

## THE REMINISCENCES OF H. L. BIGGS

### No. 3—ALFA ASSOCIATIONS

**S**EVEN-FORTY-FIVE on the morning of the 11th August, 1928, saw me standing outside the closed doors of the Lorne Gardens Service Station of Alfa-Romeo British Sales to which, inspired by the success of Ramponi in the Essex Six Hours' Race, a desire to work on the 1½-litre Alfa-Romeo had brought me.

At first my efforts were confined to the earlier 3-litre cars, the "22/90" short-chassis R.L.S.S., and the "21/70" long-chassis job. These two cars differed in many respects. The "22/90" was the genuine sports machine, with a wheel-base of 10 ft. 3½ ins., axle ratio of 3.75 to 1, dry-sump lubrication (4 gallons), twin vertical Zeniths, and a V-fronted radiator. The "21/70" had a wheel-base 1 ft. longer, 4 to 1 axle ratio, wet sump, single carburettor and a flat-fronted radiator. Identical features were four-speed box, multiple disc clutch, o.h.v. push-rod engine, four-wheel brakes by pedal, and hand operated transmission brake. The "22/90" used a 76 mm. bore block, the "21/70" a 75 mm. block, whilst both engines had a stroke of 110 mm.

The only tuning personally attempted on these cars was the fitting of an 80.5 mm. bore block, carefully balancing the reciprocating parts, and changing the constant mesh gears for a pair of higher ratio.

A very special 3-litre which appeared for service and aroused my keen interest was the blue Targa Florio car, owned at that time by a Mr. Lindsay. Considerably lower and shorter than the standard R.L.S.S. with a smaller radiator with the base mounted below chassis level, it definitely looked imposing. The differences from standard were many. So far as the chassis was concerned, double-opposed Hartfords damped the rear axle movement, single Hartfords the front. The gear change was right-handed, and a stiffening strap ran under the gearbox from the chassis side members. The hand brake operated on all four wheels, the foot on the transmission, and many other detail alterations were embodied. The engine was originally 80 mm. bore by 120 mm. stroke, but when I knew the car, a standard 76 mm. block was being used, with twin 47 H.K. Zeniths, the pistons and valve gear were considerably lighter than standard, and the connecting rod webs were drilled. Special large capacity oil pump and tanks completed the dry sump system, and an exhaust manifold composed of three separate branches, one from each port, gave a free passage to the gases. I believe this car was of 1923 vintage and that it is still in existence.

Things began to look brighter when Marinoni, then chief mechanic at Alfas, and his assistant, Perfetti, arrived to prepare two of the 1½-litre blown cars for the "Coupe Boillot," to be run at Boulogne.

At last, I felt, I should be working on the real thing. They were intriguing little cars, always referred to by their racing numbers "43" and "45." The Boillot Cup, as all will remember, was a handicap race for sports-cars, and to that end we set about the modifications to the more or less standard Spyder bodies, removing the long sweeping wings, and substituting regulation short aluminium guards (a flaired-up extension attached to the scuttle on the driving side with heavy gauge celluloid riveted thereto, deflected the wind over the head of the driver). Wire cables, spring loaded, secured the hood, and the smallest lamps allowed by the regulations, turned sideways to reduce resistance and prevent glass breakage, were fitted. An additional oil tank with large bore pipes and tap, and a needle contents indicator, mounted inside the body to the rear side within reach of the driver, enabled him to let down additional oil to the sump when required.

Rapid action tank caps were made up, with a special tommy bar pattern for the radiator. Marinoni and Perfetti stripped down and rebuilt the engines with extreme care, giving the necessary extra clearances where needed. Large diameter sheet metal exhaust manifolds, using a 2½ in. tailpipe, were welded up, and the Italian aversion to spring spoked steering wheels was made manifest by the replacement of the standard rigid type (I noticed this again later, when Campari lashed steel strip across the spring spokes of the wheel of his Maserati in 1932). Jaeger 8 in. rev. counters replaced the standard small head, the red sector being at 5,000-6,500 r.p.m. Straight toothed bevels with a 12/51 ratio replaced the standard helical 11/54. Tyres used for the race itself were 27" x 4.75" front, and 28" x 4.75" rear, and the completed cars, in Italian national red, looked extremely fierce and businesslike. The third team car was not seen over here.

Ivanowski won at 69.78 in No. 43, Marinoni was third, and Cyril Paul driving No. 45, entered by F. W. Stiles, the British concessionaire, fourth; not a bad performance! One of the six-cylinder Amilcars run in this event, and driven by Miss Maconachie, I was to meet again five years later, in different form, as the 1,100 c.c. Hour record holder. On the Monday following the event I accompanied Dunkley, the works foreman (since killed in an M.G. Midget during practice in Ulster), to Folkestone to pick up No. 45, and in a glorious run back to town held 104 on a level stretch of road. Back at Lorne Gardens, a standard axle ratio was fitted, and this car sold to a private owner. No. 43 had similar attention, but in addition the engine was replaced by a standard unblown 1½-litre twin o.h.c. engine which had been fitted with a compressor by Giulio Ramponi, who had come over immediately after Boulogne. Inci-

dentally, I had some very interesting demonstration runs in No. 45.

The actual racing engine from No. 43 was put into a beautiful little two-seater, finished in old ivory and blue-black, by Youngs of Bromley, and sold to that eminent bacteriologist and motor sportsman, Dr. J. D. Benjafield.

Shortly after, the 25th October to be exact, Count Lurani arrived in England to compete in his first event in this country, the M.C.C. One Hour High Speed Trial. He brought with him his pale blue Spyder-bodied unblown twin o.h.c. 1½-litre car, special features of which included an extra oil tank as on supercharged cars, extended steering column, the Count being extremely long in the leg, small headlamps, radiator shutters, and a flaired scuttle with English pattern fold-flat screen. The only work we had to do was the fitting of the regulation Brooklands silencing system, and I accompanied him to the Track on the Friday for practice, and carburettor tuning. On our way to Champions for the necessary plugs, we had a slight argument with a tradesman's cycle, due partly to Lurani instinctively taking the right hand side of the road. Distribution of largesse, however, smoothed over the incident, and we were soon doing a steady 3,600 down the Kingston By-Pass in a veritable cloudburst. As the use of an 85 main jet gave a useful 83 over the kilo, the car was tucked away in Malcolm Campbell's shed, and we returned to town in a friend's bull-nosed Morris Cowley coupé, the Count, with his inimitable Italian courtesy, forcing me to travel inside, whilst he occupied the dicky, the lid of which he proceeded to shut down :- it must have been most uncomfortable!

On the morrow, in appalling weather, and misfiring badly with water in the fuel, the Alfa lapped at 77, and covered 66.5 miles in the hour. Nowadays, being used to seeing 100 miles covered in this event, this may seem slow, but actually the best performance that day was that of Brian Lewis, whose 1,998 c.c. Bugatti covered 85.5 miles. The then unknown driver, Henken Widengren, driving a Sports Austin Seven only covered the amazing distance of 35.9 miles!

I maintain that these 1½-litre twin o.h.c. Alfa-Romeos, blown or unblown, would still show their fishtails to most modern sports-cars, and I remember vividly a run I made in an unblown version to Portsmouth, from town in the pouring rain, absolutely non-stop, taking nourishment in the car, and putting up an extraordinarily high average speed in comfort!

These cars started the run of Alfa-Romeo successes, first in sports-cars, and then in Grand Prix racing, which will remain for ever a landmark in Italian motor racing history.