, the brothers Panhard—associations that brought me very close to these men from whom I learned so much and to whom I owe so much. I should also mention my wonderful association with Sir John Siddeley of Armstrong-Siddeley, for whom I was privileged to build show cars and assist in designing. England was also one of my most successful markets. It was my privilege to build as many Rolls-Royce bodies as any other manufacturer outside England. And it remains my firm belief that the designing and building of custom bodies is the shortest road to the developing of new and startling designs. This has been proven in recent decades by the Italians, without a doubt the leaders not only in custom bodies but in advanced styling, both for production and custom work.

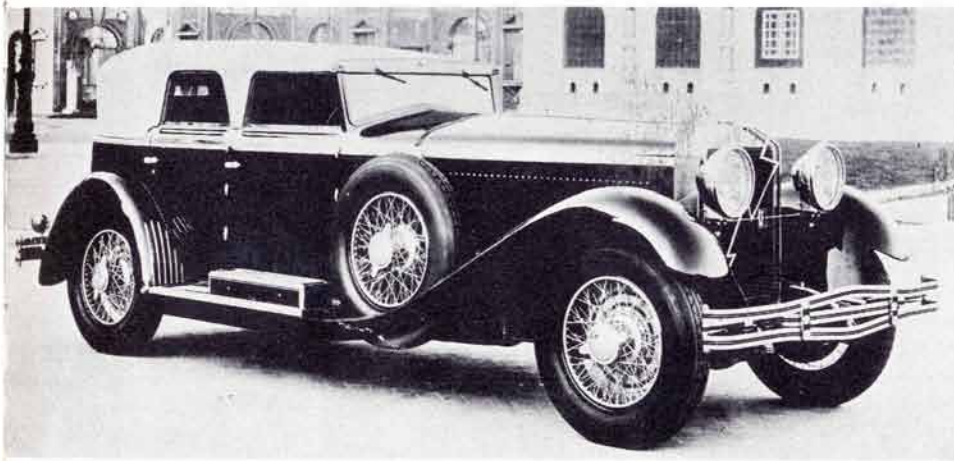
It must be realized that the progress to be made in the art of both beautifying the automobile and making it more acceptable to the public is a com-

bination of engineering, architecture and, naturally, of styling. This combination no longer exists in America for any individual. It is for this reason that Italy, with its many custom builders, has been able to develop stylists who are not only experienced and qualified in the construction of automobile bodies, but are also very familiar with chassis problems, allowing them to approach the automobile as a chassis-body entity and enabling them to follow designs through to actual construction.

My own story in this whole lofty business begins—humbly—back in 1916, with John North Willys. He had heard about me through the daughter of his advertising agent, had been told that I was an engineer with Westinghouse, and that I might be able to solve a problem that had long intrigued him—that of designing an electric gearshift. It was Mr. Willys' far-sighted belief that a simple automatic gearshift could be installed in an automobile. At this time he was building 1,500 Willys cars a day, but the greatest sales obstacle was the new customer who had never driven a car

By 1920 I had founded America's first scheduled airline, called Aero Limited. We had stations at Atlantic City, Miami, Palm Beach and several other localities. We had purchased six HS2L flying boats and had altered the gunner's cockpit to accommodate four passengers. We flew these planes between Miami and Nassau, Palm Beach, Key West and Atlantic City. We were recorded in the Manufacturer's Guide as the first scheduled airline in America, and employed several ex-Navy pilots such as Jack Rutherford, then well known in automobile racing circles. Juan Trippe, inspired by our efforts, formed Pan American Airways out of the Miami base and went on to an enormous success as the president of that company. As for us, there was disaster. When four of our pilots were killed in a seaplane traveling between Palm Beach and Miami, we sold out and gave the new owners use of the name "Aero Limited."

On my return to New York I purchased two Delage chassis from Walter Chrysler. He had bought them to study, and I was fortunate to get both for \$1,200. I put bodies on each chassis, one of which, incidentally, I sold to Al Jolson. In the course of this venture, I met Tom Hibbard.



I would like here to pay tribute to Tom, my former partner, who in my belief was the pioneer in the custom body revolution. As founder of Le Baron in 1921, he was the creator of the famed Le Baron bodies that were so popular then and so highly desirable by collectors today. Various European car importers—Isotta, Minerva, Hispano—brought to Le Baron immediate acceptance, and he received numerous orders.

About this time Brooks Ostruck, the Minerva dealer in New York, wanted to have bodies built in Europe for the Minerva chassis. I decided to take a flyer and make the trip to France. Because my ideas so coincided with those of Tom I invited him to join me in the trip. Initially we thought we might establish a European branch for Le Baron. However, when we arrived in

A striking 1929 Isotta-Fraschini built by Castagna, Italy, under Darrin license.

France, the chance for a Minerva dealership seemed so attractive that we abandoned the idea of using the Le Baron name and organized our firm as Hibbard and Darrin. This was in 1922.

Initially the Minerva company greeted our proposition of a Minerva agency in Paris with amusement. In truth, they said the idea was absurd; in ten years they hadn't sold a dozen Minervas in all of France. My idea was to sell the cars to Americans living in Paris. When they returned to the United States they could bring the cars home, with the duty exemption on used property, at a cost considerably lower than the New York price. Minerva didn't like this at all; they wanted to protect their New York agents who were selling their cars for about \$13,000. Consequently they insisted that the cars not be shipped to America for six months following purchase, figuring, I suppose, that by that time the cars would be considered "used," and a price lower by a couple of thousand dollars would be not inappropriate. Yet they still weren't convinced. I don't think they trusted us, but finally they accepted our good intentions, and agreed to our dealership if we would put up \$20,000, of which \$5,000 would be paid for each car that somehow found its way to New York before the stipulated six months had elapsed.

We agreed to this, feeling that somehow we could talk them out of the deposit if we proved to them the car was actually going to stay in Paris. Fortunately for us the Paris salon was held one week after our arrangement with Minerva, and we had cards printed up with "Minerva de Paris" and "Minerva de France," as well as colored drawings of body designs. While one of us stayed at the Minerva stand the other roamed around the salon looking for any Americans who looked rich enough to buy one of our cars. We did a terrific business. Instead of having \$20 in the bank, we ended up at the close of the salon with over \$25,000 in deposits. We rented a showroom on the Rue de Berri just one block from the Champs Elysées. The rent was minimal, and as a matter of fact, when we later moved to the Champs Elysées, we rented this particular showroom to a Duesenberg agent who in turn gave us many body orders. We were very fortunate in many ways. Those Belgian coachbuilders turned out some fine work, although they took a little supervision, and we spent some time at Minerva in Belgium adapting their factories to the American type of sheet metal construction, using as little wood as possible.

Much to our surprise, we sold quite a number of our cars to Frenchmen. One amusing situation came about when a member of the French nobility, whose name I shouldn't mention, saw one of our bodies on a Minerva chassis and decided to buy one for his Hispano chassis. Because he used his car for the opera and other formal events, he specified that we must raise the roof to allow him to wear his silk hat. So six months later, when he came to get his car, he brought along his valet who had a leather box containing said hat. When he went up to the car he was delighted but could not understand why it did not look higher than the other cars. When he got into it he found sitting difficult and the silk hat impossible. He debarked, furious, calling us every name imaginable—in French, of course. I tried to pacify him by telling him that there must have been a misunderstanding, that I assumed he would go to the opera with Madame la Duchesse, and certainly he wouldn't wear his hat in the car while she was present. This only in-